Three *Keywords* in the Campaign Against Farmland Consolidation and the Loss of Small Farms through the lens of the Prince Edward Island Chapter of the National Farmers Union.

by © Heidi Haering

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Abstract

This thesis uses an ethnographic approach to examine campaigns against farmland consolidation and the loss of small farms through the lens of Prince Edward Island chapter of the National Farmers Union (NFU PEI). Using Raymond Williams' *Keywords* concept, I trace three terms — "absentee landlords," "family farm," and "soil health"—as used by NFU PEI participants and their interlocutors at a time when loopholes to the Prince Edward Island (PEI) Lands Protection Act were publicly debated. Through this examination of meaning, I show how specific language used by participants and other groups illuminates underlying issues, debates, areas of consensus, and shifts in the agricultural landscape of PEI. These issues included contested claims to authenticity, remnants of colonialism, and the erasure of Temporary Foreign Workers, refugees and immigrants. Additionally, I show how an emphasis on issues such as heritage, obscure challenging questions around who owns land, who works the land and what makes "good" land.

These arguments are supported by evidence from fieldwork in PEI from August 2021 to early June 2022, with additional meeting attendance in 2023 and 2024. Fieldwork consisted of library research, 15 interviews with NFU PEI members and members of related organizations, 8 farm visits with NFU PEI members and attendance at organization meetings, NFU conventions and other community meetings related to PEI land issues.

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Chapter 1 — Introduction

Ian Petrie, a retired CBC agricultural journalist and current National Farmers Union supporter, stood before the members of the Prince Edward Island chapter (NFU PEI) at the District 1, Region 1 Convention on April 20, 2022:

"We've got to let Brendel go," he said, "The Irvings may have won this one."

This declaration referenced the Brendel Farm sale, a land sale of a potato farm owned by the Gardiner family (Walker 2019) and sold to a subsidiary of K.C. Irving Ltd. In 2019, the Brendel Farms sale application, put forward by members of the Irving family, immediately caught the attention of the NFU PEI for being in contravention with the Lands Protection Act (LPA). Subsequently the NFU PEI held a public forum on "Land Grabbing on PEI" to discuss "loopholes" in the LPA (K. Campbell 2019a).

On PEI, the LPA stipulated that "corporations require cabinet permission to own more than five acres of land" (K. Campbell 2019b). However, when a company's shares were transferred to a new owner, the sale of land attached to the company did not need cabinet approval. This is an example of one "loophole" that the Irving Corporation may have used to circumvent the LPA. According to Stu Neatby, the Gardiners incorporated a company called Haslemere Farms Ltd on June 17th, 2019. Ten days later, the Gardiners transferred land from Brendel Farms to the newly created Haslemere Farms Ltd. Then, on July 12, Rebecca Irving bought Haslemere Farms Ltd and was listed as the sole director.

Less than a month later, she changed the name of the farm to Red Fox Acres Ltd. (Neatby 2019b).

A report from the Island Regulatory and Appeals Commission (IRAC)[1] concluded that the sale purposefully violated the LPA, and the agricultural minister asked those involved —Rebecca Irving and Red Fox Acres— to divest. A group of MLAs then subpoenaed the report, which The Standing Committee on Health and Social Development reviewed; it recommended that cabinet should approve any sale of land transferred through company shares. Rebecca Irving and Red Fox Acres refused to divest and took the sale to PEI's Supreme Court (K. Campbell 2021b).

This sale — and protests against it— may have prompted the PEI government to create and implement the Land Matters Project, which sought to "review Prince Edward Island's policy and legislative framework for land and propose changes where necessary to reflect present-day and future priorities" (Government of PEI 2020b). In May 2021, the Minister responsible for changes to the LPA, Bloyce Thompson, stated that he would wait until the Land Matters Project concluded the following autumn before he would consider any changes to the LPA, including the removal of any "loopholes" related to the Brendel land sale (K. Campbell 2021a). The Land Matters Committee published its report as I began fieldwork, and during my fieldwork selected amendments to the LPA from the report were passed in the fall 2021 sitting of the PEI legislature. The Minister of Agriculture and Land, Bloyce Thompson, explained that the amendments to the LPA

[1] An independent "quasi-judicial tribunal with appellate, regulatory, and administrative responsibilities" commission. It is the result of the 1991 amalgamation of "the Public Utilities Commission, the Land Use Commission, and the Office of the Director of Residential Property" (IRAC 2024).

were tabled "directly because of the investigation into [that] transfer of land" (quoted in K. Campbell 2021c). Thompson explained that the recommendations in the bill should take care of the issues that allowed the Brendel land sale to go through, stating "this addresses the loophole" (quoted in K. Campbell, 2021c); the amendments passed.

However, instead of divesting from the land in question, Red Fox Acres divested land that was part of a "global lease agreement" (Neatby, 2022a/b), an arrangement used to lease land between farmers to help with crop rotation but that can also be used to "allow farming corporations to own more than the maximum 3000 acres limit" (Neatby, 2022a). This arrangement enabled Red Fox Holdings to hold on to Brendel land in exchange for divestment from other land held in a global lease agreement (Neatby, 2022a). Global lease agreements were not part of the LPA amendment bill.

Ian Petrie addressed the NFU Convention attendees just days after the news of the divestment of land from the global lease agreement. As Ian Petrie exclaimed defeat, members strongly protested. One member stood to express his concern, "All their land could be sold to another entity, and people will wonder 'How did you let that happen?!' We need to know who will benefit from these land transactions!" Another member rose: "The Irving Empire is a strong oligarchy; they have more power than the government of PEI." Former NFU President and retired MP Wayne Easter urged members to not point fingers at the government. Another member proclaimed the need for a database that would make public the beneficial owners[2] in land sales. They believed that lawyers

[2] Identifying "beneficial owners" is a way to combat money laundering in real estate transactions. In April 2021, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland stated that the Canadian Federal Government would "create a publicly accessible database of the 'beneficial' owners of companies" by 2025 (Angelovski and Dubinsky 2021). This database will make visible the "true buyers" who currently hide behind "numbered or shell

should not be able to work around the intent of the LPA. Another attendee raised the situation in neighbouring New Brunswick, where they said that "three landowners controlled all the land in the province."

Ian Petrie was pleased, "This is the response I was hoping for!" [3]

NFU PEI participants and a shared vocabulary

This thesis examines the NFU PEI's campaign against farmland consolidation and the loss of small farms by tracing three keywords — "absentee landlords", "family farm" and "soil health"—used by NFU PEI participants and their interlocutors in land politics on PEI. Through this examination of meaning, I show how specific language used by participants and other groups illuminates underlying issues and shifts in the agricultural landscape of PEI. These issues include contested claims to authenticity, remnants of colonialism, and the concealment of Temporary Farm Workers and refugees.

companies" (Angelovski and Dubinsky 2021). British Columbia implemented the first database of "beneficial owners" in Canada after a BC government funded "expert panel on money laundering in real estate concluded … that disclosing beneficial ownership of property was the single most important measure that can be taken to combat money laundering" (Hoekstra 2023). According to Mike Hager (2022), the BC registry was delayed by a year due to "heavy lobbying by BC lawyers" who had issue with the amount of personal information revealed and the definition of "beneficial ownership" which they said was "unclear" (Hager 2022).

[3] At the Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands second of four land forums, on January 28, 2023, Ian Petrie referred to this presentation and claimed it was the worst talk he had ever given. He explained that his intention was to suggest that the NFU and Islanders move on from the Brendel sale because the LPA had mostly worked and the new amendments had mostly done their job, but the outcry from NFU members made him change his approach.

Corporate land ownership on the rise, fear of "absentee landowners"

Over the last decade, non-resident land ownership in PEI has decreased. During this time, corporate land ownership —by island resident shareholders— increased (Neatby 2019a). The distinction between resident owners and non-resident owners was significant as strict regulations limited the ability of non-residents to buy land and were shaped by historical resistance to "absentee landowners" (Robertson 1996; McCallum 2008; Hatvany 1997). However, there have been multiple attempts to bypass the LPA through the creation of individual corporations, held by different members of the same family, who later combine to form one large entity with land holdings that greatly exceed LPA limits (Beingessner 2019: 168-169). This type of land sale has concerned PEI residents, including members of the NFU PEI. During my fieldwork, I spoke to two Associate (non-farmer) NFU PEI members who had taken it upon themselves to track and observe new landowners and traced names on tax documents, due to the fear of a resurgence in absentee ownership. This tracking was encouraged and appreciated by other farmer NFU PEI members and discussed in the chapter "Absentee Landlords."

Lands Protection Act and the "family farm"

According to the NFU PEI representatives, the spirit and intent of the LPA was to keep "farm land (sic) in family farming" (D. Campbell 2018) and that land limits for corporations were not intended for use by industrial agriculture but as a tool for the incorporation of family farms with three family members[4].

[4] The land limit for individuals is 1000 acres. The limit for corporations is 3000 acres. The 3000 acres for corporations were meant to be used to allow one parent and two children to incorporate the family farm as a "business convenience" (Campbell 2018, Trainor 2020).

The Act's purpose is "to provide for the regulation of property rights in Prince Edward Island, especially the amount of land that may be held by a person or corporation" (Government of PEI 2022c: 9). The Act acknowledged challenges related to PEI land that have resulted due to "several circumstances" (Government of PEI 2022c: 9), but the LPA lists only three particular concerns that prompted the creation of the Act:

(a) Historical difficulties with absentee land owners, and the consequent problems faced by the inhabitants of PEI in governing their own affairs, both public and private;
(b) The province's small land area and comparatively high population density, unique among the provinces of Canada; and
(c) The fragile nature of the province's ecology, environment, and lands and the resultant need for the exercise of prudent, balanced, and steadfast stewardship to ensure the protection of the province's ecology, environment and lands (Government of PEI 2022c: 9).

It is notable that none of the "circumstances" in the WHEREAS clauses mentioned the need to keep land for farming or the importance of the "family farm." The term "stewardship" in the third section might suggest, without stating explicitly, the role of farmers and their connection to the land. Nevertheless, the Act does not include any regulations to protect the described "fragile environment" of the Island or land for small farmers or agricultural use. The exclusion of any mention of farming is conspicuous, considering that the concept of the "family farm" was prominent in discussions leading up to the Act's creation. According to Margaret McCallum in "The Prince Edward Island Lands Protection Act: The Art of the Possible" (2008), in 1972, a Land Use Commission recommended legislation be drafted to "limit the expansion of non-family-farm corporations" (McCallum 2008: 154). This legislation would protect small farmers as it would limit the need for them to form relationships with larger agribusinesses that would

push them to "produce what the processors wanted on the processors' terms" (McCallum 2008: 154).

The recommendation to limit non-family-farms came one year after the 1971 NFU tractor demonstration, which, according to Ryan O'Connor in his master's thesis "*SHUTTING THE ISLAND DOWN": Prince Edward Island Conservatism and the 1971 National Farmers Union Highway Demonstration* (2004), was a response to the 1969 Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP) under Liberal premier Alex Campbell. The CDP sought to restructure and "modernize" the province by placing less emphasis on the farming and fishing industries, and more emphasis on the tourism sector and industrial manufacturing. Ports closed and the government offered to buy out licenses, which enticed fishers to leave the industry. Added to that, the number of farms was reduced from 6357 to 2500, with an aim to increase the yields of the remaining farms through mechanization. The assumption was that farmers and fishers would find jobs in tourism and manufacturing (O'Connor 2004: 43-44).

That same year, the NFU PEI held its founding convention. Two years later, after the worst farming season to date[5], the NFU PEI sought to differentiate itself from the Federation of Agriculture when it promised to "[act] on behalf of farmers" (O'Connor 2004: 58) in ways that the Federation would not. In August 1971, 150 tractors appeared on the major highway, rolling at only 15 miles per hour, to start ten days of farmer demonstrations. Almost immediately, five members of the NFU PEI were arrested

[5] That season each farmer made about "seven percent of the average Canadian personal income" (O'Connor 2004: 58)

(O'Connor 2004: 71-74) and the demonstration ultimately ended with the arrest of Roy Atkinson, the National President of the NFU (O'Connor 2004: 88).

After the demonstration, premier Alex Campbell spent two weeks touring the Island to gain a local point-of-view on farming issues. When he returned, he created the Farmers' Committee on Agriculture, made up of Island farmers from both the NFU PEI and the Federation of Agriculture (O'Connor 2004: 99). According to O'Connor, the committee work may have influenced Campbell, as the premier stated that the "iron thread of permanence and stability is made up of our family farms and the agricultural community made possible by the family farm" in the *Speech from the Throne* on March 2, 1972 (*Speech from the Throne 1972* cited in O'Connor 2004). That same year the *Family Farm Development Policy* was launched and provided grants to farmers (O'Connor 2004: 102).

It seemed that agribusiness was aware of the power of the "family farm" label. According to McCallum (2008), after the LPA passed in 1982, Cavendish Farms challenged the act in the PEI Supreme Court and asserted that the purpose of the act was for the "preservation of land for agricultural purposes" (McCallum 2008: 156) and that the LPA violated the Charter of Rights and Freedoms because it infringed on "the security of the person and the right to pursue a livelihood in any province" when it limited access to land for agribusinesses (McCallum 2008: 158). This argument was rejected as the charter did not include the right to own property and the LPA did not stop anyone from becoming a PEI resident (McCallum 2008: 158). In response, the newly elected Liberal provincial government lowered the initial land limits and created a 1987 Royal Commission on the Land to "consider questions of land ownership, land use, and

the quality of the landscape" (McCallum 2008: 159). However, the Irving family continued its attempts to circumvent the LPA, which prompted public concern. As a result, in 1992 PEI Premier Robert Ghiz promised amendments and a review of the LPA. A year-long Special Legislative Committee reviewed the Act and the "family farm" concept re-entered language around land ownership in the final 1993 report. The committee concluded that "the 'central purpose' of the limits on aggregate ownership was "to support family farm-based agriculture on PEI for the social and economic benefit of the province … by preventing large-scale corporate farming, and by promoting the wide distribution of land ownership rather than its concentration in a few hands'" (McCallum 2008: 160). In sum, although the "family farm" was not described in the LPA, there was a widespread understanding that the intent of the Act is to preserve the "family farm" on PEI, and this interpretation is publicized by the NFU PEI and the concept of the "family farm" was employed by agribusiness and government.

Prince Edward Island and "soil health"

PEI is the smallest and one of the most rural provinces in Canada[6] with 42% of its 1.4 million acres devoted to agriculture (Government of PEI 2024). Added to that, 88% of the land in the province is privately owned (Government of PEI 2019).

PEI's pastoral landscape, popular with tourists, is often described quaintly and superficially as a "patchwork quilt"[7] of family farms (MacDonald, MacFadyen and

[6] : The Statistics Canada definition of 'rural' means that over half of the Island's 156 000 residents live in rural areas (Brinklow, Lévêque and Sark 2021: 84)

[7] The Island Nature Trust used this description in their latest fundraising effort. They describe the Island as a damaged patchwork quilt that needs to be repaired (Island Nature Trust 2021).

Novaczek 2016). This view of the Island is due in part to the popularity of the novel *Anne of Green Gables* by PEI-born author L.M. Montgomery. The author's work has inspired fan pilgrimages (Bergstrom 2014) and books like *The landscapes of Anne of Green Gables: the enchanting island that inspired L.M. Montgomery* by Catherine Reid (2018) are used by fans to guide them through the landscape of PEI. Land trusts also work to protect this idealized landscape; for example, the L.M. Montgomery Land Trust attempts to keep parts of the Island frozen in time. Representative Marion Reid explained that the shoreline it protects "… exists the way it was when Maud Montgomery herself frequently walked the fields, beach and sandstone shore" (CBC News 2011).

Nevertheless, the shore, beaches and fields are constantly changing due to climate change, with rising sea levels and shoreline erosion, which was made acutely evident after the shoreline devastation of hurricane Fiona (Goodsell 2022). In PEI, agriculture looks to "soil health" as a way to mitigate climate change through the sequestering of carbon, often through the use of livestock manure and grazing practices (Gallant 2024). To reach provincial climate targets, PEI agriculture is currently tasked with the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and to "improve soil health" (Ramsay 2023: 2).

The Island is an environment that exists as a "dynamic human and non-human relationship" (MacDonald et al. 2016: 7) and in this thesis I will discuss the politics of these relationships which include farmers, government, agribusiness, soil and water.

Participants in context: The National Farmers Union and PEI

Founders, Youth Recruits and New Farmers

For this project, I focussed on the recruitment of participants from the PEI chapter of the National Farmers Union. The NFU PEI was one of the founding member provinces of the national NFU and has advocated for small family farms since its formation (Wiebe 2019; O'Connor 2008). The group also prioritized land issues as one of its main concerns. According to Naomi Beingessner (2019), PEI was unique in that it was the only Canadian province "that sets clear limits on the amount of land that can be owned by distinct individuals and entities" (Beingessner 2019: 160).

Since the creation of the LPA, the NFU PEI has consistently tried to bring attention to corporations that "find ways to exceed allowable land ownership limits" (Beingessner 2019: 161). According to the NFU PEI, these more extensive farming operations pressure smaller farms to compete and failure to compete leads farmers to leave the industry (Beingessner 2019: 161). Robert Irving of Cavendish Farms claimed that land limits for their contract farmers make them less productive and less competitive (Beingessner 2019: 161).

In "Agricultural Persistence and Potentials on the Edge of Northern Ontario," anthropologist Elizabeth Finnis (2021) explored resiliency and persistence in the Parry Sound District of Ontario. Finnis observed that this group of farms, on the "periphery" (Finnis 2021: 60) of Ontario agriculture, persisted despite lack of supports for the declining number of small farms. Finnis observed that the farmers who remained credited their resilience, in part, on a shared culture that included an emphasis on "local agricultural heritage" (Finnis 2021: 65). The farmers stressed "the importance of cultural

heritage, tradition, and respecting the hardships of the past" (Finnis 2021, 65). My participants also emphasised history during interviews: both the history of farming in PEI and the history of the NFU. Therefore, I thought it fitting to place my farmer participants in historical context within the history on the NFU.

NFU PEI participants in my research joined in waves that seem to represent three different periods in the life of the NFU on PEI. First, the *Founders:* their time at the NFU PEI started with the beginnings of the organization; then the *Youth Recruits*: they joined as new graduates in the late 1980s after they finished agricultural college, and they typically relished in the educational opportunities available within the organization; and thirdly, *New Farmers*: participants who were relatively new to farming, with around 15 years of experience, and who have varied amounts of interest in the NFU and its goals. Some joined as they began farming, while others just recently joined the organization.

The *Founders* and *Youth Recruits* became members largely due to community links within the organization — their parents and neighbours had been active in the tractor demonstrations, and they had recollections of the early struggles faced by farmers and agriculture in PEI. They became members to join family or friends and are still friends today. The *New Farmers* as a group are not as uniform: one *New Farmer* joined because he respected the activism of the historical tractor demonstrations and had been taken under the wing of a *Founder*[8], the second *New Farmer* was more active in organizations related to organic farming, and the third and fourth were recent, but not active, members who respected the NFU as an alternative voice to the Federation of

[8] Described in the chapter "Family Farm."

Agriculture, of which they were also members. Below, I contextualize the experiences of my research participants within the history of the NFU on Prince Edward Island.

In July 1969, the Farmers Unions of BC, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Ontario merged to create the National Farmers Union (NFU); PEI joined soon after. The creation of the NFU came at a time when farmers were increasingly frustrated with "low grain prices, low exports and continuing attacks on the Canadian Wheat Board" (Desmarais 2019: 22). Along with the transition from local to federal agricultural policies that favoured larger more mechanized farms, these factors made a national, farmer-driven, democratic, direct-membership organization appealing to farmers (Desmarais 2019: 23).

A few of my participants remembered this era. The unrest in Canada and PEI that lead to the inception of the NFU coincided with one member's participation in the Canadian Union of Students (CUS) while he attended the University of Prince Edward Island. At the time, he said, the NFU was organizing in PEI, and his work with the CUS became relevant:

> The NFU hired the staff people from the Canadian Union of Students … So, we had that immediate connection and the politics involved in that, you know? So, when they started organizing in PEI, they were in contact with us as students too. It was quite an involved process here on the island, there was a lot of organizing work and farmers were quite interested in it and going to it. [The] government [probably] didn't even know a lot of times that this was taking place.

Another participant, a retired farmer, was also an early member of the NFU PEI, but his route was slightly different:

> I was a member of the NFU before it became the NFU… I heard about it and the Minister of my church was supportive of it. A fellow in Nova Scotia, Alfred

> Nieforth[9], he was the organizer, and he came over here, had public meetings and I joined.

According to Ryan O'Connor (2008), two church ministers — Ted Butler and Donald McLennan— contacted the NFU president's office directly. The NFU quickly sent Alfred Nieforth, a Nova Scotian farmer, to PEI, where he held "a series of meetings in small communities throughout the early months of 1968 [and] drew considerable interest with [the NFUs] promises of action and change" (O'Connor 2008: 42).

As discussed earlier, the 1969 *Comprehensive Development Plan* was an agreement between the provincial and federal governments with the aim to make PEI agriculture more competitive through modernization, industrialization, consolidation, and commercialization (McFayden and Scott 2019 cited in Kolinjivadi, et al. 2020: 75; O'Connor 2008). This plan resulted in recalled debts of many small, less productive farms and reduced the number of less profitable mixed farms in PEI (Kolinjivadi, et al. 2020; O'Connor 2008). In response, in 1971, farmers took to the streets in protest with the help of the NFU PEI. For fifteen days, farmers blocked highways and the ferry terminal with tractors and human chains. These fifteen days are considered infamous in PEI farming history (MacIntyre 2018; O'Connor 2008). The *Founder* CUS member was involved in the blockades as a student and recalled his role in communications:

> At the time [as a student] I had a motorcycle [laughter]. So, I used to be driving, making contact when people couldn't get by on the roads with cars. I could get around them with the motorcycle and communicate from one farm blockade here to another one over in the other place, and the other place, and then get back so they knew what was happening. They had all these meetings, and they were having them at nighttime sometimes. They would say "[go to] conspiracy hall." That's where they all met before they decided what to do the next day. You had

[9] Alfred Neiforth was member #1 of the NFU (NFU 2009: 4).

> two to three hundred farmers there working and deciding what to do and talking about it. Of course, you didn't want that to get out because you knew the RCMP were always trying to have people inside wanting to know what was happening. So, they had to have pretty good communications among each other.

Even though there was solidarity among farmers, the tractor strike put one *Founder* member in a tough position as the secretary to the Minister of Agriculture:

> It started here in 1969, and my dad belonged to the NFU then. Also, my husband and I got married in 1970 and he was already a member of the NFU by then. So, it goes back that far. It's kind of interesting, because when I got married, I was working as a private secretary to the Minister of Agriculture. That was a kind of interesting position to be in, especially when the NFU formed the tractor blockade of the highways here in the province. My husband was out on the tractor. Yet, while I was working in the Minister's office, that was never a topic that was ever discussed at the office between him and me. We always maintained a good working relationship throughout.

At the time of the PEI tractor demonstrations, Premier Alex Campbell refused to meet with the NFU. He "characterized further meetings between himself and the NFU as pointless" (O'Connor 2008: 47) and directed the NFU to meet with the Minister of Agriculture, Donald McDonald:

> Should the NFU refuse to meet with Mr. MacDonald as he has proposed later this week and choose to resume their disruptive and dangerous demonstrations with tractors, it can only be concluded that the leadership of the NFU is more interested in demonstrating than in finding practical solutions to the problems of our Island farmers (Guardian, 16 August 1971: 1 cited in O'Conner 2008: 47).

This denunciation of the NFUs tactics only emboldened the farmers and led to the obstruction of the Borden ferry terminal on August 20, 1971. And, as discussed earlier, the protest ultimately ended with the arrest of NFU President Roy Atkinson.

Additional questions about non-resident ownership on the Island arose in the late 1960s. According to McCallum (2008), recreational land in PEI became attractive to

developers partly due to recreational land development restrictions in the British Columbia Gulf Islands. Outside of the province, large recreational lots in PEI were advertised for sale, as well as agricultural and forested land, prompting Premier Campbell to state: "If non-resident ownership continues to accelerate, we may reach a time when a majority of our land is owned by people who do not reside in our province, a subtle reversion to the absentee landlord situation of a century ago" (Campbell quoted in McCallum 2008: 151). In 1971, Campbell created a Special Committee of the Legislature to tackle the land ownership issue. The committee declared that non-resident ownership "would almost triple by the end of the century" (McCallum 2008: 151) if sales continued unabated. To ease these fears, the provincial government amended the Real Property Act to limit all non-residents and all corporations to ten acres of land or 330 feet of shore frontage the following year [10] unless approved by Cabinet. However, between 1971 and 1974, non-resident owned land grew from 5% to 8%, as cabinet approved 85% of applications for exceptions to the land limits (McCallum 2008: 151-154).

In 1979, after the election of Premier Angus MacLean, the Land Use Commission was asked to review the existing legislation. The Commission was concerned about "corporate control of the agricultural sector" (McCallum 2008: 154) and the danger of agribusiness' ability to own both processing plants and cropland whereby "it could dictate the terms on which it would buy crops from smaller producers who did not have access to alternative processing facilities" and "reduce small producers to 'a form of

[10] *The Real Property Act* was implemented in 1939 to limit "aliens", or non-Canadians, to 200 acres of land in response to the Absentee Landownership of the 1800s (McCallum 2008: 150).

tenancy'" (McCallum 2008: 154). The Commission urged legislation to be drafted to restrict the growth of "non-family-farm corporations" (McCallum 2008: 154).

Interestingly, this recommendation was made when rumours persisted that the largest potato processor on PEI at the time— C.M. McLean Limited — had been sold to the Irvings (CP 1979). By 1980 the sale was official, and the Irving Group of Companies in New Brunswick had added a new —and its first food— subsidiary to its business portfolio (Chafe 2022) and changed its name from C.M. McLean to Cavendish Farms (Cavendish Farms 2018a). On March 10, 1980, before the name change, in the article "Irving's takeover of potato plant worries PEI farmers, Government" Barbara Yaffe (1980) of the *Globe and Mail* captured the unease around the sale and rumours around attempted farm takeovers:

> C.M. McLean, an Island institution owned and managed since the early seventies by the local McLean family, was taken over last fall by K.C. Irving, the corporate giant based in New Brunswick. When the new management was installed, a gate went up and a security guard was posted at the plant's entrance.
>
> The province and farmers are anxious to know what the Irving intentions are on the island but to date their grasp of the situation is about as clear as the steam from the plant. They are aware Irving enterprises tend to be vertically integrated. In oil, the foundation of the family fortune, the Irvings not only control refining and transportation but also have a marketing network through Irving gasoline stations.
>
> Where potatoes are concerned, the fear is that Irvings will take steps to acquire more and more farmland to produce the potatoes needed for its processing plant. Robert Nutbrown, and assistant deputy minister in the provincial Agriculture Department says the Island is rife with rumors of attempted takeovers of family farms by Irving interests (Yaffe 1980).

At that time, a company was required to list their shareholders only when initially incorporated. Its shareholders could change without any declaration at any time after incorporation. This meant that Irving takeovers would not be public or on record. This

lack of transparency, added to the fact that the Irvings had received loans and grants from federal and provincial governments worth almost $6 million over the previous ten years, prompted the NFU PEI to call for the disclosure of Irving land holdings in PEI (Yaffe 1980).

In 1981, two years after Irving-owned Cavendish Farms arrived on the island and one year after an attempt to buy 6000 acres of land, the LPA was created (CBC Archives 2019). According to Reg Phelan (1996) in his master's thesis *Islanders and the Land: A Multi-disciplinary Approach to the Culture of the Land Struggle in Prince Edward Island*, NFU PEI members held a demonstration at the Provincial Legislature to protest the delayed passing of new land legislation that would address the attempted Cavendish Farms land acquisitions.

The demonstration led to a meeting with Premier Angus MacLean who agreed to consult the NFU on land size limits. Initially the NFU PEI suggested "an upper limit of five hundred acres for farms… with no land at all for vertically integrated companies" (Phelan 1996: 107). In the end, the LPA passed in 1982 with land limits of 1000 acres for individuals and 3000 acres for corporations. The goal of the LPA, according to the NFU PEI District Director, was to "prevent corporate and foreign interests with deep pockets from gaining control of Island land to the detriment of family farms and rural communities" (Campbell, 2021a).

In the late 80s, another commission was created — a Royal Commission on the Land— to examine the LPA. It found that although the LPA was accepted by Islanders, the lack of enforcement had created "a virtual open-door policy to non-resident ownership" (McCallum 2008: 159) and called on the government to amend the act. By

the end of the decade, Cavendish had expanded its French fry market, and Mary Jean Irving had acquired thousands of acres of farmland as a resident of PEI, through her company Indian River Farms. Farmers protested, which prompted Premier Joe Ghiz to call on Indian River Farms to make their land holdings public and divest from their excess land holding or face legal action. Almost immediately the government passed a bill to amend the LPA and Mary Jean Irving divested (McCallum 2008: 159).

One group of research participants*, Youth Recruits*, joined the NFU PEI during this period. They explain that it was primarily due to the encouragement of family, friends and an active NFU youth contingent. One *Youth Recruit* explained: "I started by a friend basically coming in and saying: 'You're joining the National Farmers Union.' So, it kind of began from there. I started as basically just a member, to where I became local president of our 102. I did that for a few years and never, ever dreamt of becoming District Director of PEI, of District 1."

Another member and past representative described joining the NFU PEI as a sort of birthright and a natural phase of life, even though he was also influenced by friends, youthfulness, and the organization's emphasis on policy:

> I was born into it. My father was a member, and I became a member. When I got out of cow college in 1988, I went to my first NFU meeting. A friend of mine invited me and my brother to go to it — an NFU weekend kind of thing— and we went. Once you're a young person in the NFU they kind of draw you in, the next thing you know we're involved. I've held a lot of positions in the NFU, and I've done my time, done some work. The NFU is a policy organization and really quite interesting, it was great. It's not a "Rah-rah! We're the best!" "Farmers feed the world!" bullshit propaganda organization. It's a policy-based organization and we talk a lot more policy.

Another member, and friend of the other *Youth Recruit* participants, joined around the same time, also after leaving agricultural or "cow" college. A friend who was the Youth President recruited him; he relished the opportunities that the NFU had to offer:

> I was kind of just participating at the youth events in the beginning, and I got involved in … an agriculture exchange trip. I went to Grenada for a month and lived on a farm there; it was [a formative] cross cultural experience. Then, I was kind of excited about farm politics, and so I ended up being the District Director for a year. [After that] I went to the National Board for several years and on the National Executive for a couple of years too... The National [Board] was more where my interests were — on the national topics— and it involved some travel and meeting people from other parts of the country. [It also involved] canvassing out in the different regions of the country, trying to get memberships, and seeing farms. So, it was a lot of fun. I wasn't married and had no family commitments at the time, so I had quite a bit of time to do stuff like that. I must've been on the board for close to ten years.

Over the last twenty years, PEI farmers have been held under scrutiny by non-farmer residents. A study in 2012 linked potato farms to poor soil quality (PEI Agriculture and Forestry 2012) and poor soil holding capacity was a factor in a large number of fish kills in the province (Government of PEI 2020a). The *New Farmers* began farming during this time or joined more recently. This group was generationally varied, farmed a variety of commodities, and lived in three separate counties. A *Founder* recruited one *New Farmer* after he had hired him and his wife as a farm labourers. That *New Farmer* joined the NFU PEI partly due to its history in land justice efforts and this *New Farmer* is now representative of the organization. Other *New Farmers* joined the NFU PEI to back its efforts through membership dues, and add support to its voice and ideas because they saw it as an alternative to the dominant voice in agriculture, namely the Federation of Agriculture:

> [I]t seemed to me that the NFU always more concerned than the Federation [of Agriculture] was about a diversity of agriculture on the Island. So, shifting away from the potato monoculture, and it's not a potato monoculture of course because potatoes have to be grown in rotation with other crops and they fit in with basically other cropping. [However], we think— and it seems that more NFU members and Federation of Agriculture members think this— we think that there has to be a real push to move away from the heavy focus on potatoes.

When asked why it was important to be a member of both the NFU PEI and the Federation of Agriculture, one *New Farmer* explained: "[I]nitially we thought it didn't make sense to have two competing organizations, but we've come to think that they're not really competing, that they work together on some things. Having another voice at the table is good."

Each group of NFU PEI farmers who participated in my research entered farming during a specific an era in PEI farming, from the comprehensive development plans of the late 60s, to the increasing farm debt and decreasing farm numbers of the eighties, as well as border closures, potato viruses, and environmental concerns. The current era has seen a decline in agricultural land that is reminiscent of the 1970s with a 12.3% drop between 2016 and 2021 (Yarr 2023). Interestingly, while the *Founders* and *Youth Recruits* became members of the NFU PEI to join family and friends, *New Farmers* seem less evenly involved in the organization. The one *New Farmer* with a large role in the NFU PEI joined almost by chance, due to his fortuitous encounter with a *Founder* member when he was looking for work. This seemed to suggest that fervent participation in the organization relied on community connection. Unfortunately, farm consolidation and the loss of small farms has created more distance between farmers, both literal and metaphorical and in turn has altered these connections. In "Learning communities and

new farmer knowledge in Canada" Laforge and McLachland (2018), attributed this distance to the effects of neoliberal policy and a focus on knowledge for profitability and productivism. They identified that farmers who wanted to challenge the "privatization of agricultural knowledge" (Laforge and McLachland 2018: 256), did so by creating "learning communities" that gave farmers— especially agroecological farmers—the tools to take on the "corporatization of food" (Laforge and McLachland 2018: 266). I would argue that for many of the early members, the NFU PEI was and continued to be a learning community. However, with higher demands to produce in order to compete, and fewer individual farms, it has become more difficult for new farmers to make the time to join communities related to agriculture.

In this research, I also included non-farming, or Associate members of the NFU PEI, as well as members of the Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands and the Cooper Institute, due to their overlapping membership and goals. The Coalition, of which the NFU PEI is a member, gained attention in 2021 for running radio ads that criticized the government's lack of political will in dealing with industrial agriculture and land grabbing (Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands 2024a). The Cooper Institute, named after the leader of the Escheat[11] Movement of the 1830s, William Cooper, hosted forums to discuss "Land Grabbing on PEI" (Cooper Institute 2019) with the cooperation of NFU representatives.

[11] The Escheat Movement was a movement in Prince Edward Island that sought to force land owned by absentee landlords to be sold to residents of PEI. It was based on knowledge that British landlords were granted lots on PEI with the condition that they would bring settlers to their land "at the rate of 100 settlers per township" within ten years of acquisition (Bitterman 2004, 24). Most had failed to do so, and residents of PEI created the Escheat Movement to put pressure on the Crown and British landlords to divest from their lands. The movement lasted from about 1830 to 1840 (Bitterman 2004: 23).

Significance in relation to existing research

Existing research, that is relevant to my research, included examinations of land grabbing, corporate land acquisition and consolidation, and local responses to these issues.

Land grabbing research has evolved since the 2008 global crisis (Edelman, Oya and Borras Jr. 2013). The global land grab perspective has focused on land dispossession (Edelman, Oya and Borras 2013; Dudley 2000) and diverse and varied local responses to land grabbing (Borras and Franco 2013, Levien 2013; Hart, et al. 2016; Schoenberger and Beban 2018; Tafon and Saunders 2019[12]; Vercillo and Hird-Younger 2019; Budy 2020), as well as food sovereignty (Carte, et al. 2019; Hart, et al. 2016; Li 2015) and land sovereignty (Borras and Franco 2010; Borras, Franco and Wang 2013; Geisler 2015; Borras, Franco and Suárez 2015). Research in Europe and the Global South has expanded past the "making sense phase" (Edelman et al. 2013) — a phase that investigated who, what, where and when questions, which include: "Who is involved? … How do we define land grab? What do we count? How do we count?" (Edelman et al. 2013: 1520) and into more nuanced inquiry that addresses the "complex issues of governance, democracy and environmental sustainability, as well as a detailed knowledge of the grabbers and their backers and a genuine effort to hear the voices and acknowledge the views of the affected populations" (Edelman et al. 2013: 1528).

In Canada, the making sense phase of research on land grabbing is still underway.

[12] More specifically related to my project, Tafon and Saunders (2019) examined a large agri-business land sale as it progressed in Cameroon. They traced the legislation loopholes, local opposition and the social relations involved in the struggle.

It includes the examination of farmland consolidation and investment with a focus on the Prairie provinces due to their reputation as "agricultural powerhouses" (Beingessner, Magnan, & Wendimu 2022: 2; Qualman, Desmarais, Magnan, & Wendimu 2020; Desmarais, Qualman, Magnan, & Wiebe 2017; Magnan & Desmarais 2017; Fairbairn 2014). It is only recently that the politics of farmland issues, namely "agrarianism, neoliberalism, and financialization" (Beingessner, Magnan and Wendimu 2022: 2) have been explored; however, the geographical focus has remained on the provinces of Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan (Beingessner, Magnan and Wendimu 2022).

Other literature that relates well to my research topic includes the "how and why" of land acquisition by elites (Geisler 2015; Keene, et al. 2015) and the role of the domestic state in land sales and how local elites, not just foreign investors, play a role in land grabbing (Fairbairn 2013). Also of particular interest, due to its prominence in PEI agriculture, is the discussion and examination of the benefits and costs of contract farming (Borras and Franco 2010; Vicol, et al. 2022).

Scholarly works related to the recent history of land dispossession in the Global North (Dudley 2000), the characterization of the term "family farm" (Bronson, Knezevic and Clément 2019) and the way new farmers find and make meaning (Bronson, Knezevic and Clément 2019; Gezelius 2017; Ngo and Brklacich 2014) offer guidance for the interpretation of how NFU PEI representatives and members, share, connect and perceive the varied meanings of the "family farm" and community.

In this research, I explored how participants discussed land issues on PEI and how their opinions related to both the spirit and intent — to keep farmland in the hands of farmers—as well as the Act's stated purpose — the regulation of PEI property rights with

the special attention to “the amount of land that may be held by a person or corporation” (Government of PEI 2022c: 9). In doing so, I observed that participant concerns related to land limits were inseparable from fears of land consolidation, economic insecurity, the environment and climate change, the viability of rural communities and food security. PEI is usually represented as an idyllic, storybook farming landscape, where potatoes grow in its red soil, and the red-headed schoolgirl *Anne* was born. In contrast, this research centers on the efforts, ideas and opinions of group members who are considered marginal by government and other agricultural organizations, in a province that has been often left off the map of Canada (Yarr 2018a) and shed light on current struggles by participants to communicate a different way of farming on the Island. Some of these concerns were revealed through anxiety about the potato industry and its role in soil depletion, the loss of supply management for all commodities but dairy, the unknown origin of the wealth of new landowners, a look back to look forward, and economic unease. These concerns are further exacerbated by government suggestions that racism was driving some land politics, as well as a potato processor’s claim to the term “family farm” and that processor’s control of farmland through contract farming and land leasing arrangements.

Methods

My fieldwork in PEI began at the end of August 2021 and continued to early June 2022; additionally, I attended a meeting related to land during my revision process on January 28, 2023. Research consisted of library research, interviews, farm visits and attendance at organization meetings and NFU conventions. I recruited participants through the NFU

PEI with the help of NFU representatives and non-NFU participants through emails to their organizations. I conducted most of the in-person interviews and farm visits in November 2021. For the safety of myself and the participants, I halted any in-person contact in mid-December 2021 due to the COVID-19 Omicron outbreak. Instead, I conducted additional phone interviews in November 2021 and February 2022. In-person interviews resumed in March 2022, and I conducted my final interview and farm visit in the first week of June 2022.

In November 2021, I attended the 2021 NFU Region 1 Atlantic Convention in person and the NFU National Convention online. Later in April 2022, I attended the NFU District 1, Region 1 Convention in person, along with community land forums, the most recent in February 2024. These conventions provided an excellent opportunity to observe the group working together and discussing their priorities.

Semi-structured interviews

I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with participants using a questionnaire as a guide (Appendix A). According to Bernard (2016), semi-structured interviews are best when you "are dealing with high-level bureaucrats and elite members of a community—people who are accustomed to efficient use of their time" (Bernard 2016: 212). I would argue that farmers fall into this category, as their livelihoods are based on daily tasks that must be completed at the right time, on the right day. For example, some of my interviews took place while a farmer milked or fed cows. Participants also seemed to appreciate the flexible nature of the semi-structured interview and the ability it afforded to talk about what was important to them. I gained insight into the themes important to

farmers and NFU PEI members with each interview and researched these topics between interviews[13]. This allowed for a deeper understanding of my topic as my fieldwork progressed and more in-depth conversations when the interviews briefly moved from in-person to phone. Most of my interviews were in-person, at the residences of the participants.

Farm Visits

Farm visits would usually occur after the semi-structured interview. I conducted eight farm visits with NFU PEI members ranging from three to five hours. I would ask the participant to show me their farm buildings and locations of different operations. However, participants were the primary drivers of the visits as they were encouraged to show me aspects of their farm operations and land that was important to them. This sometimes resulted in walks in forested (non-cleared) sections of their property where they enthusiastically discussed their re-forestation efforts, or consisted of trips to nearby farms that operated in ways that were similar or that contrasted with their own farming practices and beliefs. During these visits, I would ask questions (Appendix B) while jotting notes in a small notebook.

Meetings

I attended the Atlantic Region 1 convention and PEI District 1, Region 1 Convention in person, and the National NFU convention online. The first, in November 2021, was an

[13] Some topics explored: the loss of the Canadian Wheat Board, dairy supply management, soil health, PEI water sources and water pollution, and hedgerows.

Atlantic Region Convention where I was able to introduce my project to the membership and it served as a recruitment opportunity. This convention also situated the NFU PEI within the Atlantic region[14]; PEI attended at Milton Hall and broadcast the room over video conference, while the other regional attendees from New Brunswick broadcast individually over video conference. The NFU PEI membership attendance increased as the region the meeting covered decreased; this made the District 1, Region 1 Convention in April 2022 the most heavily attended. Also, COVID-19 measures and hardships related to COVID-19 may have also influenced the low attendance in November 2021. The District 1, Region 1 Convention in April 2022 was lively and made up for the lack of meetings over the previous two years. I also attended public AGMs and meetings concerned with land issues, including the AGM of the Island Nature Trust and the fall sitting of the Legislative Assembly of PEI.

Women, Farming and COVID 19: challenges and gaps

Only four out of the fifteen participants in this research project were women, and only two of the four were farmers. When recruiting participants, it was difficult to convince the partners of male respondents to participate. This could be due to many factors; the specific factors I observed were related to off-farm work on top of on-farm duties, and childcare responsibilities, which became more demanding during COVID-19. In "Children, Work, and Safety on the Farm during COVID-19: A Harder Juggling Act," Florence Becot (2022), a rural sociologist with the National Farm Medicine Center,

[14] NFU PEI seemed to share knowledge mostly with New Brunswick, but that could be an assumption based on the relative lack of attendees from regions other than PEI and New Brunswick.

suggested that pre-COVID-19, farmers with children relied on formal care for their school-aged children which often changed to an online format during the pandemic. The change to online learning resulted in most school-aged children being brought to the farm to spend more time with parents (Becot 2022: 319), which impacted the safety of children (Becot 2022: 324) and the workload and mental health of women on farms who "still act as primary caretakers" (Becot 2022: 325). Additionally, more than one spouse stated they did not need to participate because their opinions would be the same as their husband's. I suggested that I was also interested in their opinion, and they then seemed interested, but we did not manage to organize the interviews. Often when I would interview one spouse, the other would be at their off-farm place of employment or running errands, such as food shopping.

Theoretical Framework – "Land Imaginaries" reveal "Keywords"

Land Imaginaries

According to Sippel and Visser (2021), the 2008 land rush reinvigorated research around rural politics in both the Global South and Global North with a focus on political economy to identify "general drivers and outcomes of the land rush" (Sippel and Visser 2021: 273). They argued, however, that although concepts such as accumulation by dispossession had been valuable in this regard, they were less successful at tackling the "geographical unevenness and highly divergent place-specific outcomes of these land transformations" (Sippel and Visser 2021: 273). According to Sippel and Visser, the concept of "land imaginaries" was useful in the interpretation of "the underlying understandings, views, and visions of land" (Sippel and Visser 2021: 273) that influenced

current land transformations. These varied understandings, views and visions illuminated why particular land projects came into being and helped to interpret how land "visions, hopes and dreams" (Sippel and Visser 2021: 274) were understood.

They offered three overlapping imaginaries to consider that argued together to form the land imaginary: environmental, sociotechnical and spatial. Environmental imaginaries are the ways in which nature is "construct[ed], interpret[ed] and communicat[ed]" (Sippel and Visser 2021: 274). This type included colonial ideals and histories related to land and points to how land use interpretations could conflict due to these long-held conceptions. Sociotechnical imaginaries were the "understood active visions and novel understandings of what land can or should do" (Sippel and Visser 2021: 274). This aspect looked at the way people worked together to reshape the relationship between humans and land, and worked towards a common shared "land" vision. Spatial imaginaries involved the people, water, plants, animals and micro-organisms that moved through—or are moved from — the fixed-in-place land and how this movement affected life and the environment (Sippel and Visser 2021: 274-275).

The NFU PEI land imaginary was influenced by the history of British colonization of PEI, which has privileged individual land ownership over tenancy or communal ownership. My participants were consistent and persistent in their attempts to communicate a vision for what they see as a better farming landscape in PEI, which in their view prioritized agroecological practices and small farms, and their values were made visible through specific farming practices that relied on a particular physical landscape, one that included small fields and hedgerows. They understood that their opponents, by contrast, were informed by profit maximization and the desire to control

the market, or simply needed to participate in the competitive landscape of farming through contracts, which allowed farmers a source of funding, but demanded that every inch of land be constantly in use to increase yields. The land imaginary of the NFU PEI brought three "keywords" to the forefront: "absentee landlords," "family farm," and "soil health." This thesis is divided into "keywords" or categories of ideas that have influenced the LPA and hold various meanings in the NFU PEI campaign against farmland consolidation and the loss of small farms.

Keywords

"Keywords," were first described by Raymond Williams (1976) who suggested that words were not simply changed by society, but that "important social and historical processes occur[red] within language" (Williams 1976: 22) and that word meanings were the result of varied experiences. Words and their meanings were active, not static or set in stone or neutral. Williams suggested that awareness of language — where and who meanings come from and the situations in which they arose — were an important "way in" to see possibilities for the future of these concepts, that could be reshaped as the less powerful sought to make their own path. There was some freedom in viewing language "as a shaping and reshaping, in real circumstances and from profoundly different and important points of view: a vocabulary to use, to find our own ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history" (Williams 1976: 24-25).

Arjun Appadurai (1990) drew on the work of Williams, when he proposed that "keywords" brought to light the disjunctures in globalization which he argued were

revealed through *ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes*, *financescapes and ideoscapes*. *Ethnoscapes* are the groups or individuals who move through the world, including tourists and temporary foreign workers, whose time spent in or for a region was not enough to create their own imagined future. *Mediascapes* are media, such as, local, national or international newspapers or television and their distribution through print or the internet, using television stations or web sites, and controlled by specific agents, each with their own political interests. *Technoscapes* are the technology, both high tech and mechanical, and included agribusiness and other multinational enterprises that deal with political complexities and relied on a highly varied labour pool. *Financescapes* are the confusing and enigmatic landscape of capital that became difficult to trace in the fast-paced global markets. Finally, *ideoscapes* that "are composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview[15]"(Appadurai 1990: 591) and relied on a specific reading of "keywords" such as "freedom" and "democracy". However, due to globalization, these keywords could take on different political meanings and challenge the centrality of Enlightenment views, depending on the audience. Appadurai (1990: 591) explains:

> [T]he political narratives that govern communication between elites and followers in different parts of the world involve problems of both a semantic and pragmatic nature: semantic to the extent that words (and their lexical equivalents) require careful translation from context to context in their global movements, and pragmatic to the extent that the use of these words by political actors and their audiences may be subject to very different sets of contextual conventions that mediate their translation into public politics.

[15] The Enlightenment worldview is associated with the concept of "modernity" which includes the acceptance of universal truth, reason, and rationality, linear progress and the standardization of knowledge (Wood 2017: 183).

The work of the NFU PEI may reveal disjunctures in globalization. Participants imagined an ideal PEI as self-sufficient, often disagreed with NAFTA, wished for more land for farmers like them, and desired a province where workers did not depend on contracts with agribusiness. Terms such as "absentee landlords", "family farm" (Bronson, Knezevic and Clément 2019), and "soil health" had varied meanings and weight when examined in the context of government, agribusiness or participants. A focus on these keywords pinpointed areas of contradiction, agreement and disagreement in NFU PEI land imaginary and showed how they related to the future agricultural imaginary that NFU PEI members and others envisioned.

Continued Significance of Keywords

Over the last two decades, the concept of keywords has been extended to broaden existing concepts and adapted to introduce new keywords and historical contexts. Examples of the revised and updated scholarship includes *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Bennett, Grossberg & Morris 2005), "New Keywords: Migration and Borders" (Casas-Cortes et al. 2014), *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle* (Fritsch, O'Connor & Thompson 2016) and *Keywords for Today: A 21st Century Vocabulary, The Keywords Project* (McCabe & Yanacek 2018).

In "Keywords and conflict, then and now", Paul Gilroy (2019) discussed *Keywords for Today* (MacCabe & Yanacek 2018). He stressed that even though Williams originally conceived *Keywords* after the global upheaval of the Second World War, the importance of keyword analysis in our current political environment was valuable:

> The need for critical and political attention to the constitutive power of language and concepts that can operate on this scale has only increased. The quantity of available information has proliferated in seventy years, but the vocabularies that carry it have contracted. Its ubiquity and the ease of access to it have failed to nurture either a richer civic culture or a more educated polity. To make matters worse, today we are not, as Williams was, post-war. Indeed, we have been required to adjust to very different conceptions of time that do not divide neatly along any line between peace and war (Gilroy 2019: 18).

Gilroy suggested that critical attention to language was necessary to bring to light lost meaning and context to words that have currently fallen under a banner of "common-sense" driven by propaganda and fuelled by a false nostalgia:

> They [meanings] can be found in melancholia and prospective nostalgia; in problems that arise not only from a deficit of *historical* knowledge, but from an orchestrated or *curated* ignorance that has been coupled catastrophically with an induced or 'groomed' failure of imagination (Gilroy 2019: 19).

This breakdown of meaning, Gilroy suggests, contributes to the shaping of a xenophobic and racist society that Williams, who began the *Keywords* project after he returned from WWII, wrote against (Gilroy 2019: 19). Williams found himself "in the new and strange world" (Williams 1976: 10) of post-war and was committed to the task of understanding it (Williams 1976: 15).

In my thesis, I considered a particular moment in time in PEI land politics — after members of the Irving family attempted to circumvent the LPA, and during legislative alterations of the same Act — with the goal to make land issues in the province visible and explore the varied meanings of the keywords to do so. Shifts in meaning could also alert us to broader societal change, which may not be immediately apparent. In short, keywords are a mechanism from which the complexity of relationships could be uncovered and made visible.

Keywords as Method

In "Keywords as Method," Marie Moran (2021), explained that Raymond Williams, developed keywords through the lens that he defined as "cultural materialism," which drew on materialism developed by Karl Marx. However, Moran states, there are key differences between the perspectives of Marx and Williams. First, Williams understood "culture" as something ordinary and that belonged to the working-class instead of primarily the elite. Second, Williams emphasised that shared meanings and trajectories of society were commonly known but also reshaped in the minds of each individual. He believed that meanings and values were "produced in and through the practices and lived experiences of everyday life" (Moran 2021: 1023). Moran explained that, to Williams, it was participation in day-to-day living that created culture which,

> is not a set of 'isolable' meanings, 'occupying merely the top of our minds'; nor is it a simple reflex to or reflection of the 'real' material activity taking place elsewhere in the economy (Williams 1976: 9). Instead, it is part of, and helps to constitute, the material reality of our lives – it is 'built into our living' (Williams, 1976: 9; Moran 2021: 1032).

Williams agreed with Marx that "material forces drive history" (Moran 2021: 1024) but expanded Marx's interpretation through the inclusion of culture itself as a driving material force. Williams argued that language was important alongside the Marxist emphasis on labour in making our own history. This lens informs Williams' *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), which is the basis for my theoretical approach.

According to Moran, a keyword in Williams' sense was a word that on the surface seems known and understood, but incorporates a complexity of meaning that was wound up in its history and the context of that history on present day usage:

> There is no general puzzlement over the meaning of these words; on the contrary, their meaning seems self-evident, obvious, accompanied by a general sense that 'everyone knows' what they mean. But such familiarity masks what is in fact a deep lexical and semantic complexity, that Williams notes is both particular and relational, synchronic and diachronic (Moran 2021: 1025).

To find these deeper meanings, Williams suggested that it was necessary to "pick out certain words, of an especially problematical kind, and to consider, for the moment, their own internal development and structures" (Williams 1976: 23; cited in Moran 2021: 1025) as well as undertake social and historical analysis to understand its complexity (Moran 2021: 1025). Moran suggested the following questions as a method in uncovering the deeper meaning of keywords:

> What else was going on where this change of meaning started to manifest and then consolidate? Why did a keyword emerge when it did, and what this has to do with the changing shape of capitalist societies in which it came to prominence? And what new practices and experiences are being enabled and shaped by this emergent and novel use of language (Moran 2021: 1026-1027)?

In my thesis, I will use these questions as a guide as I explore keywords specific to land politics in Prince Edward Island. In *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Bennett, Grossberg & Morris 2005), the editors noted that Williams focused on language and meaning through a British lens (Bennett et al. 2005: xix). In my thesis, I examined language through the lens of the NFU PEI and the politics of land in the province of PEI with an emphasis on the agricultural landscape in which the NFU PEI participated. I examined the keywords "absentee landlords", "family farm" and "soil health" along with associated keywords from this particular standpoint to show how an emphasis on themes that emerged from the NFU PEI land imaginary, such as heritage, could obscure challenging issues around who owned land, who worked the land and what made "good" land.

Chapter Preview

In the following chapters, I will examine terms that I argue are keywords in the discussions regarding land politics on PEI. These keywords connect to both the NFU PEI and the LPA. Each chapter begins with an analysis of an existing keyword related to the chapter topic, then describes the significance and historical context of the proposed keyword through the lens of the NFU PEI and PEI land politics, and then concludes with a look at obstacles to NFU PEI land campaigns that this keyword brings to light.

Chapter 2 – Absentee Landlords

This chapter begins with a look at the keyword 'citizenship', a notion that is central to the concept of "absentee landlords." I will then discuss the origin of the "understood" history of the term, and how it erases the history of the Mi'kmaq on the Island. I will then examine how NFU PEI representatives invoke "absentee landlords" in published letters to PEI newspapers and during conventions to advocate for the enforcement of the Lands Protection Act. However, in doing so, they change the meaning of "absentee landlords" from a rallying call for land workers to a call to maintain the status quo for some landowners while also raising suspicions around the residency status of Buddhist landowners.

Chapter 3 – Family Farm

This chapter begins with a look at the keyword "family," a key element in the concept of the "family farm." I will then explore the importance of the "family farm" concept to the NFU, Federation of Agriculture and the United Nations. I will explore how participants

talk about the “family farm” and how the government and agribusiness use the “family farm” to stress a certain type of heritage in farming, which, for example, obscures farm labour that is not part of the “family.”

Chapter 4 – Soil Health

This chapter begins with a look at the keyword “organic” a term that is prominent in the NFU and connected to their conception of soil health and “quality.” I will then describe how the NFU PEI and PEI government talk and seem to agree on the importance of “soil health” as a concept but disagree on the methods and metrics to determine “health” due to recent issues around agricultural soil pollution and contract farming in the province. I will then discuss how the concept of “soil health” is highly contested by soil biologists, a field to which both the NFU and PEI government seem to defer.

Chapter 2 — "Absentee Landlords"

No! No! Don't sell PEI,
It's our homeland; it's our heritage,
And we want to make it free.
No! No! Don't sell PEI,
It's a gift of the Almighty,
Made for sharing equally.

When the Micmacs (sic) walked our Island
Back in those days of yore,
They loved and they respected,
Every hill and field and shore.
They preserved it for this day of ours
For their children and for us.
The land was only to be used,
And handed on "in trust".

When Acadians came and lived here,
They tilled and cropped the soil.
It gave food and clothing, shelter,
And rewarded all their toil.
But the British came and drove them out,
And sent them far away.
Ils sont exiles de l'Ile St. Jean,
Bannis de ses foyers.

When the British lotteried PEI,
To landlords far from here,
Tenant farmers raged against their plight,
For full 100 years.
It was only a determined fight,
That got the Island Back (sic),
Shall we return to serfdom now,
Or halt the invading pack?

Just think! When the King of Glory comes,
On that dire and fateful day,
He'd be told the Island's Irving-owned,
And if he wants it, he must pay!
But the earth would be so mined-out,
That it's just a pile of sand,
And the Lord himself couldn't grow a thing,

If he could buy back the land!

So, let the legislators make the laws,
To stop this present threat,
Of corporate speculators,
Buying all the land they get.
Let the Premier and his ministers,
Not have to take the rap,
For allowing themselves to fall into,
A multinational trap![16] (Rev. Andrew MacDonald 1981 quoted in Phelan 1996)

In November 2021, I attended and presented my project to NFU PEI members at a small gathering for the Region 1, District 1 (PEI), Atlantic District meeting at Milton Community Hall. I often arrived early to my fieldwork meetings due to nervousness and eagerness. This day, I arrived at the barn-shaped hall early and took the opportunity to drive around the community. The landscape was changing to winter, highlighted by the slight bleakness of the abandoned and crumbling barn buildings[17], and a dotted landscape of old pumpkins left over in patches.

Upon my return, I entered the hall and presented my VAX Pass to the Women's Director at the registration table; she recorded my name and handed me a name tag. On the wall, next to a notice about COVID protocols, was a poster for a Christmas Craft Fair the following Saturday. Quilts adorned the wall and denoted the use of the hall by three Women's Institute groups that had been meeting here for more than 60 years; they

[16] Written by Cooper Institute member Rev. Andrew MacDonald in 1981 and first performed at Standing Committee hearings to establish the Lands Protection Act that same year (Phelan 1996: 107-109). The song was most recently performed at the Cooper Institute 2018 Social Justice Symposium: "PEI Lands Protection Act: The Spirit and the Letter." The room was led in song to begin the symposium (Cooper Institute 2018).

[17] Some participants had collapsed barns on their property. These barns were destroyed during Dorian, the 2019 Post-Tropical storm, and the farmers had not repaired them (Russell 2020).

accessed the hall for free (Milton Community Hall 2013). The hall space was rectangular. On the left, there was a kitchen with a serving window. On the right, three large windows opened onto the parking lot and the farm fields beyond. A small stage sat at the front of the hall and on the back wall, where I entered, was a large map of the province. A podium was set to the side of the stage for presenters and a screen was pulled down to broadcast updates from the National NFU president, Katie Ward. The meeting would be broadcast over Zoom.

Once past registration, I found a seat at a table for one, and the Regional Director, Byron Petrie, came over to assure me that current rules allowed for potlucks and that coffee and tea were available. The Women's Director, Edith Ling, presented the annual report and minutes from the previous meeting, and the Regional Director read the District Director Douglas Campbell's speech, as Campbell would not be attending. His address focused on the hardships of farming during the pandemic: "COVID was a Molotov cocktail on an already present dumpster fire."

Attendance in the hall was sparse. Throughout the meeting, and over Zoom, a national NFU delegation at COP26 in Glasgow informed in-person attendees of their progress. The group, who protested alongside members of La Via Campesina, was concerned with what they felt was the greenwashing of climate issues, the exclusion of indigenous voices and a lack of focus on agroecology as a serious solution to food sovereignty and climate change (MacInnis, Oke, & Qualman 2021).

In a few days, the national NFU convention would take place, and the Regional Director reached out to attendees for ideas that he could put forward as resolutions. One NFU PEI member suggested they should resolve to bring the LPA into the "national

conversation." "The world is watching," he continued, "and we need all hands-on-deck." The PEI Regional Director agreed: "The Lands Protection Act is a radical document that signals to the world that enough is enough." National NFU President, Katie Ward, suggested that members of the PEI chapter should join the National Farmland Committee, known more formally as the Farmland Access and Action Committee. This committee met once a month and "provide[d] leadership at the local, regional and national levels for grassroots political action promoting collective action towards Farmland Access and Control solutions and alternatives" (NFU, 2024a). An NFU member explained that virtual meetings were difficult due to the time zones; this committee would meet at three in the afternoon, when most farmers worked. Katie Ward acknowledged the time difference and explained that the chair resided in British Columbia.

During the break, members served food, ate and socialized. Women took care of the potluck set-up and placed three slow cookers, two filled with chilli and one with squash soup, along with ham sandwiches, and some dessert on a large table. While women were busy with the food, men socialized and discussed the state of their farms during COVID-19. I presented my project to the gathering over this lunch break and discussed my research with individual members, several of whom pointed out a woman in the hall who they said had "done a lot of work on land ownership in Kings County." However, she was reluctant to participate in the project when I approached her. I assured her I was very interested in her opinion on land ownership and left her my research package. Three months later, she contacted me through email.

In reply, I offered to speak to her over the phone; there had been COVID-19 outbreaks in PEI since the last time we spoke and as a precaution, I was not meeting in

person. However, it was vital to her that we meet face-to-face because they —her husband and her, both Associate NFU members (non-farmer)— "had a lot to show me," including large maps related to land ownership in Kings County; we met a month and a half later.

On a late March morning, I headed to a Catholic church in Kings County. The streets were long and quiet. I slowed down as I passed Amish children walking to school. We met in the Parish Hall, and on a table were four large maps — about 4 ft by 4ft— secured with dowels at the top and bottom (Image 1).

Image 1. Large maps colour coded to indicate land holdings of "Asian Investors", "Great Wisdom Buddhist Institute (GWBI – the Nuns)", "Great Enlightenment Buddhist Institute Society (GEBIS – the Monks)" and "Moonlight International Foundation, Inc. (MIF Inc. – the charity wing of the Monks)" Permission granted by participants.[18]

[18] The participants asked to include the following: "[The maps] were presented at 'Land Grabbing on PEI' at the Farm Centre in Feb. 2019. Then shown again at the NFU meeting in March 2019. The aerial photos

We sat at a long table, and I interviewed the couple together. The woman gave me a packet of information, including notes from her investigations related to land purchases in Kings County. As I reviewed notes in the package, some seemed as if they were directed to me: "Have you read the letter to the editor in the Guardian by F. Ben Rodgers titled 'Land Purchases' dated Feb. 9, 2019?" When I found the letter, published online, it seemed to summarize the land issues that were of concern to these participants:

> There appears to be much concern in the Montague and surrounding areas over the sale of land. The Monks that represent GEBIS seem to be buying up an inordinate amount of acreage. People are divided on the issue. Some say we have more important issues to deal with. Some ask why are we picking on these gentle peaceful monks. Others worry about the island losing large portions of valuable farmland. However, the more important question is, where is all the cash coming from? I find it difficult to believe the monks are wealthy. Surely their purpose is not about (sic) financial gain? Who funds these purchases? Who is GEBIS and/or who is behind them? I found it very strange when MLA Alan Roach so forcefully argued against GEBIS appearing before the committee on Lands Use and Protection in the spring of 2018. I believe it's beyond the time for our government to provide answers to these questions. An immediate and serious investigation is clearly required (Rodgers 2019).

GEBIS, the Great Enlightenment Buddhist Institute Society, ran two monasteries and trained monks; the Great Wisdom Buddhist Institute (GWBI) operated a program for nuns. According to Venerable Yvonne Tsai, board member for GWBI, there were few training opportunities for Tibetan Buddhist nuns, which made the PEI program "a Harvard in the Buddhist world" (quoted in Neatby 2021). The training programs offered by GEBIS and GWBI could take 15-17 years to complete. Due to the popularity of their programs, the groups had tried to buy farmland to expand their school. In 2018, the

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are from a fly-past in 2010. Property lines were accurate to the day the maps were printed and labelling was done close to the dates of presentation."

cabinet rejected their attempt to buy 20 acres of land (Neatby 2021). The focus of NFU PEI participants on Buddhist organizations and their land purchases, suggested conflicted ideas around what is a "citizen" and who is a "resident." For example, the NFU PEI seemed to ignore land purchases by other new resident landowners, such as equally insular (to outsiders) Amish or Mennonite groups. I argue that these contradictions are influenced in part by the history of "absentee landlords."

In this chapter, I apply Raymond Williams' (1976) concept of keywords to the term "absentee landlords," which is a term used by NFU PEI participants, interchangeably with the concept of "foreign" or "non-resident" landowners. In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams (1976: 16) suggested that the meaning of certain words could be met with complacency and an appeal to a sort of "common sense." Those who understood the "real" meaning of a keyword have access to a shorthand and a shared sense of belonging to a specific history. However, over time the meaning could be altered and shaped by emergent social conditions. An examination of the history and uses of a keyword may be an advantageous way to illuminate these shifts:

> When a particular history is completed, we can all be clear and relaxed about it. But literature, aesthetic, representative, empirical, unconscious, liberal: these and many other words which seem to me to raise problems will, in the right circles, seem mere transparencies, their correct use a matter only of education. Or class, democracy, equality, evolution, materialism: these we know we must argue about, but we can assign particular uses to sects, and call all sects but our own sectarian. Language depends, it can be said, on this kind of confidence, but in any major language, and especially in periods of change, a necessary confidence and concern for clarity can quickly become brittle, if the questions involved are not faced.

Williams also suggested that vocabulary, shaped by a dominant class, emerged in "historical and social conditions" (Williams1976: 24) that could continue or change over time. According to Bennett, Grossberg and Morris (2005: xvii), in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Williams not only meant that word meanings changed over time, but that words also "change in relationship to changing political, social, and economic situations and needs."

I will explore how the keyword "absentee landlords" brought to light the ways in which a widely trafficked version of history, shaped by colonialism, has been brought into contemporary discussions around land-grabbing in PEI. Before I do, however, I will explore the keyword "citizenship" as it is directly related to the idea of belonging in a place and to membership in the political community. I will then explore how a term that was defined by the domination of wealthy and absent British landowners over tenant farmers is now employed by the NFU PEI to inspire local action to keep agricultural land available for resident farmers and maintain the status quo for landowning farmers. Following this, I will look at how the varied meanings of the keyword are used as a call to action in current discussions around foreign land ownership on the Island, even if the historic resonance of the term more closely reflects the state of Temporary Foreign Workers and refugees who work in agriculture, than that of Islanders with full Canadian citizenship. Finally, I will compare how participants, and other Islanders, viewed different groups of landowners —the Amish, and Buddhist nuns and monks— and how these conceptions, and the words that go with them, highlight inconsistencies around who can own land and who are considered ideal landowners.

Citizenship

Some of the notes given to me by the participant at the church were seemingly directed at an imagined audience: "How can individuals from Ontario and Taiwan not know that the Lands Protection Act states five acres is the limit for non-residents? Where is the respect to us as citizens of PEI and the Lands Protection Act?"

In other words: non-residents, Canadian or not, lack respect for PEI "citizens." In these comments, the participant suggested that buyers from Ontario and Taiwan were not "PEI citizens" even though a "non-resident" could be Canadian (including dual citizens), or non-Canadian without permanent residency in Canada, or Canadian permanent residents who have not spent at least 365 days[19] in their new home. The slightly ambiguous nature of "non-resident" brings to light the complexity of the concept of "PEI citizenship," especially when NFU PEI participants who referred to "non-residents" often seemed to imply something other than a Canadian from another province.

"Citizenship" was not included in William's *Keywords* or the updated Keywords Project *Keywords for Today* (MacCabe & Yanacek 2018); However, Bennett, Grossberg and Morris (2005: xvii) included the concept in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* because they believed that it was a significant concept in the present-day public landscape. According to Bennett, Grossberg and Morris, "citizenship" was somewhat contradictory in meaning as it granted a person rights while at the same time gave power to the state to control its population: "It is important to note that citizenship is

[19] According to the LPA, a resident is a Canadian citizen or a permanent resident that has called PEI their principal province of residence and resided in the province for at least 365 days over a two-year period (Government of PEI, 2022c: 6-7).

characterized by an ambiguity: it is a conduit of individual rights but also reflects the growth of state power over civil society and carriers of bourgeois civility" (Bennett et al. 2005: 29).

They explained that citizenship began as a term to describe a city or town dweller, then changed to denote a class position. In Europe, a citizen was considered a member of the bourgeoisie, who were "not a member of the landed nobility or gentry" (Bennett et al. 2005: 29). Bennett, Grossberg and Morris argued that modern citizenship was "contested and unequal" (2005: 31), due to discord that resulted from attempts to create a homogeneous state while at the same time disregarding local identities. In PEI, one local historical movement that played a part in the formation of local Island identity was the struggle against "absentee landlords," known as the "Land Question."

"Absentee landlords" and foreign land ownership are strong preoccupations of the NFU PEI. "Absentee landlords" are always absentee, as they do not reside on the Island, but are not always non-Canadians[20]. "Absentee landlordism" in PEI is referred to in the Land Protection Act (Government of PEI 2022c) as the first of three challenges that the Act is created to address[21]. The Act stipulated that a "non-resident person" may not own more than 5 acres of land or more than 165 feet of shoreline (Government of PEI 2022c :10).

[20] One participant described his neighbour who rented his land but did not live in PEI as "Mr. Toronto".
[21] "Historical difficulties with absentee landowners, and the consequent problems faced by the inhabitants of Prince Edward Island in governing their own affairs, both public and private" (Government of PEI 2022c: 9)

"Absentee landlords," a recognized history

Frontline Farmers: How the National Farmers Union Resists Agribusiness and Creates our New Food Future (Desmarais 2019), a collection of first-hand accounts from NFU members across Canada in their opposition to corporations and large agribusiness[22], included a chapter about the PEI NFU. In the chapter, "Owning the Island: The Question of Land in Prince Edward Island" (Beingessner 2019), Associate NFU PEI member Marie Burge described the significance of "absentee landlords" for Islanders:

> I don't think there is anyone on the Island who wouldn't know what you mean when you say we don't want to go back to the absentee landlord era of the eighteenth century. It is somewhat surprising that after a hundred years, "absentee landlords" is part of people's language. Most Islanders know the significance of that moment in our history (Beingessner 2019: 163).

NFU PEI President Douglas Campbell, continued in the same chapter: "You have to understand the history to know where we are with the land issue today. We don't want to go back, and we are very close to teetering on that line" (Beingessner 2019: 163).

"Absentee landlordism" was at the heart of what is known as the PEI "Land Question" (McCallum 1999; Bitterman 2004; Hatvany 1997). From 1767 until 1875, PEI remained fixed in the proprietorial system under the ownership of the British Crown and British proprietors[23] who had been awarded PEI land — divided into 67 lots-— in a lottery. Unlike neighbouring Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, the Crown did not reclaim land to redistribute to settlers when owners did not fulfill their obligations of ownership.

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[22] Some accounts include a boycott of Kraft foods, grassroots mobilization against Monsanto, as well as highlights the organization's advocacy for the equal opportunity and representation of women farmers and the fostering of open dialogue between settlers and Indigenous groups (Desmarais 2019).

[23] Three lots were given to the officers of the 78th Regiment of Fraser Highlanders, and the rest allocated among ninety-eight individuals, including high-ranking colonial administrators and military officers, members of Parliament, intimates of the establishment, merchants, and entrepreneurs (McCallum 1999).

Also, in contrast with American states to the south that had removed themselves from the system entirely by the end of the American Revolution, the proprietorial system remained in place and was characterized as a consistent source of conflict between landlords and tenants in PEI for the next hundred years (McCallum 1999: 361; Bitterman, 2004).

In "Tenant, Landlord and Historian: A Thematic Review of the 'Polarization' Process in the Writing of 19th-century Prince Edward Island History," Michael G. Hatvany (1997) suggested that the upheaval during this period created a singular focus in writings on Island history in the 19th and 20th century. Historians fixated on the battle between "'bad', wealthy, absentee proprietors who neglected, while at the same time exploiting, their property and 'good,' poor, egalitarian resident tenants whose progress was hamstrung by the burden of the leasehold system" (Hatvany 1997: 109). Hatvany found that historical accounts of the landlord-tenant struggle were influenced by early accounts of PEI produced by middle-class residents who were motivated by self-interest (Hatvany 1997: 111). For example, published in 1806, *An Account of Prince Edward Island* by John Stewart — an account that popularized the narrative of the tenant-landlord struggle— described PEI settlement, government, and natural environment but "the consistent theme throughout was the politics of land tenure and the detrimental impact negligent proprietors had on tenants and on the Island's development" (Hatvany 1997: 111). John Stewart and his brother were elected members of the House of Assembly thanks to their support of the escheat of Island land. They convinced the tenant farmers that land would be redistributed from the Crown to residents, which would result in the creation many small farms. In reality, the Stewart family had hoped lower the value of the land so that whole estates would be affordable and available to buy for "themselves and

other middle-class Island officials" (Hatvany 1997: 112). Early accounts also obscured socio-economic issues — including crop failures and downturns in shipbuilding and timber industries— that contributed to the challenges facing Island residents and instead local politicians directed resident anxiety and attention to the landlords (also McCallum 1999: 362). Added to that, after confederation, a new narrative emerged that has survived: PEI in pre-confederation was in its "'golden-age' of isolation, self-sufficiency, independence, and consensus" (Hatvany 1997: 125). This narrative, which continues to persist, suggested that the Island was a homogenous place whose prosperity was hampered only by the proprietary system and "absentee landlords" of pre-confederation. The acceptance of this narrative may explain why references to the time of "absentee landlords" was included in the LPA.

These accounts of the Island's history also completely erased the Mi'kmaq, who have resided on PEI for at least 10,000 years (Fraser 2017). The political dominance of labour theory of property— that those who make land "productive" should own it — was also used to undermine the values and claims of the Mi'kmaq people (Locke 1690/1980; Venkatesh 2019). According to Margaret McCallum in "The Sacred Rights of Property: Title, Entitlement, and the Land Question in Nineteenth-Century Prince Edward Island" (McCallum 1999), this theory was used to validate the land claims of those "tenants squatters and small freeholders" in PEI who fought for title against "absentee landlords" (McCallum 1999: 371). At the same time, the interpretation and practice of this theory invalidated Indigenous land use practices and upheld colonization in the New World (Dudley 2000: 8; Wood 2017: 111; Venkatesh 2019: 84).

According to Daniel N. Paul in *First Nations History: We Were Not the Savages* (2006), by 1783, the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia were presented with "licences of occupation" from the English, which reduced their land use to 18,105 acres out of 13.5 million. He explained that the Mi'kmaq did not regard land as something to be owned, and the English took advantage of their lack of interest in this form of ownership: "the Mi'kmaq had little understanding of the complexities of the new social order's land management laws and did not appreciate the concept of ownership of land by individuals" (Paul 2006: 187). This enabled the encroachment on Mi'kmaq land to continue until the Mi'kmaq lost it all. According to *Our History, Our Stories: Personal Narratives & Urban Aboriginal History in Prince Edward Island* (Taylor 2016), the Mi'kmaq were "the first of many Aboriginal groups in North America to have contact with Europeans" (Taylor 2016: 3). Mi'kmaq populations were devastated by diseases brought about by that first contact; however, "until early 1800's their population likely outnumbered that of the colonists" (Taylor 2016: 3). The Mi'kmaq found allies in the Acadian settlers who lived on the Island and joined forces with them to defend the Island from the British; however, in 1758 thousands of Acadians were deported. Although, the Mi'kmaq signed friendship treaties that stipulated that they would have access to their fishing and hunting grounds, the growing number of British and Irish settlers encroached on Mi'kmaq lands, and the previous friendship treaties lost their significance with the new arrivals. By the 1860s, "there were about 250 Mi'kmaq and 94 000 settlers" (Taylor 2016: 3).

"Absentee Landlords" and the Labour Theory of Property

The NFU PEI often referred to "absentee landlords" when they discussed land issues, land grabbing and the LPA in their Opinion-Editorials submitted to local papers. During interviews, I would often see printed copies of *The Guardian,* PEI's main daily newspaper, on the kitchen table. At NFU meetings, members would ask each other (and me) whether they had "seen the paper this morning?"[24] The NFU PEI were frequent contributors to newspaper *Opinion* sections. Below I will illustrate how these Op. Eds. connected current global land-grabbing issues with the PEI history of "absentee landowners." Raymond Williams (1976: 24-25), explained that the examination of keywords was not "neutral" as it showed that meaning was an ongoing process and not set in stone or "owned" by any one group who could claim control over that meaning:

> In a social history in which many crucial meanings have been shaped by a dominant class, and by particular professions operating to a large extent within its terms, the sense of edge is accurate. This is not a neutral review of meanings. It is an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical — subject to change as well as to continuity — if the millions of people in whom it is active are to see it as active: not a tradition to be learned, nor a consensus to be accepted, nor a set of meanings which, because it is "our language", has a natural, authority; but as a shaping and reshaping, in real circumstances and from profoundly different and important points of view: a vocabulary to use, to find our own ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history.

In the case of the NFU PEI use of "absentee landlord", the group sought to appeal to the shared meaning of the term by an "in-group" of Islanders; however, in using the term,

[24] According to News Media Canada (2022) the 6 titles of all daily and community papers in PEI had a paid circulation of 92,807 in 2022, which is almost 60% of the population of PEI, compared with 29% in Ontario, with 357 titles and 4.3 million paid circulation, and only 18% in BC, where 127 titles have a paid circulation of 868, 616 (News Media Canada 2022, 1). The printed paper continues to have a significant impact on the residents of PEI.

they have altered its meaning from a concept that was used to advocate for tenant farmers, to one that aimed to maintain the status quo for land owning farmers.

In 2017, The Guardian Newspaper published a letter submitted by NFU PEI District Director Douglas Campbell. The letter suggested that land grabbing, an issue that affected the Global South, had arrived on the Island, and brought with it the threat of the return to the type of economic instability brought about by the British lot-system and its "absentee landlords" (emphasis mine):

> Land grabbing is a trend nationally and internationally. People with big money, seeing low return on their investment in the financial sector are turning to securing their future wealth by investing in land which they presume will increase in value. The P.E.I. government needs to be on top of this: **we don't want to return to the conditions of absentee landlord days** (D. Campbell 2017a).

Here Campbell compared the current global issue of land grabbing with PEI's history of "absentee landlords." Both were concerned with power and land acquisition; however, the financialization of land was a more pertinent issue today than "absentee landlords." In Saskatchewan, for example, the growth of investment-owned farmland led to the consolidation of farms in the hands of Canadian corporations instead of an increase in "absentee landlords."

In *"*Investor ownership or social investment? Changing farmland ownership in Saskatchewan, Canada," Desmarais, Qualman, Magnan and Wiebe (2017), looked at the aftermath of loosened regulations around farmland ownership in Saskatchewan. In 2002, the government amended The Saskatchewan Farm Security Act and opened farmland ownership to "all Canadian individuals and corporations" (Desmarais et al. 2017: 154). Farmer organizations, that included the NFU and the Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan, opposed these changes. They believed "it posed threats to family farms

because it encouraged absentee landlords and speculation" (Desmarais et al. 2017: 155). Since the implementation of the amendment, the change may have instead influenced accelerated farmland consolidation by *resident* companies and landowners, due to the 16-fold increase in investment owned farmland, and a 6-fold increase in farmland ownership by the four largest private landowners in the province (Desmarais et al. 2017: 158)[25].

Andjelic Land Inc, the largest private landowner with 160,858 acres, specialized in land rental to farmers and seemed to be a Saskatchewan-based company. On their website they anticipated interest in their land holdings: **"**Why so much land? Because we want to be a one-stop shop for all producers looking to rent farmland. From those just starting out to large operations with generations of history and everyone in between, Andjelic Land has rental options available" (Andjelic Land Inc. 2020). The next largest was the Canadian Pension Plan, then HCI Ventures, an Alberta-based investment group that also rents land to farmers (Taylor McCaffrey 2019; Magnan and Desmarais 2017). HCI Ventures (known also as Hokanson Capital) lists "Saskatchewan Farmland" as one of its projects. In their description of this investment, they explained that the loosened regulations were part of the motivation for the farmland purchases:

> What We Saw: An asset class that had been restricted to investors outside of Saskatchewan for decades, which had kept prices depressed. Combined with improving fundamentals driven by rising demand for protein in China and ethanol, the stage was set for a bull market in agriculture… Execution: HCI

[25] The four largest private owners in 2002, before the change in ownership rules, were three separate Hutterite groups: Hutterian brethren church of Hillcrest (24,296 acres), Hutterian brethren of Arm River Colony Ltd. (19,401 acres) and Hutterian brethren of Golden View Inc. (15, 780 acres), as well as Weyburn Security Company (15, 072), a financial services company with a mineral focus (Weyburn Security, 2023). The combined acreage of the top four private landowners in 2002 are about 10,000 acres short of the top four private landowners in 2014, after the land ownership rules were relaxed (Desmarais, Qualman, Magnan, & Wiebe, 2016, p. 161).

> became a leader in the farmland investment space, with a portfolio of high-quality land that peaked at 150,000 cultivated acres… (Hokanson Capital n.d.)

The fourth private owner was made up of "affiliated companies, including TopSoil Farmland Management Fund, a private equity fund," a group of investment companies and farmer/investor hybrids that owned 84, 516 acres of land (Magnan and Desmarais 2017: 6). Therefore, even though these groups had addresses in Saskatchewan, they could also be considered non-resident landowners due to the main bases of their operations. For example, HCI Ventures' head office was in Edmonton, Alberta and the Canadian Pension Plan was based in Toronto, Ontario.

The next time Douglas Campbell wrote an Op.Ed. in 2017, it was about the lack of information about land transactions, this time he flagged an influx of seemingly mysterious "Dutch, Chinese and Taiwanese money" (D. Campbell 2017b) as well as the danger of land ownership as financial investment. He warned that it would become a difficult "struggle" to regain the land after it has been lost:

> What the NFU, and the rest of the community, knows is the names of those who are the front people, but the questions are: What is the origin of the money? Who are the real investors? Besides the longtime locally grown, grasping corporations, we now have on the stage Dutch (Netherlandic), Chinese, and Taiwanese entities. In other words, Dutch, Chinese and Taiwanese money.
>
> In (sic) most parts of the world, PEI is experiencing the plague of "land grabbing". The lesson learned is that capitalists worldwide view land as a solid investment, promising future growth in their investment capital. Land is bought up everywhere for the expectation of an incredible increase in value over the years.
>
> At the heart of all land grabbing is a source of investment capital. If the government is serious about its role in protecting PEI land, there must be an investigation of who are the real investors.

> **Most Islanders know our land history: that for one hundred years, our land was in the hands of absentee British land lords (sic). Island farmers held a courageous and painful struggle to get back the land** (D. Campbell 2017b).

In this published letter, Campbell suggested that purchasers of land on PEI were mainly interested in making a profit on the land value. He explained that if Islanders ignored these buyers, it may be impossible to regain control of the farmland. He invoked "absentee landlords" to remind Islanders that it took 100 years to take back the land and that to ignore this would be an afront to the struggle of those "courageous" farmers. Here he suggested that the land on PEI was originally and rightfully meant for those who resided on PEI with its reference to "getting **back** the land" — but who were not Mi'kmaq or Acadian — perhaps even suggesting a divine right to the land.

These letters and their appeal to this historical narrative appeared to have reignited an emphasis on land issues in PEI. A few months later, the Cooper Institute hosted a Social Justice Symposium entitled "PEI Lands Protection Act: The Spirit and the Letter" (Cooper Institute 2018), with four NFU PEI representatives included as panelists. The symposium opened with the song "No, No Don't Sell PEI" by Rev. Andrew MacDonald[26], written originally for the NFU land committee meetings during the creation of the LPA in 1981. This song retold the history of the "Land Question," and indeed did suggest that land was a gift from God, that was given to Island farmers willingly "in trust" by the Mik'maq:

> No! No! Don't sell PEI,
> It's our homeland; it's our heritage,
> And we want to make it free.
> No! No! Don't sell PEI,

[26] Rev. Andrew Macdonald was a founding member of the Cooper Institute (Cooper Institute 2024).

> It's a gift of the Almighty,
> Made for sharing equally.
>
> When the Micmacs (sic) walked our Island
> Back in those days of yore,
> They loved and they respected,
> Every hill and field and shore.
> They preserved it for this day of ours
> For their children and for us.
> The land was only to be used,
> And handed on "in trust"
> (Rev. Andrew MacDonald 1981 quoted in Phelan 1996)

The objectives of the sympsium were:

> to examine the meaning and significance of the spirit and the letter of a legislation, to review the history of the "Voices for the Land", to identify why and how the LPA has been and is being misinterpreted to serve a few interests, to discover some of the loopholes in the LPA and to identify practical and doable community action to strengthen the LPA (Cooper Institute 2018)

In the list of objectives, the "Voices of the Land" were referenced. This pertained to a section of the symposium called *History: Voices of the Land Protectors*. Here NFU PEI member Reg Phelan summarized the history of land struggle in PEI. In the first five paragraphs, he briefly described Mi'kmaq conceptions of land in this way: "The Mi'kmaq did not lay claim to the land, but only used what was on the land during various seasons of the year. This concept was also shared by many agricultural peoples throughout the world" (Cooper Institute 2018), he added that Acadian settlers did not interfere much with Mi'kmaq life and access to land. However, he says, it was "after the Acadian expulsion [that] things changed drastically, [and] PEI was lettered off to those in line for patronage from the British Crown" (Cooper Institute 2018). Over the next twenty paragraphs, he recounted the story of the "absentee landlords" and how the role of the

namesake of the Cooper Institute, William Cooper, factored into this history. Phelan included a reference to Cooper's speech in the legislature during the Escheat Movement. This speech referred to the Lockean labour theory of property, which suggested that tenant farmers who did the work added value to farmland, while owners who did not labour added none (emphasis mine):

> Cooper argued that the landlord monopoly of the land was in fact the monopoly control of labour. The land monopoly led to labour enslavement and since British law did not permit the enslavement of British Subjects, then such a land system was illegal. He asserted as well that the value of the land really lay with the labour that had been applied to it. **If tenants had not cleared the land, it would not have been of value to others. In addressing himself to tenants he said: "They have wasted their youth in clearing land for others, they have planted their labour where the forest grew … and built a cabin where the bear has had his den." … He argued that tenants had a natural right to the land they farmed because it was they who cleared the land and gave it the value it has** (Cooper Institute 2018).

According to Margaret McCallum (1999), the labour theory of property —that those who made the land productive should own it[27] — was one of the more "radical" arguments of the time, used to affirm rights for "tenants, squatters and small freeholders" (McCallum 1999: 371). McCallum explained that the connection to Locke was deliberate. A February 1864 article in the *Examiner* entitled "The Land Question, No.6" specifically quotes Locke's Two Treatises of Government[28] when it made the argument that land would be

[27] This did not include Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Locke considered the land in the Americas lacking in "the comforts of life" because the local population seemed to refuse to parcel and enclose the land to "improve" it through labour. "There cannot be a clearer demonstration of any thing, than several nations of the *Americans* are of this, who are rich in land, and poor in the comforts of life; whom nature having furnished as liberally as any other people, with the materials plenty, i. e. a fruitful soil, apt to produce in abundance, what might serve for food, raiment, and delight; yet *for want of improving it by labour*, have not one hundredth part the conveniences we enjoy" (Locke 1690/1980: 25-26)

[28] The passage is paraphrased from section 27 in the *Second Treatise of Government*: "The labor of a man's body, and the work of his hands, we may say are properly his. Whatever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided and left it in, he has mixed his labor with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property" (Locke 1690/1980: 19)

granted to tenants if escheat occurred because the labourers had reclaimed the land from the wilderness (McCallum 1999: 372).

Douglas Campbell also presented at the symposium; his topic tackled "corporate influence." In his speech, he suggested that land protection laws were not working as intended because they should protect the "masses" from those in power, and suggested that for a stable, peaceful, and equal province, the intent of laws should be enforced. He stressed that land struggles were part of the history of PEI and part of "Island culture":

> [it is] is defined as a rule, usually made by government — to order the way in which a society behaves to give the rule of conduct for mutual protection. I'll repeat that — to order the way in which a society behaves to give the rule of conduct for mutual protection. Unfortunately, we live with many laws because of those who do not wish to conduct themselves in a manner favourable to mutual protection.
> …
> Laws are the tools used to provide equality, stability, and peace in society. In other words, to ensure the strongest do not rule over everyone else. But we all know laws are only effective if their intent is respected and enforced … The intent or spirit of the Lands Protection Act came out of our Island story. Land ownership and use is an ongoing saga in the development of the Island culture and economy (Cooper Institute 2018).

At this point, Campbell recounted the history of the PEI land lottery and "absentee landlords." He conceded that the current land issues were different than they were in the 1800s; however, control of resources through land ownership was still the crux of the problem (emphasis mine):

> The lottery gave crown creditors townships averaging 20,000 acres. The crown's action resulted in over a hundred years of Island history dominated by absentee landowners. **Settlers were enslaved as land tenants - they had no control over their land and futures. They suffered economic stagnation, financial and personal hardship, turmoil, and unrest.** It took great effort and political will to break free of those absentee landowners and for Islanders to hold title to their land. Unfortunately, the land issue has not gone away with the buying out of absentee landowners. They simply have been replaced with new entities —

> foreign buyers, individuals, and corporations who desire unlimited control and/or ownership of the land and its resources (Cooper Institute 2018).

A *New Farmer* NFU PEI member from Prince County had an opinion about the use of this history in NFU PEI articles (emphasis mine):

> I can understand why it is good press: because it is rooted in Island history and there is this kind of – I wouldn't say a consensus, but there's a very widespread popular understanding on the Island that: **"We wrestled the island out of the hands of absentee proprietors and it's ours now and we need to keep it that way."**
> ….
> So, it's useful because you're tapping into existing public understanding of history and existing public sentiment against absentee ownership, but the problem isn't absentee ownership.

While their perspectives on the root of current problems differed, both quotes suggested that the current focus on "absentee landlords" pointed to the idea that the keyword was used to tap into the historical narrative that "we" as in the *original settlers* needed to secure ownership of farmland to maintain the status quo and safeguard the land that "our families" made productive through labour.

Temporary Foreign Workers, Refugees, Immigrants and the "Island Way of Life"

The Canadian agricultural industry relied on subsidies and foreign labour (Venkatesh 2019, 88). In this sense, the struggle of farmworkers who have "no control over their land and futures" better depicted precarious labourers, including Temporary Foreign Workers.

Interestingly, farm worker and Temporary Foreign Worker issues were important to the national NFU; it created a membership category for farm workers in early 2022, which allowed them the same voting privileges as farmers (NFU 2024g), and it organized farmworker meetings once a month over Zoom (NFU 2024b). The national NFU has also

had an Indigenous Solidarity Working Group since 2015, which educated members on topics including Indigenous food sovereignty and settler-colonialism (NFU 2024c).

However, the PEI chapter had yet to write or meet about these issues. Instead, the NFU PEI maintained their focus on issues related mainly to the Lands Protection Act. One participant, a *Youth Recruit* NFU PEI member from Prince County, expressed confusion about the need for the national working groups during an NFU District meeting and earlier acknowledged the narrow focus of the NFU PEI to me during an interview:

> The [NFU PEI] seems to focus more on the land; we've been criticized about that by some of our members for being a one to two-issue organization. But everything comes back to the land. **So, if the land is not being protected how are you going to protect your communities, the people that are in them and have a thriving province?**

During my visit with this same *Youth Recruit* member in Prince County, he spoke passionately about opportunities for new immigrants and refugees in sustainable agriculture or micro-farming and spoke to me about a "Syrian refugee" who found a market in PEI:

> The guy has five acres, he was on the news one day on Compass[29]. He's growing watermelons like that [gestures widely] … He's got 5 acres, and he does all kinds of great stuff because it's work, and he gets in there and he's got a greenhouse and he's starting all these vegetables. He's a Syrian refugee become a farmer. There's the opportunity. I would take thousands of Syrian refugee farmers before I'll take one more member of that Irving family buying up 5000 acres of land… People don't have to go to the Superstore to buy their watermelons, they can buy them from this guy.

[29] Compass is a local CBC News program.

Aman Sedighi, the farmer discussed above, left his government job as an agricultural researcher and his business in pistachio exports in Iran and immigrated to Canada through the Provincial Nominee Program[30]. He wanted to live in a country with more progressive rights for women. Initially, Sedighi worked part-time on a dairy farm. There, the owner gave Sedighi access to a few square feet of land to grow vegetables for his family. However, when his harvest outgrew his needs, perhaps due to his education and expertise in agriculture, Sedighi started to sell his produce to a Charlottetown restaurant. In 2015, he purchased a 15-acre farm in Brookfield, PEI, an unincorporated area in Queens County. The farm quickly expanded to 107 acres and now employs five people (Meader, 2018; Fritz 2018; Day 2019). Two of his workers were a couple from Syria — Mounir and Nisrine Alkernazi — who had worked for three years full-time for Sedighi as of 2019 and "[hoped] to one day own a fruit and vegetable farm on PEI" (Day 2019).

Unfortunately, most Syrian refugees were only offered opportunities to work *on* farms or in processing to "help fill a shortage of workers in the industry" (Walker 2016). Even before Syrian refugees arrived in the province MLA Robert Henderson suggested that they could work in agriculture and fisheries in jobs that were usually filled by over 1000 Temporary Foreign Workers. The Standing Committee on Agriculture and Fisheries disagreed and suggested that the 250 refugees that eventually arrived would "eventually be looking to make a living in the province" (Wright 2015), this implied that Temporary

[30] The Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) is a pathway to permanent residency on PEI. According to the government, "[i]ndividuals are selected for nomination based on their intention to live and work in PEI and their economic ability to establish here (Government of PEI, 2022d)." Currently, the focus is on prioritizing immigrants with skills in sectors with worker shortages. Interestingly, the Cooper Institute Symposium in 2018 included a song entitled "Let's Pull the Plug (on the PNP)" but the lyrics were not included in the report (Cooper Institute, 2018).

Foreign Workers would not make a living wage and were not able to stay in the province long-term. When the refugees did arrive, they were given tours of Island farms with other newcomers. Executive Director of the PEI Agriculture Sector Council, Laurie Loane was excited at the prospect of "whole families coming to work together on the same farm" (Walker 2016). This suggested that the PEI agricultural sector relied on the labour of entire refugee families to sustain the concept of the "family farm."[31]

More recently, in 2019, Kelly Toughill examined the employment of refugees and other immigrants in "Can refugees help save PEI's way of life?" which brought to light a different conception of what, or whose, "way of life" was safeguarded. In the article, the owner of a plant that processed, packaged and exported over 600 cows a week, described the plant as a *mission* to ensure a way of life: **"**Our mission is to make sure that this is still here for the region, for the beef producers and for everyone who depends on them" (Toughill 2019)**.** Therefore, the plant's existence protected the way of life for the cattle farmers who depended on the service, and the potato farmers who depended on the manure produced by the cows (Toughill 2019). Plant workers, in contrast, facilitated the PEI way of life instead of living it. According to Toughill, the "60 foreign-born workers" at the plant arrived through a "dizzying array of immigration programs" and were a mix of Temporary Foreign Workers, recent immigrants and refugees. Furthermore, the element of ethnicity and racialization of labour came into play when the author stated that "most of the faces in the processing plant … are brown" and worked to secure the incomes of farmers in "one of the whitest provinces in Canada" (Toughill 2019).

[31] Discussion continued in the chapter "family farm."

In “Confronting Myths: Agricultural Citizenship and Temporary Foreign Worker Programs”, Vasanthi Venkatesh (2019) suggested that the role of Temporary Foreign Workers was indeed to sustain a *way of life* through the “myth of agricultural citizenship” (Venkatesh 2019: 83), which invoked the image of the white landowner farmer who, as Locke insisted, transformed, and made the land productive. In reality, Temporary Foreign Workers and farm owners existed in a “paradoxical [relationship that] divorces the labour aspect from ownership, where the (white) free landowner is the natural embodiment of the ideal citizen but the (migrant) unfree farm labourer, who actually cultivates the land, is shut off from the privileges of citizenship” (Venkatesh 2019: 82-83).

While the NFU PEI focused on the differences between land-owning residents, non-residents, and corporations, the group whose daily work best fit the present-day version of the historic PEI land struggles used to motivate the public were left unprotected, invisible, and landless. As recently as August 2022, nine Vietnamese TFWs were given open work permits by the federal government to let them escape “an abusive situation” at a farm on PEI (Yarr 2022). However, as the NFU PEI continues to focus on landowners they consider problematic, they also displayed divergent attitudes towards two newer groups buying large tracts of land: the Amish and Mennonite, and Buddhist monks and nuns.

New Resident Landowners or “Foreign” Landlords?
Traditionalist Christian groups, Buddhist Nuns and Monks

Participants in this research who identified problem landowners —other than the Irvings or Vanco Farms — would invariably mention the Buddhist community. At the same time,

and in sharp contrast, they showed support for new residents made up of Amish and Mennonite groups from Ontario.

A 2016 *Globe and Mail* article "Former Ontario farmers creating Amish paradise on Prince Edward Island" Kevin Bissett described the arrival of 14 Amish families with excitement and characterized them using language reminiscent of colonization: They were "industrious," "well-organized," "community-based," "pioneers" who would "revive" rural PEI. The author explained that Islanders —including retired farmers who were "tak[ing] the Amish under their wing"— embraced the new residents: "Islanders, thrilled at the sudden interest in a shrinking, aging corner of their rural province, are going out of their way to help make it an Amish paradise" (Bissett 2016). However, the author admitted that the families did not necessarily come to PEI for the existing community, they were lured by the low cost of land and had acquired older, neglected farms. At the time, Premier Wade MacLauchlan hoped that the Amish would "spark a sense of pride and enthusiasm in the area" (Bissett 2016), which suggested that Islanders in the area lacked pride in their community.

In the *National Post* article "Can the Amish win over the Islanders? Cheap farmland triggers migration from Ontario to P.E.I." Joe O'Connor described the new Amish residents as "economic migrants" who were not only "from away[32]" but also from "from another century, where children leave school after grade eight, technology is shunned, outsiders are avoided — unless for commercial purposes — women have lots of babies and men make all the decisions" (O'Connor 2016). This article claimed that "the

[32] PEI Residents who move to the Island from other places are commonly referred to as people who "come from away" or "CFAs".

only discernible pushback to date has been from some island farmers, who felt the land that was sold to the Amish should have been sold to a local. The problem: no locals were interested in buying" (O'Connor 2016).

Interestingly, the exclusion of locals from farmland acquisition was a major issue to the two participants I spoke to at the church in Kings County. According to my participants, when the Buddhist community bought vacant farmland to rent[33] to other farmers or to use themselves[34] they were not being truthful about the quality of land and had, in contrast to the Amish, acquired good quality land for farming:

> One of the first years the Monks had come here —they did have a public session here— my nephew went and one of your sisters went (looks at other participant) and they're both from farms. So, I said (at the session) "A few years ago at a public meeting, representatives from the monks were questioned by farmers as to why they were buying so much good farmland," … The answer was that they only buy marginal land. Another farmer strongly disagreed with that answer and rightly so … My nephew then and his sister who is a little bit more vocal, they said "No, you're not" and they said "Yes" but they (nephew and sister) know the area.

This comment suggested that one group is taken at face value while the other is viewed as untrustworthy. The same participant suggested that one reason for suspicion was the lack of visibility of the Buddhist monks and nuns. According to the participant, the Amish were much more visible in the community:

> And they say, "But the Amish are here, and they've bought up quite a bit of it (farmland)" and I said "Ya, there's several families, they buy 70 acres, 100 acres, whatever the family and the horses can do." They don't buy… and they're here. There's the operative word: they are HERE, H-E-R-E. So, they are expanding because they have big families, but they are here, and they are contributing. People say "Well, the monks and nuns are contributing too." Well, the construction would be a boom...

[33] Retired farmers I spoke to also rented their land to other farmers.
[34] Their businesses included organic farms (Mercer & Huang 2023).

She suggested that being able to "see" new community members in the town, buying goods and supporting the local economy was one important detail that separated the Amish from Buddhist groups such as GEBIS. According to the participant, the monks and nuns used to be visible in local stores, but now they buy their goods directly from suppliers: "I never see them in the Superstore anymore, you used to see them buying case after case of soy milk, now you never see them because they just [buy] directly."

A *New Farmer* in Kings County expressed a similar, but more conflicted sentiments when discussing the monks and nuns. His unease seemed to come from a feeling of mystery surrounding the Buddhist groups, marked by a seeming lack of transparency in their activities, an ability to access capital, and was underscored by the number of temple members. In the LPA a resident can own 1000 acres of land; therefore, each individual member would be allowed to buy 1000 acres (Government of PEI 2022c: 10):

> With VANCO and the Irvings it's a bit more, it's kind of one family and you can sort of see… ok, who might be connected to who. Even though they do have numbered corporations and so on and so forth. But with the Monks, there's like all these added levels of "we don't know." They're new here, so there's this whole — so you want to be respectful — while also trying to be vigilant about "What are you doing here? Because you're spending a lot of money and bought up a lot of land," and it's very difficult because their membership is in the hundreds, possibly thousands and not all of them are connected to the public at all. It just takes a matter of putting your name with a title, ok. So, it's — they're Buddhist monks for Christ — you know — it's not— I think the bulk of them don't mean anything toward anybody, just pick up slugs off the driveways so they don't drive over them. But you just wonder…

When the Buddhist monks and nuns first arrived, they made sure to be seen and to engage the community. According to Mark Mann (2013) in "When the Monks Come to Town" they hosted several public events and meet and greets. However, instead of elatedness,

the public were cautious. Mann noticed a difference in Islanders when they were asked about the Monks and Nuns:

> [W]henever I asked about the Buddhists; it was all shy smiles and retreating grins and nervous chuckles. Clearly people have an opinion, but something stops them from expressing it.
>
> One plausible explanation is that they don't want to seem racist. People secluded on islands aren't exactly known for their immunity to xenophobia. On PEI, they've even got an acronym for outsiders: CFAs, the "Come From Aways." And, certainly, I occasionally detected something other than open-mindedness. One Islander could hardly talk about the Buddhists without searching for insect analogies; another worried about the long-term "social and cultural effects" of their presence; one farmer declared that he'd let his property "go to the trees" before he sold to the Buddhists. But mostly, Islanders reminded me that everyone's an immigrant and spoke of cultural differences with fond curiosity. Brad Oliver is a ubiquitous real-estate agent in Kings County, on the eastern side of PEI, where Montague and the monastery are located and where the Buddhists are buying their land. He likes to respond to any grumblings about the monks with the sardonic retort that "there are too many Irish Catholics around here" (Mann 2013).

Interestingly, in an article for *The Globe and Mail*, "Monks, money and the fierce debate over PEI's scarce land" (Mercer & Huang 2023) a PEI-born GEBIS monk, expressed a similar sentiment: "No one would question this if we were all Catholics. Any new group that has ever come to PEI in history has gone through the same thing."

In the 2021 *Saltwire* article "After more than a decade, why is there still a controversy over the P.E.I. Buddhist community?" Stu Neatby (2021) described the apprehension of locals towards new the new landowners as one of two possibilities:

> Maybe it's the story of an immigrant community, loosely connected by a religious group, struggling to establish itself in a rural community, often encountering more nativism than Prince Edward Islanders would like to admit.
>
> Or maybe it's the story of a wealthy religious group that has taken advantage of P.E.I.'s lax oversight of agricultural land protection, driving up land prices in the process.

Participants in this research were sensitive about discussing issues around GEBIS and GWBI due to the government's implication that the NFU PEI's opposition to foreign ownership was racist (D. Campbell 2021b).

At a March 2023 land forum, presented by the Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands, NFU PEI Representative Douglas Campbell reported on suspicious land ownership in Three Rivers, PEI — where the GEBIS monks resided— and prefaced the presentation with an acknowledgement of the allegations of racism related to the NFU PEI. He suggested that that this allegation was created to keep Islanders quiet about LPA issues through fear and that policies favoured rich, white-collared immigrants over blue-collar immigrants:

> [F]ear that is wrapped up in the word racism, it is the red herring that is distracting people's attention away from the central points being considered which is the validation of PEI Lands Protection Act and the concentration of our primary resource in the hands of a corporation. The implication of racism effectively keeps people quiet to wrongdoing.
>
> Let me clearly state: the NFU is not racist. Across Canada, the NFU works with many newcomers to help them make Canada home… There is no disputing that our Island needs newcomers who will work beside us, raise a family, integrate, buy homes and farms, and contribute to the economy that provides all Islanders the infrastructure required to support our communities. But sadly, it seems government programs favour deep-pocketed, moneyed, white-collar immigrants over the traditional blue-collar newcomers. Such policies are inequitable and unjust to many immigrants who have much to offer. They are also unfair to Islanders losing opportunities to have homes or farmland to fast tracked, moneyed immigrants (The Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands 2023: 28:24).

Here, Campbell suggested that GEBIS were a threat to Islanders due to their access to capital which put Islanders at a disadvantage when trying to buy homes or farmland.

Economics seemed central to the criticism of Buddhist communities on PEI. So much so, that the narrative also included rumours of suspicious wealth, as one of the NFU PEI Associate members recalled:

> I heard a story third-hand, some Buddhist monk walked into the tax office in Charlottetown and paid property taxed on all kinds of properties. You know, there's a lot of Asian individuals coming here and buying properties as well, who are associated with the monks and the nuns. Well, he come in apparently with a suitcase full of cash to pay these property taxes and that set off some alarm bells in taxation. Anyhow, government's well aware and the monks even admitted it, they're over their land limits and they're going to try to do better [laughter]. But government is just turning a blind eye to this. It's not good for Island agriculture, I'm really disappointed. I guess, you know, why don't they clamp down on the Irvings? Why don't the clamp down on the Buddhists? Maybe they're afraid of losing the revenue stream or jobs and economic activity.

The concern about economics, and foreign investment may be due to the lower median income in PEI, compared with Canada as a whole[35]. According to the PEI Statistics Bureau (2023) approximately 30% of Islanders who have an income make less than $25000 a year (PEI Statistics Bureau 2023: 52) and 8.8% of all persons aged 18-64 are considered low income, lower than the national average of 8.2% (PEI Statistics Bureau 2023: 53). A *Youth Recruit* pig farmer in Prince County expressed direct anxiety about the link between "foreign entities," economic stability and food security in PEI:

> If I was to tell the public: "What would happen if some **foreign entity** owned all the farmland here and you couldn't eat anymore?" That would get people's attention. But then the government would accuse me of fear mongering. "Oh, no, no! That would never happen!" Absolutely that's going to happen. We make these predictions, the NFU. "Oh, you guys are crazy!" Well, it happened. You don't want a **foreign entity** and some rogue government … It happens. It's all part of human history.

[35] The median income in PEI for 2020 was $38, 290 (PEI Statistics Bureau, Department of Finance, 2023). The median Canadian income was $43, 600 that same year (Statistics Canada, 2024).

Interestingly, a *New Farmer* in Prince County suggested that Mennonites buying land at inflated prices could affect the price of farmland for Islanders, but their concern was offset by their favourable view of Mennonite farming practices that included mixed farming:

> The greater interest in Mennonites in farming on PEI is a change since we bought our land. I think it's good, it brings diversity, it brings back a lot of mixed farming. I know people are concerned it may be pushing up land prices because one of the reasons Mennonites are finding it attractive in PEI is that they can buy land more cheaply than in Ontario. [However], some of the land they're buying is land that was marginal — from the potato industry— and they're bringing it back into production with mixed farming. And the more diversity we have in PEI agriculture the better. Glad to see that.

Mixed farming was the usual farming practice on PEI until the mid-1900s and a suggested method by the NFU for farming regeneratively using livestock (MacFadyen 2016: 188-189; Qualman 2019). For some NFU PEI members, their mixed farms were both viewed with nostalgic affection and considered good practice. In contrast, nostalgia and mixed farming ideals were missing when a spokesperson for GWBI, Venerable Elena, was interviewed for a *CBC Atlantic Voice* audio documentary *Outside the Monastery* (Graham 2023). Her view of land seemed disconnected from agriculture, rural life or any particular land vision:

> Some things I didn't really understand, some of their concerns. For example, like how they care about the land. Maybe I knew a little bit about land is very important to the Islanders, but what's the reasoning behind that and what degree do they care. It's not like in other big cities, where you bought the land, and you can do whatever you want. I can't really say that I understand already, but it helped me to realize that there is a lot to learn, and we need to get close to each other (Graham 2023: 21:38)

The philosophy that ownership confers a right to "do whatever you want" with the land is at odds with NFU views on agroecological farming, which may explain why the

traditional mixed farming practices of the Amish were looked upon favourably by NFU PEI members. The suggestion that a landowner could "do whatever" with the land was also reminiscent of the colonial views of land, as well as agribusiness practices. This viewpoint may also explain why a representative for GWBI consulted a lawyer to find ways to circumvent the LPA. She was recorded as saying: "See if this will work, let's pretend that the lay-people are buying first for better negotiation and then transfer to GWBI later before closing" (Graham 2023: 18:03), which was an approach very similar to Cavendish Farms in their attempt to buy Brendel Farms[36].

Conclusion

According to Bennett, Grossberg and Morris (2005: xvii), in *New Keywords*: "For Williams the point was not merely that the meanings of words change over time but that they change in relationship to changing political, social and economic situation and needs." The NFU PEI used the shorthand of "absentee landlords" that evoked a "common-sense" history used to call the general PEI public to action, by suggesting that a valued form of land ownership, and with it a way of life, may be at risk. Unfortunately, the focus on this version of history also erased the land history of Mi'kmaq people. What was described as a revolutionary struggle on the side of the landless had been transformed into a threat of the end of a "way of life" but hid how it upheld an agricultural myth that depended on the labour of Temporary Foreign Workers, refugees, and new immigrants. In examining comments about two groups of resident landowners — Amish or Mennonite versus Buddhist groups— contradictions were illuminated. Both

[36] Described in detail in the introduction.

groups claimed to have purchased undesirable farmland, and both were viewed by outsiders as insular communities. However, only one was "foreign," which, in turn, made the Amish and Mennonite groups more acceptable to my participants and the NFU PEI. Ultimately, these contradictions highlighted obstacles for the NFU PEI in addressing land issues in a way that would bring more people to the organization — not least farm workers, indigenous farmers and new farmers that fit the demographic highlighted in the next chapter: "family farm."

Chapter 3 — "Family Farm"

The pigs were the first thing I noticed when I headed up the long red dirt driveway of the farm of this *Youth Recruit* participant. I worked hard to avoid them as they wandered freely along the road. This farm was in Prince County, known as "potato-ville" to participants; the Brendel sale took place in this county, where Cavendish Farms has its largest processing plant.

I parked on a grass patch in a clearing near the house and barn. The farmer came out of the barn immediately to greet me. "Heidi!" He yelled from a slight distance and gave me a thumbs up about my parking spot. "I'll get you to bring in the cows with my kid, and then we'll talk." He brought me into his house to borrow some rubber boots[37] and then his young son led me out to the field. I folded the printout of my interview questions and put them in my pocket, and with my backpack I followed the boy, about ten, to the cow field. His son spoke non-stop about his farm chores (he liked them, but his other brother hated waking up for them and would get in trouble), the dog (he usually doesn't come this far out in the field, he must be curious about who I am and what's going on) and the cows.

"Don't you think they're beautiful?" He said, "They're like elephants … no, like tame rhinos. No, they're like unicorns."

[37] After this meeting I kept a pair of boots in the car at all times.

We walked out to place ourselves behind the furthest cow and started walking back to the barn. The cows knew that this meant they needed to walk in. A cow in the next field over got the message too, and started in. The boy said that the young cows could stay in the field. One of my socks came off my foot in the boot, but I ignored it, I needed to keep up with the ten-year-old. Luckily for me, a larger cow lagged behind, so the boy ran over to urge him on, and I had time to fix my sock. As we got closer to the barn, he warned me about a particularly muddy part of the trail and showed me how to walk through it without getting stuck. Unfortunately, halfway through the trek, my boot was sucked into the mud, and I fell forward. The boy was sympathetic, and I laughed. I got stuck again but managed to wriggle out of the mud without falling.

"Do you want to be a farmer?" He asked.

"I don't know," I replied, "I'm a student right now."

"That's funny, I'm just a kid, and I'm teaching you."

"Kids know stuff," I replied, and he nodded in agreement.

Before we met his dad in the barn, the boy showed me a stable where a calf shared space with a pig, and visions of *Charlotte's Web* ran through my mind. We left the stable laughing as a dog ran in front of us to chase a cat. I met my participant in the milking barn, and he hosed off my boots. My sock felt wet; there must have been hole.

The milking area had room to milk three cows at a time; I interviewed the farmer as he milked about twenty cows. He had no problem going through the paces while he spoke passionately about the NFU, farming and land issues. He added food to the feed container, pulled a lever to open the main pen door. Three cows advanced to the empty stalls. He cleaned and disinfected their udders and fit the milker mechanism. Once the

cow was done, the milker seemed to release on its own, then the farmer opened the pen gate, and the cows walked back to the main barn.

After the interview he asked me about myself and told me that he was willing to sell part of his land to people like me. I could farm five acres; get chickens and he would help fix up an old house and barns. He had 100 acres, grew grain, silage and hay in the spring and summer and had about 70 pigs on top of the 20 cows. He believed that his is the smallest dairy farm on the Island. After our talk, we left the barn, and it was dark. Kids ran around with nerf guns alongside cows that slowly wandered the grounds. His son saw me, "You're still here!"

In PEI, as recently as 2001, farms that were occupied by at least two family members made up two-thirds of all farms on the Island. In 2016, that number reduced to less than half (Yarr 2019). The "family farm" or "farm families" concept is central to the NFU. The term is the focus of the organizations mission and history. This is especially apparent on the organizations "About the NFU" website statement (NFU 2024d):

> The National Farmers Union (NFU) is a grassroots farmer organization advocating for farm families across Canada since 1969. Members work together to achieve agricultural policies that ensure dignity and income security for farm families while protecting and enhancing rural environments for future generations.

Additionally, the NFU was a direct-membership group, and which meant that there were no requirements to become a member as part of a commodity organization[38] and farmers

[38] In New Brunswick and PEI, farmers can become members at the same time as they register their farm. It is not clear whether the organization checks the farm status of "family farm" members who register in other ways (NFU 2024).

joined of their own accord. One of the main goals of the NFU included the promotion of the "family farm" as the "most appropriate and efficient means of agricultural production" (NFU 2024f). I asked the dairy and pig farmer for his definition of the "family farm" and he admitted that it was a "struggle to define" but the definition could be found in the NFU policy booklet. The NFU policy booklet stated that the endorsed definition is the following: "A 'family farm' is an operation that produces food or other agricultural products and where the vast majority of labour, capital, and management are provided by family members" (NFU 2020: 44).

In this chapter, I looked to Raymond Williams to examine the meaning of "family farm" as figured in the agricultural landscape of PEI, as well as through attempts to create precise definitions, for example, by the United Nations. According to Raymond Williams (1976: 21-22),

> The emphasis of my own analyses is deliberately social and historical. In the matters of reference and applicability, which analytically underlie any particular use, it is necessary to insist that the most active problems of meaning are always primarily embedded in actual relationships, and that both the meanings and the relationships are typically diverse and variable, within the structures of particular social orders and the processes of social and historical change.

The "family farm" idea relied heavily on the concept of "family." Therefore, I will begin with a historical examination of the creation of "family" as explained by Williams. The family relationship is key to the concept of the "family farm" and in examining "family" the meaning of "family farm" will be both illuminated and muddied. Then, I will discuss attempts to define the concept of "family farm" and highlight how the ambiguous nature of the term was useful in the promotion of farming to the general public. The image used in promotional material and employed by agribusiness and government evoked the

traditional family, who seemed to succeed by family ties and family labour alone. I then look at how the meaning of "family farm" seemed to be a synonym for "small farm" for my participants, who believed more small farms meant less consolidation and brought about rural renewal and good land stewardship. I conclude with an examination of the "family farm" in practice that shed light on the contradictions of meaning related to farm and family.

Family, God and Land

In *Keywords – A Vocabulary of Culture of Society,* Raymond Williams (1976) interrogated the meaning of "family" and found that the common meaning of family in use today — direct blood relatives living together— was an invention of the twentieth century that could be traced to the "rise of the bourgeois family" (Williams 1976: 132) and its role as an isolated economic unit under capitalism. He wrote that in the late 1300s and early 1400s, the term "family" emerged in English from the Latin *familia* which meant "household," and at the time, indicated a group of servants living together, who were sometimes —but not always—related by blood. Later in the 1400s, "family" described a "house," which consisted of a group linked to a common ancestor through a particular lineage, and then linked to religious meaning through "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Williams 1976: 131). He noted that there were class differences in term usage that arose in the late 1700s: rural households included workers under the term, but upper classes made distinctions between "servants" and the "family."

Then, in the 1800s, due to economic changes brought on by capitalist production, a distinction between "men" and "the family" arose: a man who worked to support *his*

family (Williams 1976: 133). This phenomenon affected the lower-middle class wage-labourer, who had earlier enjoyed a more expansive definition of family. The term changed to represent a small, isolated "family unit" that relied only on worker wages and unpaid labour. "Family" now "represent[ed] the only immediate positive attachments in a largescale and complex wage-earning society" (Williams 1976: 133).

The discrete family unit, with the man who worked to provide for the family, contributed to the image of the "family farm." The merging of this family unit with John Locke's labour theory of property seemed to bring the revered idea of the "farm family" to the forefront. Locke (1690/1980: 23) proclaimed that:

> he who appropriates land to himself by his labour, does not lessen, but increase the common stock of mankind: for the provisions serving to the support of human life, produced by one acre of inclosed (sic) and cultivated land, are …. ten times more than those which are yielded by an acre of land of an equal richness lying waste in common.

This view of the commons, along with Locke's notion that "God … gave authority so far to appropriate" (Locke 1690/1980: 22) served to rationalize colonization through the comparison of "used" and "profitable" land in England to the "unused" or "wasted" land in North America, where the First Nations had not transformed land to render it profitable, according to Locke and also did not consider land an alienable private property (Wood 2017: 111).

According to Kathryn Marie Dudley the Lockean notion of "appropiat[ing] land to himself by his labour" was important to the farmers in her book *Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland* (2000: 8). She explained:

> …in a community based on agriculture as a way of life, it is the figure of the autonomous farmer, cultivating what would otherwise be "wasted" land, who takes center stage in the drama of human mastery. Divine gifts — be they in the

> form of native talent, good land, livestock, or weather—play an important role, but ultimately it is what the individual does with them that counts. Like the sod-busting pioneers before them, family farmers inscribe their moral character into the landscape, taking pride in what they produce — and in their ability to do it on their own.

Here Dudley described the "family farmer" as an individual, a lone farmer who was (most often "his") own boss. He supported his family by labouring enclosed land. Therefore, the "family farmer" could be considered both bound by capitalist sense of "family," and also felt as though they had escaped the more stifling aspects of the same capitalist system:

> To the American worker —subject to mass layoffs, plant closings, corporate downsizing, temporary jobs, and dead-end careers — the family farm glimmers like a promised land, a respectable way to opt out of the rat race, even if that option is never exercised (Dudley 2000: 9).

Added to that, farmers were driven by the moral code that influenced colonization and "independence and self-reliance" (Dudley 2000: 8) that gave the farmer and the "farm family" freedom to succeed and freedom to fail. Either way, the freedom and failure would be the fault of the discrete family unit, who would be celebrated if they succeeded or "worked hard enough" or would have aided in their own downfall because they did not. Dudley continues: "The paradox of the pastoral ideal has allowed us to entertain the illusion that any family with the right combination of skill, ambition, and luck can make a decent living on the land" (Dudley 2000: 9). The "family farm," was a lauded "commercial enterprise able to support a heterosexual couple and their children" (Dudley 2000: 9) even though the reality was a move to larger, machine-heavy, employee-laboured farms which were considered agricultural and economic "progress."

In my research, I have found that agribusiness and government exhibit a fabricated, romantic image of the "family farm" as a marketing tool, and perhaps also as a distraction from land grabbing and dispossession. A return to the "family farm" was important to participants in the sense that it could be a way to give autonomy back to the farmers who may be in precarious contract situations. Participants suggested that the future of Island agriculture depended on vibrant rural communities, which could be revitalized through the redistribution of land from large agribusiness to create many distinct and separate small farms. One way they sought to do this was through the LPA.

"Family Farm" and Legislation

In a Guardian Op.Ed. entitled "Silence is Consent" (2018), NFU PEI District Director Campbell stated:

> The intent [of the Lands Protection Act] was that three members of a family group, e.g. a parent and two adult children could form a corporation. In this way, the original spirit of the Lands Protection Act was to keep farm land (sic) at the service of family farming model. It was never intended that the corporation limit would be manipulated to serve the interests of industrial agriculture. In fact, a five-acre limit was placed on industrial corporations (including processors).
>
> So, to accept the spirit of the Lands Protection Act, in fact, requires accepting the original goals of keeping farm land (sic) in family farming.

The NFU PEI stressed the preservation of the "family farm" as central to the intent of the LPA. However, the act did not mention the "family farm," and instead the stated purpose of the Act is the regulation of the amount of acreage that a person or corporation can hold. Added to this, the last reference to "farming" was erased from the LPA in 1990, when "the distinction between farm corporations and other corporations" was removed (Government of PEI 2013: 8).

The problem of definitions around land limits and farmland was not unique to PEI. In "Problems of Legal Definition of 'family farm' in Poland," Damian Puślecki (2016), examined the meaning of "family farm" in the Act of 11 April 2003 on the Agricultural System. The Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 1997 designated the "family farm" synonymous with the "agricultural farm" and described it as a farm:

> 1) Which is run by an individual farmer, and
> 2) Whose total surface area of agricultural lands does not exceed 300 ha (741 acres) (Puślecki 2016: 21).

Puślecki explained that this definition did not evoke the idea of a "family farm" unless the "family farm" was defined by "surface area" (Puślecki 2016: 22) and ignored all of the intertwined family and farm labour that made up the activities of the farm. Similarly, to PEI's LPA, the Act of 11 April 2003 was mainly put in place for the sale of real estate "with special attention given to foreigners" (Puślecki 2016: 22). He explained that the definition of "family farm" was complicated because there was "no precisely drafted, accepted and commonly used definition of the family farm" (Puślecki 2016: 22).

Struggle to Define: Wendell Berry, Canadian farmers, and the United Nations

The definition of a "family farm" was a direct question for participants in this study (Appendix B). Most participants were conflicted about the definition, similarly to the *Youth Recruit* at the beginning of this chapter and pointed to articulated definitions from the National NFU or Wendell Berry, a hugely influential farmer and writer who opened the National NFU conference in 2020.

Farmer Wendell Berry's opinion on the "family farm" and farming was well respected in North America, most notably in his home state of Kentucky where Sterling College offers the tuition-free Wendell Berry Farming Program (The Berry Center n.d.). His definition of the "family farm" was stated in his book *Bringing it to the Table – On Farming and Food* in the chapter "In Defense of the 'family farm'":

> [A] farm small enough to be farmed by a family and one that is farmed by a family, perhaps with a small amount of hired help. I shall not mean a farm that is owned by a family and worked by other people. The "family farm" is both the home and the workplace of the family that owns it (Berry 2009: 31).

One *New Farmer* participant was an organic grain, feed and poultry farmer in Prince County who started farming with her husband and reclaimed her father-in-law's farmland that had been previously rented to a potato farmer. When her husband completed agricultural college, they transitioned to organic farming. This farmer suggested that Berry's definition was good but did not apply to her farm because they were fairly large[39] and thought that it excluded some small farms. Her farm was one of the largest in this research, at nearly 600 acres. Nevertheless, she believed her farm was a "family farm" because it was "driven by family values" that included a farming philosophy that appreciated community relationships and "land stewardship":

> Wendell Berry has the definition that I like, but it also doesn't necessarily apply to even our farm. It's something about [how] it supports the farmer and the family. I think it also references not hiring other people. I mean, conventional agriculture likes to claim that 98% of the farms in Canada are "family farms," it's a really subjective term. I don't know that it can be defined really. What is a small farm? What is a large farm? Again, hard to define. I guess the question is what does it mean to me personally? Ya, I don't know [laughter]. I'm not sure, I guess it would probably be a farm driven by family values. Values that support your family's needs and your family's values. So, whatever that ends up looking like, I

[39] Large in terms of organic farms, but still small compared to conventional farms.

> guess. I don't know. I guess the Irvings are a family, but I don't know. I guess I don't really have a good answer for that…
>
> I'm not convinced that limits are the solution because you can have a 50-acre farm that is treated terribly, that is eroded and full of gullies and just ruined. Then you can have a 500-acre farm that is actually pretty well taken care of. I do appreciate land limits, and I see the difference, and I know why we have them here, we're a tiny island …
>
> [T]echnically our farm is a corporation, we're incorporated, so we're a corporation. I mean, we're not the Irvings obviously. That's who we're thinking of when we say the word corporate. But it really does apply to quite a number of farms. I think it should be a matter of what are you going to do with it. How are you going to treat it? How do you contribute to the community? I think those are the same questions. I don't think the number [of acres] matters.

This quotation highlighted some issues that arose from the definition. Most participants espoused their support for the "family farm" but could not define it; nevertheless, there seemed to be some appreciation of the rigid, romanticized, notion of the "family farm" evoked by Berry. At the same time, there was also an awareness that the current reality of farming and agriculture meant that the definition was hard to put into practice and that "family farm" was used as a marketing tool for "conventional agriculture." It also suggested that perhaps the "family" aspect of "family farm" played an important role in the revitalization of rural towns compared with a solo farmer without family ties. This *New Farmer's* concern about the definition brought to light the range of conceptions of the "family farm" among my participants. For some farm size was described as a more fitting way to talk about farms that they considered desirable than the term "family farm." To some participants the term "family farm" suggested a "traditional" family unit — heterosexual and white— or a term that was mainly applicable in a specific context; for

example, when discussing a "century farm[40]." The three *New Farmers* that I spoke to had a more difficult time with the term than more established farmers. This may be due to the fact that many of the long-standing farmer participants lived on "century farms" and had been surrounded by family, both immediate and extended, for most of their lives. However, in practice, that ideal was not necessarily followed, as two of my participants (a *Founder* and *New Farmer*) had formed a co-op, and others had hired labourers.

In the Canadian context, social scientist Kelly Bronson, food researcher Irena Knezevic and political scientist Chantal Clément (2019) found a wide array of definitions when they interviewed 36 self-identified "family farmers" to examine the term in "The Canadian 'family farm', in literature and in practice." They found that the "family farm" could be grouped into the following categories: size and ownership, community relations, food security and politics, and an overall theme of flexibility. In regard to size and ownership, some participants thought that small size was a characteristic of the "family farm" and the larger a farm was, the less likely it was to be a "family farm." Others stated the importance of the family as the decision-makers regardless of farm size or considered non-related farm-workers part of their "family." In the community relations category, researchers found that some farmers relied on their immediate community and the farm-community relationship that they also stressed the importance of "family values" (Bronson et al. 2019: 107). Food security and politics illuminated the role of the "family farm" in food security for the immediate community, as well as in the farm family itself, as the food they provided was valuable in feeding the people around them. Finally,

[40] A farm that has been in one family for 100 years or more.

researchers pointed out that farmers were aware of the ambiguous nature of the "family farm" concept. The general public had a "largely positive" impression of the term even though the concept was "fuzzy" and often evoked "a bucolic, pastoral setting and non-technologized, environmentally friendly food production practices" (Bronson et al. 108). Farmers viewed this as positive because it allowed flexibility in marketing and financial opportunities. For example, the term was advantageous when seeking "government supports" as the term did not define labour arrangements and allowed farmers access to funding even if they relied on volunteers or employed paid workers. However, some of their participants were also aware, and unhappy, that the term "family farm" was used to market large corporate Agri-farms in the same way (Bronson et al. 108).

Interestingly, The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) conducted research into the concept to grapple with similar issues before they declared 2019-2028 the "decade of family farming" (FAO of the UN 2021). The role of this declaration was the hope that a spotlight on the concept of the "family farm" would help the UN meet some key objectives including "Zero Hunger, a more balanced and resilient planet, and the Sustainable Development Goals" (FAO of the UN 2021).

In the *United Nations Decade of family farming 2019-2028 Global Action Plan* (FAO and IFAD 2019) Director-General of the FAO, José Graziano da Silva, explained that the Global Action Plan would put "family farming at the centre of the international agenda" (FAO and IFAD 2019: 7) to enact change in the global food system. The global food system, the report declared, was to blame for virtually all the ecological destruction that has led to the current climate emergencies:

> [T]he current food and agricultural system is largely responsible for deforestation, water scarcities, biodiversity loss, soil depletion along with high levels of greenhouse gas emissions, which have significantly contributed to climate change (FAO and IFAD 2019, 62).

According to Graziano da Silva, "family farmers" "provide the majority of the world's food [and] are major investors in agriculture and the backbone of the rural economic structure" (FAO and IFAD 2019: 7). They defined the "family farm" as "all types of family-based production models in agriculture, fishery, forestry, pastoral and aquaculture, and include peasants, indigenous peoples, traditional communities, fisher folks, mountain farmers, forest users and pastoralists" (FAO and IFAD 2019: 8). Later the report added to this definition and stated:

> family farming (including all family-based agricultural activities) is a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production that is managed and operated by a family and is predominantly reliant on the family labour of both women and men. The family and the farm are linked, co-evolve and combine economic, environmental, social and cultural functions (FAO and IFAD 2019: 9)

The definition that the UN chose for the decade shared some elements with more traditional definitions put forward by my participants. For example, a "family farm" depended on family labour and "family farms" created social and economic value in their communities.

Presumably, the UN came to this definition after Elizabeth Garner and Ana Paula de la O Campos published the FAO of the "UN Working Paper No. 14-10 Identifying the "family farm": An informal discussion of the concepts and definitions" (2014).

In this Working Paper, Garner and de la O Campos looked at 36 definitions of the term to try to distill the particular traits that make "family farming" a unique type of

agriculture, how it differed from "smallholder farming" and whether these definitions were relevant to the current agricultural landscape. According to the researchers, the definitions of "family farm" varied and depended on "country, context, author, and political motivation" (Garner and O Campos 2014: 1). They found that while a majority of definitions noted the importance of the family involvement in farm labour and management, as well as the importance of small farm size, there were not enough overlapping traits to create a "global and unique definition of family farming" (Garner and O Campos 2014: 1-3).

Interestingly, Garner and de la O Campos found that the type of farming and farm size took a backseat to labour type, which was mentioned in 23 of the 36 definitions, and management type which was mentioned in 22 of the 36, with a preference in both cases that family members took on these roles (Garner and O Campos 2014: 2).

The focus on labour and farm management suggested that the "family farm" was not necessarily bound by land size, which illuminated the distinction between "family farm" and "smallholder farm," where "smallholder farm" was defined predominantly by farm acreage (Garner and O Campos 2014: 7,16). Also, according to researchers, labour relations were a more significant trait than land ownership, which was mentioned only in four of the 36 definitions (Garner and O Campos 2014: 3).

The researchers suggested that the "family farm" was an "entry point" to broaden the understanding of rural families, and subsequently support rural development: "The family as a unit of the community, in the context of family dynamics, local knowledge, social connections, and community identity, are essential for understanding and supporting rural development" (Garner and O Campos 2014: 11). Added to that, they

believed the "family farm" could make visible "broader rural socio-economic aspects" that would be missed without a focus on "family", such as through the study of "small farms" where workers do not necessarily have a link to the rural community (Garner and O Campos 2014: 11).

However, many of my participants believed that members of a small farm could be just as active in the community and act equally as environmental stewards as a "family farm," and a small farm could also cause as much environmental devastation as a large farm. Nevertheless, Garner and de la O Campos seemed confident that "family" was integral to the definition and not simply a nod to a romantic ideal.

Agribusiness, the Federation of Agriculture, the Department of Agriculture and the "family farm"

In my research, I found comments associated with what was *not* a "family farm" as illuminating as the definition itself. A *Youth Recruit* dairy and pig farmer in Prince County stated that it is *not* a farm comprised of multiple corporations used to exceed the land limits set out in the LPA, or a subsidiary of an oil company[41], or a larger non-agricultural corporation:

> The family farm is the base unit of agriculture. A great example of a family farm would be there's a generational shift from one family to the son or daughter, to the son or daughter, there's others within the family and the corporate profits … they're a corporation but corporate profits stay within the family and it's all within reason. It's not like they own an oil company, it's not like this is a farm is a division of something else bigger. A family farm is its own 100% self-contained income kind of thing where … as opposed to some corn company that's buying up land, and the fictitious, or very real family of billionaires is investing. There's quite a difference between a family farm and an entity.

[41] "Oil company" is implied to be Cavendish Farms.

A *Founder* from Queens County made it clear that "family farms" included farms that incorporated for tax reasons but excluded "mega corporation and industrial corporations." Adding to that a *Youth Recruit* calver in Prince County stated that a "family farm" was *not* listed on the stock exchange or controlled by a family who made their money in oil and gas:

> Not that the Irvings are on the stock exchange, but they made their money in oil and gas, and they came to PEI and bought a potato processor along the way that happened to have some farmland tied to it. And all of a sudden, they're farming.

A "family farm" is *not* a processing company that happened to have farmland as part of the sale, it is *not* financed by invisible shareholders — or put bluntly — the "family farm" is *not* the Irvings. However, VANCO Farms' identity as a "family farm" was somewhat up for debate. The *Youth Recruit* calver in Prince County suggested that they were a "family farm": "I think you'd have to consider them because all the principals are family members," while, a *Founder* from Queens County explained that VANCO had been a "family farm" once, but after they grew, depended on non-family labour, and large equipment they were no longer in that category:

> They're so highly mechanized. [They use] huge equipment and they have their own workers, but they *used to be a* "family farm." I don't know how some of them keep track of the land they have. They've got so many fields, it must be quite a job, the management of that.

In discussion with participants, VANCO and the Irvings/Cavendish Farms were continually mentioned unprompted, by both farmers and non-farmer participants. For example, a non-farmer and representative from the Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands echoed the *Founder's* statement above:

> VANCO consider themselves a small "family farm," I think they still are claiming that. But they've got so much land and so much money. We'd like to know where all that money is coming from. So, you go try to search that up through IRAC[42], well you can't find out. It's impossible to find out. But we know that you can drive from one end of the island to the other and VANCO owns an awful lot of land, but they still call themselves a "family farm."

Some participants struggled to label VANCO farms anything other than a "family farm." For example, a *Youth Recruit* in Prince County made a distinction between VANCO, and Cavendish Farms when he described what he thought was a "real farmer," a term he used interchangeably with "family farm":

> I think the NFU, you know, maybe wants the farming left to the farmers and let the big corporations do what they do best: process. But don't have farmers, — what I call "real farmers"— competing against billionaires for land …
>
> *What's your definition of a "real farmer"?*
>
> [They are] someone who's not a major corporation, like an Irving. Somebody who's an actual "family farm." You know that definition is changing, I mean you've got VANCOs down east, they're a pretty big operation, but you'd have to consider them a "family farm." It's all been run by family members. I think the Irvings would like to consider themselves a "family farm" [laughter], but they had a little bit of a leg up on everybody else.

Another participant stressed that the division and conflict on PEI are between small farms and industrial farms. This *New Farmer* in Kings County suggested that the term "family farm" was almost useless as it could describe even the largest agribusiness, which has access to more capital:

> [L]et's face it, to me the observation is that you have small farms, and you have industrial farms. And ironically, a lot of the industrial farms that are left, if they're not like an outright corporate farm, they are typically more of the old style "family farm." Partly because anyone new could not start a farm of that size, that every bank would laugh. Unless you have an airtight business plan, nowadays if

[42] The Prince Edward Island Regulatory and Appeals Commission.

> you are a larger farm, you most likely inherited it. Unless it's a corporate farm and you're a hired farm manager and so on, in that sense.

The national NFU depicted land purchases by corporations "as part of a larger corporate strategy based on economies of scale, market domination and vertical integration" in *Losing Our Grip 2015 Update* (NFU 2015: 15). In the report, the NFU discussed four corporations across Canada, one of which is J.D. Irving, Limited (owner of Cavendish Farms) with their "history of resisting compliance with the Lands Protection Act" (NFU 2015: 17).

Cavendish Farms and VANCO Farms were both corporations that relied on the idea of the "family farm" in their marketing. In the case of Cavendish Farms, the concept of the "family farm" seemed to be used to claim authenticity and residency to distract from criticism of their land holdings and contract farming practices. In the case of VANCO, the idea of the "family farm" seemed to be used to obscure the dispossession of land from local farmers and downplay their use of temporary, and low paid labourers.

Cavendish Farms

On the Cavendish Farms website, there was a section devoted to "Our Story" (Cavendish Farms 2018a). This section included "Our History," the history of J.D. Irving, Limited and Cavendish Farms; "Our Business" with subheadings that included "A family food company" and "Partnering with farmers"; as well as "Our Mission and Values" and "Our Locations". Under "Our History," the parent company is described as a "family" instead of a corporate empire: "At Cavendish Farms®, we're proud of being part of a larger **family**, the J.D. Irving Group of Companies" (emphasis mine). Under the heading "A

family food company," the longevity of the parent corporation was used to suggest extensive farming expertise even though their portfolio did not include agricultural companies until they purchased C.M. McLean Limited in 1980 and "know-how" evoked a folksy image (all emphasis mine):

> We're a **family food company** that puts pride, dedication and a **whole lot of know-how** into everything we grow, and everything we make. Cavendish Farms is part of a **family-owned company** that has been customer focused since 1882 (Cavendish Farms 2018a).

Under "Partnering with farmers" the company suggested that their brand was about land, the promotion of a local and global community and suggested that they had long family history on the Island:

> Built by the expertise of **growers over generations**, we **have a proud history and deep roots**. Bringing the goodness of the farm to homes and restaurants is what we do best with a **strong commitment to the land, to the community, and to the people** around the world who love our food (Cavendish Farms 2018a).

Finally, they tried to distance themselves from notions of "industrial" farming in the "Where we grow" section:

> Growing potatoes on Prince Edward Island is **much more than an industry**. It's a way of life. Ninety-eight percent of **farms here are family run**. And their pride, hard work, and knowledge passed down through generations ensure success (Cavendish Farms 2018b).

According to Jillian R. Cavanaugh and Shalini Shankar (2014), "the linguistic construction of continuity over time in [a] place was an essential element in the process of transforming heritage as a sign of authenticity into economic value" (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014: 55). Cavendish Farms used language that invoked heritage to imply continuity with a created idea of the PEI of yesteryear to build an image of authenticity. This authenticity was then used to market the potato as intrinsic to the PEI way of life.

Cavanaugh observed a similar construction of authenticity in the Bergamo region of Italy. Bergamasco food product marketing framed the region's food as the result of hard work by passionate producers who were committed to traditional processes and devoted to their land and culture (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014: 55). Similarly to PEI, marketers used a "common stereotype" (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014: 55) of Bergamascos which depicted them as "passionately hard workers whose labour is depicted as the same as that which their predecessors did in the past" (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014: 55) to communicate authenticity. However, Cavanaugh and Shankar also found that when a product reached the global arena, it was more difficult to sustain the traits that signal authenticity (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014: 58). Similarly in "Putting nature 'to work' through Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES)," economic ecologist Vijay Kolinjivadi, geographer Alejandra Zaga Mendez and economic ecologist Jérôme Dupras (2019) looked at the Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) program in PEI and noted the "influence of PEI's potato processing industry" (Kolinjivadi et al. 2019: 331). The obscuring of local and authentic product identity on the global scale seemed to be confirmed by a potato processing industry representative in PEI who spoke with these researchers:

> McDonald's French fries from potatoes produced on PEI go to different parts of the world, and consumers don't know or don't care where they come from. McDonald's sets the standards for where they procure their potatoes, but they don't care where their potatoes come from. PEI processed potatoes receive no special favours" (Anonymous industry representative quoted in Kolinjivadi, et al. 2019: 331).

Although Cavendish Farms marketed their corporation and potatoes from PEI using the language of authenticity, the authenticity of the brand may not be important to

them on a larger scale. Cavendish Farms' most significant customer— the global and highly competitive fast food industry— required uniformity, consistency and efficiency, in both appearance and taste, which are all characteristics in opposition to the kinds of traits usually associated with claims to authenticity and location-based product marketing (Kolinjivadi, et al. 2020: 79; Coombe, Ives and Huizenga 2015). According to Kolinjivadi, geographer Jean-François Bissonnette, Alejandra Zaga Mendez and Jérôme Dupras in "Would you like some fries with your ecosystem services?: McDonaldization and conservation in Prince Edward Island, Canada" (2020), "the embeddedness of PEI's processed potato industry within the highly competitive and global fast-food business has resulted in a singular focus on sustaining and enhancing productivity" (Kolinjivadi et al. 2020: 79).

These researchers suggested that Cavendish Farms embodied the "McDonaldization" of agriculture: the simplification of the landscape to achieve uniformity through mechanization (Kolinjivadi et al. 2020: 75-76). This type of agriculture sought to separate the technical goals of an agribusiness (such as aquiring more land to increase yields) from "unexpected social, political, and ecological consequences" (Kolinjivadi et al. 2020: 75) of those goals. Cavendish Farms did not seem to need to rely on ideas of authenticity and location-based virtues to keep its main customers happy. The weak relationship between PEI and Cavendish Farms was seen earlier by Kolinjivadi, Mendez and Dupras (2019) when they spoke to a processing plant representative: "The public just assumes that we'll [Cavendish Farms] always stay here. They think we're committed to this place, but the reality is that economics dictate" (Processing plant representative quoted in Kolinjivadi, Mendez and Dupra 2019: 331).

VANCO Farms

One participant brought me to a few large VANCO fields and taught me how to recognize them through the numbered lot markers. The fields were huge compared to neighbouring farms, and did not have the characteristic buffers and hedgerows that are recommended by the government[43] (Government of PEI 2023a; Government of PEI 2023b).

VANCO Farms, a potato and tulip grower, had a website that was divided into two sections to reflect this separation (VANCO Farms Ltd. n.d.a). The tulip section described the type of bulbs they sell, and how to buy in bulk or retail, and the "About us" section explained their method for growing tulips. This section stressed the "Canadianess" of the tulips and VANCO's "state-of-the-art equipment and machinery" (VANCO Farms Ltd. n.d.b). In contrast, the potato section was more detailed and stressed tradition and the "family farm."

In the potato section, a sub-section labelled "potatoes," was further divided into 1) Organic, 2) Pure PEI and 3) VANCO Produce. Additionally, an "About us" sub-section was divided into three further sections: 1) Our Farmland, 2) History and 3) Careers.

In the "Organic" Section, VANCO stressed that they grew their potatoes organically "**as opposed to traditional fertilizers** used on conventional crops" (VANCO Farms Ltd. 2016c). However, organic farming only took place on a portion of their

[43] Discussed in more detail in the chapter "Soil Health."

land[44], and they did not specify the acreage of their organic operations. The section "Pure PEI" was a simple page with a photo of a bag of potatoes and this text (emphasis mine):

> **We are farmers and have been for generations.** Together **with our families** we have relearned **traditional farming practices** and have added some new techniques to bring you our certified organic potatoes. To us **farming means more than growing crops**. We strive to **protect our farmland, help our neighbours** and provide safe delicious food to our customers. We are proud to grow for you (VANCO Farms Ltd. 2016d).

The "About us" subsections were filled with descriptions of the "family farm." The "History" section emphasized the long history of farming within the family: "For as long as our history can be traced, we have been a **farming family**" (VANCO Farms Ltd. 2016b). The company painted an idealized image of the "family farm" in this section:

> As **a farming family** we enjoy sharing our work with our children. Our children start young, riding along in the "buddy seat" of tractors, often catching a nap as their dad works. **They are learning to be farmers** and as they grow older, spending their holidays working on the farm (VANCO Farms Ltd. 2016b).

At the bottom of the page, VANCO admitted that the farms were too large for one family to work alone, and that they depended on the paid labour of staff who "grew up on farms in the area" (VANCO Farms Ltd. 2016b). In a 2014 *Globe and Mail* article, the general manager of potato sales stated that VANCO "relied very heavily on the Temporary Foreign Worker Program" (Contributed 2014). As recently as May 2022, they stated again that they had almost 160 employees, made up of hired locals and "also have a group from Mexico working seasonal and year-round" (Riley 2022).

[44] As of 2017, 15% of VANCO crops were organic (Ceretti 2017).

In the "Farmland" section of the site, VANCO admitted that "while **some traditions give way, others live on**" (VANCO Farms Ltd. 2016a). Here they discussed having bought out farms in the region:

> Our family has purchased smaller farms over the years, and we have continued many of the practices that were core to these farms, such as rotating crops from year to year**. These farms often continue to carry the name of the family that originally farmed it. On our farm you will hear field names like the MacRae farm, the Ford farm, the Doyle farm, the Lund farm and many more** (VANCO Farms Ltd. 2016a).

This passage suggests that VANCO is keeping PEI tradition — and souls? — alive through purchase of the fields and memorialized the now defunct "family farms." At the same time, one might wonder if the paid labourers "from the area" once lived on these fields and now worked where their family tradition ended, and their farmland was dispossessed. Much like Cavendish Farms, VANCO Farms "creat[ed] linguistic and material connections between what was made in the past and what they make now" (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014: 55).

The link to place being claimed here brought to mind the analysis of how expressions of attachment to land are connected to national identity as described by Richard Handler (1988). Handler cited the work of Lionel Groulx as exemplifying the creation of the Québécois identity. It was born through a "recipricol relationship" between the people and the land (Handler 1988: 33) and an indissoluble bond with the land where they are born. According to Groulx "the people mark the land with their soul and personality, and above all they love the land" (Handler 1988: 34). This idea that a person was part of their land in spirit is suggested by VANCO's marketing strategy; however, it was not their bond with the land that they described. Instead, VANCO

seemed to appropriate a bond that Island farmers previously had and claimed it as their own. In other words, in the purchase of this land VANCO was also purchasing authenticity and rootedness.

Even as VANCO foregrounded the heritage of farmland and "traditional farming," in reality it was a small part of their business. Their main operation, and much of the agriculture industry on PEI, was dependent on Temporary Foreign Workers who were vulnerable to abuse from the employers who may withhold wages and threaten deportation if the workers do not comply (Yarr 2022).

In sum, the marketing imaginary that Cavendish Farms and VANCO farms attempted to project is one of family, history and community. However, my participants seemed cognizant of these marketing attempts when they explained what a "family farm" was *not*. Agribusiness attempted to project an image of familial attachment to the land. However, its business model entailed the domination of both land and labourers through the dispossession of land and home, and precarious working conditions for Temporary Foreign Workers in order to maximize profit — "what is not" for my participants, family farming. The NFU PEI seemed to envision an Island of discrete farms, usually incorporated, with "just enough, but not too much" outside help, income or autonomy. Notably, the Federation of Agriculture and the Government of PEI further obscured the reality of the agribusiness discussed below and illuminated the NFU PEI conception of "family farm" in what it is not.

Federation of Agriculture and PEI Department of Agriculture

One of the *New Farmers*, a cattle and sheep farmer in Prince County, described the role of the Federation of Agriculture in perpetuating the image of the "family farm" and discussed the emotional appeal of the term that evoked a farm that had been worked continuously and was home to a healthy traditional family, and obscured a reality of farming that included toxic chemicals, accidents, and illness that put stress on families:

> The Federation of Agriculture has its calendar that it publishes every year, which members get and it's quite a cool calendar. Each month features a different member of the Federation who has a farm, and they work very hard at including a range of farms and a diversity of farm products. But yes, it's … they like the new entries to farming but they also like to have the farms where they can say "This farm has been in the same family for six generations" or "five generations" … There's a powerful emotional appeal in the idea that agriculture in Canada supports families who are living a healthy life on the farm.
>
> It ignores the exploitation of the unpaid labour of the family members, it ignores the extent to which farms are sites of industrial accidents and exposure to heavy-duty toxins and exposure to the kinds of environmental contaminants that can lead to long-term chronic illnesses. So, if you simply say this farm has been in the same family for six generations, that's fine. If you say this is a "family farm," then immediately for me I want to sit down and interrogate exactly what that means.

This image was also found in PEI Agriculture press releases. The PEI Department of Agriculture described the multi-generational, traditional, altruistic "farm family" in the press release "Community-minded farm family striving to make a difference" (Government of PEI 2018). The article, published alongside a photo of the couple and their son in a field (Image 2), qualified the family link to the farm: "Jonathan and Katie

MacLennan, who run a fourth-generation "family farm" … Jonathan's father [is] the late Laurids MacLennan [who] was a respected leader in the local agricultural industry."

Government press releases would sometimes acknowledge non-family workers. In the case Sandy Rae Farms, for example, the article mentioned the help of their "longtime herdsperson Calloway M'Cloud" as well as the farm's "legacy passed through six generations of MacKinnons since 1859" (Government of PEI 2017). However, later in the release, they explained that the farm "employs up to six students and part-time workers along with a full-time employee" (Government of PEI 2017). This suggested that the image of a small family-run farm, with minimal outside workers was important to the image of agriculture on the Island, even if the actual landscape of agriculture did not fit this image[45].

Image 2 - Jonathan and Katie MacLennan, with their son Gabriel and dog Plower (Government of PEI 2018) © Dan MacKinnon Photography, used with permission.

[45] Discussed in the chapter "Absentee Landlords."

Interestingly, in Hungary, propaganda that espoused the importance of "farmers, peasants and rural dwellers" was used to gain farmer support and distract from land grabbing. In "Contradictory populist ecologies: Pro-peasant propaganda and land grabbing in rural Hungary" (2022) researchers Péter József and Noémi Gonda discussed the tactics used by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán during the 2010 election. Throughout his campaign Orbán praised rural citizens and adopted "pro- family farm discourse" (József and Gonda 2022: 1) to win a two-thirds majority. Soon after, he repackaged small and medium sized state-owned land into large parcels. This change was "purposefully designed to exclude" (József and Gonda 2022: 1) small farmers who could not afford the land at the much higher prices and local residents who could, were pressured against doing so. The result was a stealth land grab by wealthy Hungarians, special interest groups and oligarchs (József and Gonda 2022: 1). The use of pro-family farm marketing by large agribusiness on PEI and government similarly suggests that it may be a smoke screen designed to distract from behind-the-scenes land deals and environmental concerns.

"Family farm" in practice

One of my participants, a *Founder* and organic farmer on a century farm in Kings County, had this to say when asked about the definition of "family farm": "I'm talking about a family being brothers and sisters and fathers and sons and daughters all working on the one farm. Not having a contract with the case here[46]." This definition also suggested a hetero-normative traditional family put forth by the agriculture industry.

[46] "The case" is implied to be Cavendish Farms.

However, during my farm visit, I observed that this farmer seemed to practice a more nuanced view of "family" than the one he had described discussed below.

As we left his brightly-coloured kitchen, we passed by a room he called the "paper room": a room full of books and magazines. He handed me one and said I could borrow it: *Fighting the Farm Crisis* by Terry Pugh. As we exited the house, he put on a Via Campesina[47] baseball hat and pointed to it excitedly, "Do you know them? The NFU are members!" He wanted to take me to a neighbouring farm; we drove over, past a pay-what-you-can farm stand and down a long dirt road, but no one was there. He showed me their garden with vegetables in the green house at different growth stages. This was important, he said, because to sell at the farmers market you needed produce year-round. The couple who lived here were *New Farmers* and NFU PEI representatives who were in a co-op with this organic *Founder*. He hired the couple as farm help and eventually sold them some of his organic farmland and helped to build their house. Later, I visited and spoke to one of the *New Farmers* and that farmer described his relationship with the *Founder* organic farmer:

> [We] often laugh because a lot of people think we're father and son, because we do everything together. So, it's like, "Oh, where's your father?" "Your son here is telling me…" So, we felt like it was more like a "family farm" than a cooperative because we never held formal meetings per se. We kind of divided vegetables, and whoever brought them to market would kind of take a cut from the other person's produce, and that was the basic bones of it.

[47] The NFU in Canada is a founding member of La Via Campesina (NFU 2024e), an organization devoted to food sovereignty and "insists that diverse, peasant-driven agroecological modes of production, based on centuries of experience and accumulated evidence, is central to guaranteeing healthy food to everyone while remaining in harmony with nature" (La Via Campesina 2021: 1).

This *New Farmer* also explained his reservations with the definition of "family farm" due to the changing demographics of farming and explained how the NFU has been trying to address these changes:

> Back in the day, when [the NFU] wrote it [the definition], it was your typical generic family of the traditional sense. But they've tried to take it [the definition] on because they realize —they conducted a poll maybe a couple of years ago for New Farmers — that the majority [of New Farmers] in the survey were folks like myself from the city, non-farming backgrounds, no family and also mostly women; women and men with university backgrounds and stuff like that. We now offer memberships because a lot of people have gotten together as cooperatives and so on, so we have adapted our membership to accommodate those. I think we can put up to four people [on a membership] even though they're not technically family.

In 2021, the NFU Youth (members under the age of 35) published a report that examined the changing demographics of New Farmers across Canada. In *Who Will Feed Us? New Farmer Perspectives on Agriculture for the Future* (2021) Ayla Fenton, Stuart Oke and Jessie MacInnis discussed the results of a 2015 national "New Farmer Survey" led by Dr. Julia Laforge at Lakehead University in partnership with the NFU. Researchers surveyed 1326 self-identified *New Farmers* and surprisingly found "that 68% of respondents did not grow up on a family farm" (Fenton et al. 2021: 14)[48]. Interestingly, farmers with less than ten years' experience were more likely to have not grown up on a farm (83%) compared to eleven years or more (29%). The authors suggested that this may point to a shift in the "origin of New Farmers in Canada" (Fenton et al. 2021: 14).

The NFU survey also found a difference in the farming practices of first-generation farmers compared to those that grew up on farms. For example, first-

[48] They also found that 58% of respondents were female and 41% were male, with 1% identifying as "other" (Fenton, Oke and Laforge 2021: 14).

generation farmers were more likely to farm smaller plots of land and practice ecological production practices and focus on niche local markets, whereas those that grew up on farms were most likely to practice conventional agricultural practices, focus on the export market and farm larger acreage (Fenton et al. 2021: 14). According to the NFU these differences may be the result of the prohibitive costs of large-scale farming that made it more easily available to those who inherited the "family farm" and all the capital that came with that (Fenton et al. 2021: 14). On the other hand, considering the top three motivations for farming "were an attraction to the farming lifestyle, a commitment to environmental sustainability, and a desire to participate in a family that is involved in agriculture" (Fenton et al. 2021: 14) the differences, and the draw to farming without prior experience, may suggest that new farmers are motivated by priorities that are similar to those of the NFU.

Participants in the NFU youth research who offered a description of the "family farm" suggested that the important aspects of family farming were that the farm was small, intergenerational, inherited, and the place of residence for the family. They believed that the family should supply most of the farm labour, and the farm should be able to sustain the family economically while they farmed using ecologically sustainable practices. Unlike the research of the UN and Garner and de la O Campos, land ownership and size were important aspect to participants' conception of a "family farm."

When applied to the reality of small farms or "family farms" on PEI, the description of "family farm" from the NFU youth research participants seemed to be a nostalgic wish list. In reality, most farms hired labourers and often Temporary Foreign Workers, or the farmers relied on off-farm income. And although all of my participants

owned their land, they would talk about parts of their acreage that were rented to other farmers or point to neighbouring farms with rented land. An NFU representative and participant from Queens County who had been raised on a farm and in turn, raised her family on the same farm explained her thoughts on farm size, farm economics and land stewardship. She seemed to make the case that small farm size was important when taking care of the land:

> If a farm family can't make a living on 1000 acres, how are they going to make it on 1250 or 1500? The same goes for a corporation: if you can't make it on 1000 acres — we never had anything like that and we made a living — if you can't make it with 1000 acres, there's something else wrong. … I think when you have fewer acres, you tend to look after the land better and that's what's really important to me.

All three[49] *New Farmer* participants all took issue with the term "family farm." One *New Farmer* stressed that family or farm size had no bearing on whether farming activities had a beneficial impact on the land and or in the community. This participant, who had spent the last fifteen years transforming and rehabilitating land on a farm in Prince County, felt very strongly that the merits of a farm should not be reduced to its size or its corporate designation:

> If you want to talk about who owns the farm, then that's what you talk about. If you want to talk about the size of the operation, that's what you talk about. If you want to talk about the form of ownership— whether it's owned by an individual or owned by a corporation— then you have to take a step behind that and say, "If it's a corporate farm, well how big is it, who owns the corporation? How much do they own?" Because some corporate farms are what most people would call a "family farm," and some are not.
>
> You [have to] ask those specific questions. How big is it? How much of the income from the farm goes to the owners? How many employees are there? And you have to be specific about the particular agricultural sector they're in… It's not just the acres; it's the capital invested. Because you could have a 10-acre dairy

[49] The fourth "new farmer" participated in the farm visit.

> farm with a huge barn and lots of dairy animals and hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on acquiring the quota to make that farm work. [It] has a much higher capitalization than a large farm where the capital cost of the farm is the land.

When I returned home after my meeting in Kings County with the organic farming *Founder*, I opened the book that he lent me. Inside *Fighting the Farm Crisis* by Terry Pugh there were passages underlined (bolded):

> **Some farmers will grasp at any immediate advantage without considering the consequences.** They were prepared to sell their **birthright for a mess of potage.** (Pugh 1987: 112)

> **Farming as culture is indeed a way of life,** expressing a unique quality of life. With the **Native Peoples who have sensitized us to this dimension of human experience** we can legitimately claim the earth as our mother. The **entire human race owes its continued existence to her bounty**, to her fertility. Land is a gift to all humanity, a vital indispensable resource. Nature envelops us as in an everchanging mantle, and we are totally dependent on her for our well-being and survival. And yet, **how alienated many people have become from their agricultural roots! They are prepared to exploit agricultural resources with no sense of stewardship** for the future or responsibility for the present. Often more deserving of sympathy than blame, some people abandon agriculture because they have become **psychologically alienated from the land.** They no **longer appreciate its potential for human fulfillment**. They have become **imbued with the tenets and illusions of the market economy**, and unconsciously espouse its underlying ideologies (Pugh 1987: 113).

This passage illuminated some fundamental beliefs of the NFU PEI and the way that most of my participants viewed farming and farmland. A "good" "family farm" should not be stewarded by farmers who are alienated from the land because those types of farmers will sell their land to the highest bidder or exploit their land to participate in the market economy. This *Founder's* co-op partner explained that his philosophy was drastically different from conventional farming. He aimed to work toward a non-

exploitive model of agriculture, a way to leave the land better than they found it. He wants farms like his to thrive:

> I want to see small farms here succeed, local farms, farms that are doing good things to the land and water. I want to see them succeed, so I would just really love to see more everyday people on PEI be more concerned about their food and where it's coming from. I think it's absolutely ridiculous, this whole neoliberal project of exporting potatoes to places where they can grow potatoes.

Conclusion

Even though the concept of the "family farm" was prominent in the early discussions of the LPA, it was not mentioned in the Act, except in the spirit and intent. This chapter first examined the keyword of "family farm" with an examination of the "family." Following that, UN research suggested that farm labour type was the most important determining aspect of the term, and that "family" should be understood as the rooted community connections and knowledge that this relationship brings to rural life. The evolving meaning of "family" suggested that the concept may be limiting, as the evolution of the concept reflected the decline of community connections and severance of family from broader networks in the service of capitalism. The difficulty of fixing meaning related to the "family farm" was not lost on participants, who pointed to NFU policy or struggled to pin-point definite traits. However, a precise or authoritative definition of "family farm" seemed to be a minor concern to the farmers I spoke with, whose main concerns were the environment and well-being of their communities and neighbours. These farmers seemed to believe that enterprises like Cavendish Farms or VANCO Farms, could not be "family farms" less on the basis of ownership than due to the lack of these shared priorities. The ways in which participants described the "family farm" contrasted with how they farmed

and was sometimes at odds with their own ideals. It also shed light on how agribusiness and government seek to dial into the "family farm" for its pastoral romanticism, perhaps in an attempt to distract from their role in the Temporary Foreign Worker program and their land holdings on the Island.

Chapter 4 — "Soil Health"

I drove to Queens County to talk to a *Founder* NFU PEI Representative; many of my participants described her as one of the forces behind the PEI chapter. As I drove up the driveway, I saw two immaculate-looking barns, both gray, trimmed with red, surrounded by green fields. The scene would not be out of place in a photo depicting idyllic rural life. A dog greeted me at the door next to the participant, "Keep your shoes on and come in!" I was a bit nervous to meet as this participant had initially been hesitant about participating[50].

As we sat down at the kitchen table, the farmer asked why PEI land issues interested me. I explained that as an undergraduate at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI), I was employed by the L.M. Montgomery Institute to work on an interactive map of PEI locations that were connected to the author's journals. This project alerted me to the changing landscape of land ownership on PEI and made use of the *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the Province of Prince Edward Island* (J.H. Meacham 1880), more commonly known as *Meacham's Atlas 1880*. This atlas was created at a time when the entire province was divided into lots that were subdivided and labelled with the names of individual farmer owners (Chang 2022). Through this project, I became interested in the history of absentee landowners[51], PEI tenant revolts (Robertson 1996; Bitterman 2004), and the NFU farmer protests (O'Connor 2008). The participant seemed

[50] When approached for an interview she initially stated that their opinion would be the same as the NFU PEI District Director Doug Campbell.
[51] Described in detail in the chapter "Absentee Landlords."

more at ease following this explanation, and after the interview, excitedly offered to show me around farmland in the area.

We walked to one of the barns where she climbed into an extra-large pickup truck; this was visually impressive to me, considering she was not much taller than I was (a little over five feet tall). This participant owned 239 acres of land, with twenty acres of woods under a forest management plan[52]. One hundred acres of the 239 were cleared and had recently been certified organic to increase its value in case she ever decided to sell. When her husband bought the farm in 1967, the land was already divided by hedgerows. The participant spoke about their love of farming and their family's route to non-conventional farming:

> [Farming] is pretty rewarding and fulfilling when you plant a crop, and you see it through to harvest; and I love the animals. I don't have any right now because I'm coasting now because my husband died eight years ago. I kept the animals until last year, then it got to be more work than fun. So, I let them go, but I still have the farm. I loved the animals. We had pigs at first, and then we got out of pigs and went into beef in 1985.
>
> In 1985, my husband attended an Ecological Farmers of Ontario meeting, up in Lindsay, Ontario and he was talking with a guy there who was a dairy farmer— a large dairy farmer — and he was an organic farmer. So, when [my husband] came home, we saw that our soil was starting to not be as good as it should— it was eroding very easily with water and wind erosion — and he thought we should try to do something different, so, we just started that year. And since then, there hasn't been a bag of fertilizer or chemical spray used on the farm.
>
> Although, then our farm wasn't certified organic, it was organic, and we sold our beef at the Charlottetown farmer's market for sixteen years. It was very successful… Back then it was the trust between the customer and the farmer. I

[52] A forest management plan "serves as a statement of the landowner's commitment to their forest and identifies how they plan to achieve various environmental, social and economic goals. The plan will focus on the economic and environmental potential of the native tree and shrub species found on the woodlot, identify ecologically sensitive areas and critical wildlife habitats, and outline treatments and harvest options which are appropriate to the forest and the owners' goals" (PEI Department of Enivronment, Energy and Forestry n.d.). Many of these plans have changed after tropical storm Fiona in 2022.

> sold pickles and whatever else, but I never ran the combine or the snowblower. Those are probably about the only things I didn't do.

The farm where her husband grew up was just down the road, her daughter lived there now. "Do you have time to see the VANCO farms?" She asks.

We headed off the property and down the road. First, she showed me her daughter's property; we drove up the long driveway and took in the view. During the earlier interview, she spoke about this property, with a view of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and explained that she would avoid selling it as long as she can:

> That land is worth a fortune down there because anything with a water view, even if you need a periscope to see it, it's valuable. But when I sell —and I'm not planning on selling that —but if I sell the home farm, there's going to be a covenant on it that says it must stay in agriculture in perpetuity[53], because they're not making farmland anymore. We've got to protect what we have, you know.

We returned to the main road and drove further west. "You see those yellow numbered signs? Those are VANCO markers; that's how you can identify their land." She again asked if I had more time; she wanted to show me more farms, but first we needed to switch to the smaller car. On the way back, she showed me a holding pond[54] and a lot filled with tractors, which she described as "hundreds of thousands of dollars of machinery." She had investigated this holding pond some time before and took photos until the "VANCO father[55]" came out to see what she was doing. Surprisingly, he had no

[53] In PEI, there are ways to add "restrictive covenants" to land; however, I could not find any that restricted the land to agricultural use. These covenants seem to be used for the conservation of wildlife habitat (Government of PEI 2023).

[54] A holding pond is used to store water for agricultural irrigation. According to Catherine O'Brien of the P.E.I. Coalition for the Protection of Water, if holding ponds are being replenished with pumped water, it can lower the water table and "risk the stream health in the area [and] it can be affecting other people's wells" (CBC News 2021). They will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

[55] The father of the current owners.

issue with her curiosity. Instead, he explained that they built the holding pond but could never get it to hold water and it was never used.

We arrived back at the participant's farm and switched to the smaller car. On our way to look at more VANCO land we first passed her family's former land; this was where she grew up. The current owners cleared more land than they should have, she explains, pointing to a swampy field as evidence. This land should have been left uncleared, as it had been when her family owned it, as it is non-arable and not suitable for growing crops. Here is how she described the farm earlier during our interview:

> The farm I grew up on, I've watched it with real sadness. There were a lot of woods on it, and one of the corporations I'm talking about bought the land. And guess what? Potatoes growing on it now where the woods were. I even watched, because I knew that land, because I was helping all the time on the farm at home when I was a kid, and I knew there was this swampy area and it was left, the trees were left in that area.
>
> They've come down and now they're trying to go through that area but it's pretty sloppy. There are potatoes — I said to myself when that land, when those trees were cut—I said there'll be potatoes in there in a few years' time. Sure enough, they are there this year. I can't understand government letting that happen.
>
> There are two things here— mark this one down— that land would not have been part of the total aggregate landholding because it's not arable land. But now [that it is cleared] it is arable land. We asked IRAC one time when we were in talking to them, we asked them: "Who goes around and checks up on all this?" and "There's a lot of land clearing going on, and do you check up on that and add that on to their [land total]?" [They replied] "Well, no, nobody's doing that."

The significance of cleared non-arable land is due in part to its status in the LPA. In the Act, up to 400 acres of non-arable land is excluded from a person's total land holding amount, while 1200 acres is excluded for a corporation (Government of PEI 2022c: 9); therefore, if a landowner cleared their excluded acreages, it could be added to their aggregate land holdings in contravention to the LPA. Moreover, they had eliminated

potential wildlife habitat or buffers for wind and rain, which left the land susceptible to erosion.

We arrived at the VANCO land that she was eager to show me. It was a huge swathe of land, with no divisions — no fences, no hedgerows, just one gigantic field. She then took me to another holding pond and was thrilled to see it unenclosed, full of geese. On the way back to her farm, we passed the large VANCO field a second time, and she urged me to take a photo (Image 3) before we headed back and parted ways.

Image 3. A large field without divisions, such as hedgerows. Photo: Heidi Haering.

Environmental issues related to farming were a vital concern for participants, non-farmers and farmers alike. The LPA (Government of PEI 2022c) included the environment as one of the challenges that face PEI regarding "property rights" (Government of PEI 2022c: 10):

> (T)he fragile nature of the province's ecology, environment, and lands and the resultant need for the exercise of prudent, balanced, and steadfast stewardship to ensure the protection of the province's ecology, environment, and lands.

Despite this concern, environmental regulations were not included in the Act.

When I met with a *Youth Recruit* NFU Member, he discussed conflicts regarding environmental challenges in agriculture, specifically around "soil health," the NFU PEI and the potato industry. He suggested that "soil health" in agriculture was tied to the idea of soil erosion and low organic matter levels and explained that agribusiness used the term to give the impression that they had addressed the environmental concerns that hurt the image of the industry:

> It used to be brutal here, I mean things have come a long way in the potato industry here in terms of soil erosion and whatnot in the past 30 years. But what the potato industry is trying to do is find ways to keep a short rotation and yet build **soil health** and that's a pretty tricky thing to do.
>
> *Do you think it's possible?*
>
> Yes, I guess maybe it is. It'll take a long time because we have low organic matter soil to begin with and as one person … soil scientist said one time "It takes a long time, when you're starting with poor soil to begin with, it takes a long time to build that back up." I don't know, part of it is these soils that were regular potato rotation, they had no choice but to do something to improve **soil health**.
>
> A bit of it is PR too. The Potato Board is pushing this very much that they're doing such a great job, and things are improving because you know there are some pretty, there's been some push-back against the potato industry in PEI …
>
> So, Potato Board is working to improve things, but at the same time they've got a PR program going on, I feel.

The term "soil health" was also cropping up in the media during my fieldwork, as the PEI Department of Agriculture launched a brand called "soil first farming" and had invested significant funding to support "soil health" programs on the Island (Russell 2021). This came after the 2018 release of results of a 20-year study that showed a decline in soil organic matter (Leeson 2018; Nyiraneza, et al. 2017), which resulted in the development of a new, and free soil health test to "measure soil quality and provide additional tools to assist [farmers] in understanding soil health" (Top Crop Manager 2019).

In this chapter, I argue that "soil health" functioned as a keyword in the landscape of PEI land politics. I tackled the idea of "soil health" and how the agreed upon term had taken on varied meanings that depended upon particular practices of agriculture that emerged due to activities in the recent past in PEI. According to Raymond Williams (1976: 23), a way to make the meaning visible was to consider the 'internal structure' of a keyword:

> In practice many of these processes begin within the complex and variable sense of particular words, and the only way to show this, as examples of how networks of usage, reference and perspective are developed, is to concentrate, 'for the moment', on what can then properly be seen as internal structures. This is not to impede but to make possible the sense of an extended and intricate vocabulary, within which both the variable words and their varied and variable interrelations are in practice active.

To understand how NFU PEI participants view the concept of "soil health" I will first explore the keyword "organic," which seemed to be part of the internal structure of the meaning of "soil health" to the NFU PEI. I will then explore how the concept of "soil health," also referred to as "health of the soil" or "soil quality" is, on the surface, an idea that is accepted by both NFU PEI participants, the Federation of Agriculture and government of PEI. However, in practice, the metrics of "soil health" are contested. I will then explore the recent history of environmental issues in the province that influenced divergent views on what constitutes "soil health." For example, NFU PEI participants considered soil part of a depleted ecosystem produced by the emphasis on the potato crop, that puts the future of Island agriculture at risk. In contrast, more conventional agricultural groups, such as the Federation of Agriculture considered soil a substrate for commodities, including potatoes, that required increased irrigation to offset the long-term effects of contract potato farming and improve the "health of the soil." Finally, I will

discuss that even though both farmers and government agencies have accepted the "soil health" concept as a scientific metric for agricultural activities, the idea itself is contested within the discipline of soil biology where researchers raise the concept's basis in human values and suggested that the concept should extend further than simply being used as a metric for crop production and yields.

Organic

Raymond Williams (1976) traced the origin of "organic" to the word "organ," a musical instrument, in the 13th Century. Then, in the 14th Century it came to refer to "an instrument, engine or tool" (Williams 1976: 227), in both the literal and abstract sense. The use of "organ" as an instrument related to the body emerged in the early 15th Century. However, it was not until the 16th Century that "organic" appeared in the context of an engine and it began to be used synonymously with "mechanical" (Williams 1976: 227). From this path, words such as "organize" and "organization" emerged, in the late 18th and early 19th Century. However, the modern biological meaning of "organic" arose during the 18th Century and coincided with major developments in that field at that time and differentiated *organic* from *mechanical*. The contrast between the two concepts were further developed by natural philosophers, such as Coleridge, who contrasted mechanical with organic and "distinguished between organic and inorganic bodies or systems; in the organic 'the whole is everything and the parts are nothing,' while in the inorganic 'the whole is nothing more than a collection of the individual parts'" (Williams 1976: 228). Williams suggested that the focus on organic versus mechanical was influenced by the

Industrial Revolution's dependence on mechanization (Williams 1976: 228). Following this distinction, "organic" was then associated with "natural." For instance, "an organic society was one that has 'grown' rather than been 'made'" (Williams 1976: 228). In the 19th and 20th Centuries, conservative thinkers suggested that machines could indeed result in organic societies, and Durkheim put forth his distinction between "organic and mechanical solidarity" (Williams 1976: 229). Durkheim argued that societies progressed from mechanical solidarity — based on close kinship ties— to organic solidarity as populations increased (McGee and Warms 2017: 82). Williams (1976: 229) ended his description of organic with its use in art and literature with terms such as "organic connection" that suggested relationships within groups. However, the most fitting discussion for my research is his description of "organic" as

> a modern specialized use of farming and of food, with a stress on natural rather than artificial fertilizers or growing and, breeding methods. This is linked with general criticism of industrial society. There is also a wider sense, to describe a kind of relationship rather than, as in explicit social theory, a kind of society (cf. ECOLOGY).

In the updated keyword collection, *Keywords for Today*, MacCabe & Yanacek (2018) included this original entry and built on it to include a more specific definition of "organic farming." They explained that organic farming differed from "large-scale, industrial farming" in that it "emphasizes biodiversity, crop rotation, and multi-cropping" while industrial farming "depends on proprietary seeds, synthetic fertilizers, and genetically modified plants and animals" (MacCabe & Yanacek 2018: 265).

“Soil health” and industrial farming

When I attended NFU PEI meetings, I noticed that an Associate member and eventual participant always carried a copy of *National Geographic* from February 1970. At a lunch break during an NFU meeting, after I had presented my project to the group, he opened it and handed it to me. Across the two pages was the futuristic “Farm of the Future,” an illustration by well-known science fiction book cover artist Davis Meltzer (Coulthart 2023). Part of the caption read: “Attached to a modernistic farmhouse, a bubble-topped control tower hums with a computer, weather reports, and a farm-price ticker tape. A remote-controlled tiller-combine glides across a 10-mile-long wheat field on tracks that keep the heavy machine from compacting the soil (Billard 1970: 184).” It was this tiller-combine that interested the NFU PEI member, who stressed that it was the only part of the illustration that was a “good idea.” Somewhat amusingly, other elements of the illustration included an elevator for cattle, as well as large metallic cylinders stuffed with beef for transportation to market via helicopter (Billard 1970: 185).

This image was part of the magazine cover story: “More food for our multiplying millions: The Revolution in American Agriculture” (Billard 1970). This article was a record of what the author described as “our farm upheaval” and the beginning of a third agricultural revolution, one that depended on new technology (Billard 1970: 151). Billard’s description of overflowing farmer’s fields, with large yields and surplus, and increased supermarket choice, seemed to be partly shaped by the fear of starvation; however, it also appeared to be encouraged by the promise of a greater calling for Americans that would not include *toiling* as farmers. The author explains: “Earth’s numbers now stand at 3.6 billion and could double in 35 years. This mounting pressure

against food supplies raises the specter of a famine more catastrophic than the world has ever seen" (Billard 1970: 153). At the same time, the loss of farmers needed for agricultural work was considered a plus: "Because only one person in 43 is needed to produce food, others can become doctors, teachers, shoemakers, janitors —even Secretaries of Agriculture," declared, Clifford M. Hardin, the Secretary of Agriculture under Richard Nixon (Billard 1970: 152). However, according to Billard, urban areas had already seen an influx of "rural refugees" that had moved to the cities for jobs and who needed the aid of civil-rights groups to gain new skills required to secure employment (Billard 1970: 178).

Interestingly, the article also outlined soil management projects, which included solutions to the problem identified by my participant: along with the new process of "spraying hillsides with low-cost petroleum chemicals that prevent rainfall from soaking in [and] spreading various materials in a covering layer on ponds to cut down on evaporation" (Billard 1970: 179), soil researchers were also concerned about soil compaction by large, heavy machinery and were experimenting with "zero tillage," which has recently been touted by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada as a way to sequester carbon to fight climate change (Qualman 2019: 31). However, the national NFU disagreed with this solution because this type of farming involved a trade-off: it usually relied "on fossil-fuel intensive, emission-heavy fertilizer" (Qualman 2019: 40) which was not ideal in the fight against climate change. On the other hand, the national NFU also admitted that no-till did increase soil carbon levels, which was a "key determinant in soil health and productivity" (Qualman 2019: 79).

The illustration carried by the Associate member was also included in the chapter "Taming Nature" in *Seeing Like a State* (1998) by James C. Scott. Here Scott suggested that "state-sponsored high-modernist agriculture" (Scott 1998: 262) — commodity farming with the aim of high yields and high profit through the simplification of process and landscape — created more problems than it solved and reduced the diversity needed for a sustainable, robust food system and disaster mitigation. For Scott, the risks involved included the simplification of fertilizer and pesticide application while ignoring the need for biodiversity and the "microvariation between and within fields" (Scott 1998: 284). Scott commented on the *National Geographic* article:

> [Billard] envisions a process of simplification of the landscape and centralization of command. Fields will be larger, with fewer trees, hedges, and roads; plots will be "several miles long and a hundred yards wide"; "weather control" will prevent hailstorms and tornadoes; atomic energy will "level hills" and make irrigation water from seawater; satellites, sensors, and airplanes will spot plant epidemics while the farmer sits in his control tower (Scott 1998, 271)

This scenario, coupled with the "deadening [of] life into the submission of rationalized disciplinary order" (Kolinjivadi, et al. 2020) of McDonaldization that PEI potato farming evoked[56], may explain why the illustration was so important to the NFU PEI member. I can only speculate that he carried the article around as a reminder of what the future could be if farmers did not pay attention, or if the local knowledge of farmers was ignored in favour of large-scale mechanized farming. A *Youth Recruit* NFU PEI member and pig farmer may have shed light on the significance of this kind of industrialized farming when he described the link between "corporate" farming, declining "soil health":

[56] Discussed in the chapter "family farm."

> The corporate model in terms of itself would be —may have a good capital return but it's not going to be —it's not sustainable. You can't do what they're doing to the land. It always goes back to land and land use. I don't care whose name is on the title of the field, of the land, of anything, I don't care who owns it. You have to look at the soil and the **health of the soil** is enough benefit to you and every Canadian.

The link between the loss of "soil health" and large agribusiness, or "corporate" farms was also noted by a non-member participant. When he discussed the public perception of farms on PEI, he made a particular distinction between "corporate" and "actual farmers" and implied that if the public had issues with "soil health" those concerns would stem from large farms:

> I think people are very sympathetic to farmers, but they may critique certain farming methods or approaches… I think, there's fewer and fewer **actual farmers**, so [farmers] probably don't have the same political clout they would've had before. I think people are seeing huger and huger operations. Maybe they relate less to them or if they have a concern about **soil health** or something, they may have some concerns.
>
> I don't think they have any animosity towards **the actual farmers**, I think they may be more animosity towards the corporate control… I'll say Irvings—in terms of Cavendish Farms or whatever — that people are more concerned in terms of how they might be boxed in too much. But I think people see farming as a reasonable thing, and like a landscape that we have, that has pastoral scenes with agriculture and with fisheries, and they add to who we are.

In "The 'Soil Health' Metaphor: Illuminating or Illusory?" (2021), Agriculture and Agri-Food soil biochemists H. Henry Janzen and David Gregorich, along with David Janzen, a researcher and theorist of communication, crisis and environment, agreed that the "health" metaphor was useful due to the image that "health" recalled for the general public:

> [It] offered ecologists an emotive connection to a wider audience, by conjuring the imagery of human health … [in doing so] the fragility of ecosystems, their

> sensitivity to disturbance, and the imperative of avoiding harm are magnified in light of our own vulnerability to illness and injury from inflicted stresses (Janzen et al. 2021: 1-2).

However, the researchers also conceded that the "health" metaphor was vague and unquantifiable (Janzen et al. 2021: 2). Nevertheless, use of the term "health" in the concept of "soil health" seemed to have piqued the interest of non-farmers on the Island, and this perception may have influenced the PEI Department of Agriculture to find a way to combat these apprehensions when it introduced "Soil First Farming."

Soil First Farming

In the fall of 2021, the Department of Agriculture and Land launched "Soil First Farming." The program is a "brand" that farmers could use when marketing themselves to show that they were "Soil First Farmers." In an October 21st, 2021, sitting of the Legislative Assembly of PEI, Minister Bloyce Thompson explained that the project was an "initiative that will house all of our resources and programs for soil health, and it will be a useful tool for farmers to access the information they need related to soil health" (Government of PEI 2021: 2063-2064). The federal government had contributed $1 million to fund provincial "soil health" programs that year and six "well-known" farms had signed on to participate. Thompson declared: "I hope one day I can stand here and say that all farmers on PEI are Soil First Farmers" (Government of PEI 2021: 2063-2064).

The Soil First Farming brand "soil health" strategy was described terms of both soil nutrients and as a way to protect land as an investment. The four pillars encouraged

1) The prevention of soil erosion to keep nutrients from fields out of "ecologically sensitive areas" and at the same time would reduce the "loss of productivity and crop yield," 2) The participation in crop rotation to "optimize nutrients in the soil and combat pest and weed pressure," 3) The promotion of carbon sequestration as a "scalable way in which PEI can do its part to combat the global climate crisis," and 4) Encouraged "positive livestock integration," which entailed the use of living animals for manure, grazing and trampling that would positively impact "infiltration rates, soil aggregation, water holding capacity, and crop yields" (PEI Department of Agriculture and Land 2021).

The Soil First Farming brand effectively reduced both soil and animals to capitalistic tools for the pursuit of profit. Additionally, under the contract farming scheme used in the potato industry in PEI, not only were soil and animals hidden, but so were the farmers.

According to Philip McMichael in the chapter "The Twenty-First Century Land Question" (2020), large agribusinesses seek to make smallholder farms invisible through contracts that "absorb" farms into "value-chains" (McMichael 2020: 24). In other words, the farm disappeared metaphorically into the operations of the larger agribusiness.

A *Youth Recruit* dairy farmer from Prince County described the difference between independent farming and contract farming:

> The general goal of getting all agricultural production under contract production has some stability to it, I suppose, but more than anything, it's just a way of keeping prices low and so now you don't have those good years.
>
> See my parents, the barn we were in, was built in 1976. A hurricane blew the roof off our old barn and so the roof came off, we had to build a new barn. Mom and dad had 40 acres of potatoes and the crop, over 2 years, built that barn basically for cash. It was a good year, it was two good years back-to-back and so, it cost

> dad $44000 to build the barn and they got insurance money for $11000 and the rest of it on 40 acres.
>
> So, if you did the same math today, it was really good. Mom and dad always said that there were years that they didn't make any money, but they never lost money. That's not the case anymore. Those big years are not there anymore, like the big prices and it's all contract. So, everybody's just kind of floating along with their nose above the water line and it's their work with the agronomists [to] squeeze every little hundredweight that they can out of the soil that keeps them going.

Even though the contract arrangement meant the land remained in the farmer's possession, the loss of financial autonomy meant that the farmer had to obtain their own financing —and debt— needed to compete (McMichael 2020: 24-25). *New Farmer* cattle and sheep farmers in Prince County believed that "land ownership [was] a red herring" for the same reason:

> If one looks at the kind of contracts that the potato buyers insist on the potato growers signing in order to have that market, the potato growers don't have much control over the basic decisions on what they're going to do with their land. They're planting the variety that they're contracted to supply; they're planting it and applying the fertilizer and the herbicides and the fungicides and the insecticides that are specified in the contract. They don't really make the decision to harvest — and there is some of their knowledge and skill required— but they're not in control anymore. They've given away that control in their contract.

According to Kolinjivadi et al. (2020), a contract farmer's land use was mainly influenced by the need to increase yields to remain competitive. Maintaining crop rotations and building up soil was not high on the list of priorities. Most participants had an issue with the proven "soil health" shortcomings of the potato industry. All participants expressed sympathy for potato growers, whom they acknowledged had no choice but to do what the processors told them, even if it meant soil degradation. Participants also spoke highly about potato growers who "tried to do the right thing,"

even if that meant extra labour because, as many farmers told me, "You only get paid for what you grow."

There are programs to help farmers gain some income for environmental projects, such as the Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) program. According to the ALUS website, it is a "charitable organization" with the goal to deliver "ecosystem services[57]"(ALUS 2022). The organization, active in six provinces, boasted 1421 farmers and ranchers in the program, with the goal of "creating nature-based solutions on [farmer's] land to build climate resilience and enhance biodiversity for the benefit of communities and future generations" (ALUS 2022). However, PEI was the only province with a province-wide program. According to the government of PEI (2022a), funding was available for participation in ALUS if the farmer took acreage out of production or participated in activities such as "delayed hay cutting" (Government of PEI 2022a). Essentially, this program allowed farmers to get paid for land they did not use or found profitless. According to Jill MacIntyre in her master's thesis *Agroecological Farming Methodologies as Climate Change Resilience on Prince Edward Island, Canada* (2021), ALUS encouraged farms that would not otherwise prioritize ecosystem services to do so, but farms that already employed agroecological methods were ineligible for funding (MacIntyre 2021: 120). PEI Farmers in MacIntyre's research also suggested that some farmers may use the program to earn income from less profitable land while "do[ing] the bare minimum" (MacIntyre 2021: 121); for example, a farmer could mark an unused

[57] According to ALUS, "[e]cosystem services are naturally occurring systems that support humans, animals and the environment" (ALUS 2022).

pasture for the ALUS program and not change any of their existing environmentally harmful farming practices (MacIntyre 2021: 121).

According to Kolinjivadi et al. (2020) ALUS affected PEI farmers in different ways; some were happy to have a long-term monetary investment in the quality of their soil, while others felt that the payments were "paternalistic" (Kolinjivadi et al. 2020: 78) and that it implied they did not understand "soil health." Additionally, some felt it set the precedent that farmers should always be paid "to act in the public benefit" (Kolinjivadi et al. 2020: 78). Similarly to MacIntyre's research, for some farmers it seemed that the program rewarded those who had degraded their soil instead of those who had not (Kolinjivadi et al. 2020: 78). According to researchers, ALUS was also a risky proposition for contract farmers who had to operate under rigid constraints with the processors, whose "singular focus on sustaining and enhancing productivity" (Kolinjivadi et al. 2020: 79). A project with ALUS did not guarantee the next processor contract, only high potato yields did (Kolinjivadi et al. 2020: 79).

The very recent story of PEI and "Soil Health"

Raymond Williams (1976) explained that change in meaning over time depended on the ability to link the history of a term to the present, and to grapple with the meanings of these shifts in the meanings and the struggles around those changes:

> To study both particular and relational meanings, then, in different actual speakers and writers, and in and through historical time, is a deliberate choice. The limitations are obvious and are admitted. The emphasis is equally obvious and is conscious. One kind of semantics is the study of meaning as such; another kind is the study of semantics to which these notes and essays belong is one of the tendencies within *historical semantics*: a tendency that can be more precisely defined when it is added that the emphasis is not only on historical origins and developments but also on the present —present meanings, implications and

> relationships — as history. This recognized, as any study of language must, that there is indeed community between past and present, but also that *community* — that difficult word — is not the only possible description of these relations between past and present; that there are also radical change, discontinuity and conflict, and that all these are still at issue and are indeed still occurring (Williams 1976: 23).

In PEI, one conflict and community around the term "soil health" was the potato. The potato has been erroneously treated as though it has been the main agricultural monocrop in PEI for 200 years (Discover Charlottetown 2019). In reality, according to Joshua MacFadyen in the chapter "The Fertile Crescent: Agricultural Land Use on PEI, 1861-1971*"* (2016) while farms did grow and sell potatoes in the early 1800s, the actual focal point of agriculture rested on "the prolonged development of the fodder and livestock economy" (MacFadyen 2016: 179) and between 1890-1921 "cattle, oats, hay, and pasture" were favoured over root crops, including the potato (MacFadyen 2016: 179). The real push for potatoes occurred much more recently, as did their connection to their destruction of "soil health."

In the chapter "Agriculture and the Environment on Prince Edward Island, 1969-2014: An Uneasy Relationship" Jean-Paul Arsenault (2016), described how much of the market in the late twentieth century incentivized land clearing for potatoes. Between 1990 and 2000, the potato and softwood lumber industries grew by fifty percent. The combination of interest in potato growing and the demand for softwood gave farmers an impetus to clear more land for potato crops (Arsenault 2016: 210). Additionally, in the early 2000s, farmers, particularly those growing potatoes for processing, were eager to increase production to increase profit margins. In doing so, they set their land up for more erosion and pesticide run-off that would set the stage for the negative public perception of

farmers, particularly potato farmers, and farming practices that remain today. A *Youth Recruit* Dairy farmer from Prince County explained:

> What has been brutal, and I've hated to see now, is the general public in particular against the potato industry. The vitriol online, it's a constant monkey on their back. I've heard them telling me, they're going on the road with the sprayer and get flipped the bird. It's totally disrespectful. I doubt that's very common, but I mean, it happened.
>
> We had the needles in the potato fields. There's one fella in Summerside, I believe he figures he was shot in the back with a pellet gun while he was planting or spraying. I think it's a little better this year, but there were a couple years there where it was bad. Social media is a different beast but it, just kind of snowballs, I guess.

Arsenault (2016) suggested that some agricultural scientists were partially at fault for the increased adoption of pest-control chemicals as they "refined the structural formulas of pesticide and fertilizer regimes and believed that modern chemistry could and should help squeeze every last kilogram of yield out of every last square metre" (Arsenault 2016: 200). As a result, the early 2000s saw hedgerows and buffer zones near waterways disappear to expand the amount of land available for crops (Arsenault 2016: 200).

Arsenault explained that the 1990 Royal Commission on the Land noted the lack of oversight in agricultural land use and its effect on island waterways, but "until very recently" (Arsenault 2016: 205), there was an understanding that farmers could decide how much and how often they used pesticides and fertilizer, and they made all decisions regarding the waterways that flowed through their acreage. He explained that the foundation for this behaviour was a generational belief that a waterway "goes with the land" (Arsenault 2016: 205).

In 1996, the PEI Department of Fisheries and Environment published *Water on Prince Edward Island: Understanding the resource, knowing the issues* to explain "threats to our water" including contamination that can lead to the destruction of environmental habitats (PEI Department of Fisheries and Environment 1996: 3). This publication also informed the public of the need for a "Watercourse Alteration Permit" for any resident who sought to change any stream, watercourse, or wetland. This permit would also require an environmental impact review through the Department of Fisheries and Environment (PEI Department of Fisheries and Environment 1996: 4). The report mentioned farmers and their agricultural practices specifically and informed the public, as well as farmers, that their practices could affect areas that are far from the field:

> A farmer, for example, might think that because his land has no nearby streams that he need not be concerned about how his farming practices could affect water quality. But because we know that surface runoff and groundwater beneath his farm will find its way into streams, we must promote safe farming practices throughout the watershed (PEI Department of Fisheries and Environment 1996: 6).

The publication also explained that surface run-off water could dissolve and result in fertilizer nitrogen, manure, and soil to mix with groundwater and precipitation in streams, especially during "storm conditions" (PEI Department of Fisheries and Environment 1996, 10). Groundwater contamination was also a concern because it moves more slowly while pulling fertilizer and manure deep into the soil which was significant because groundwater is the primary source of drinking water on PEI (PEI Department of Fisheries and Environment 1996: 11); therefore, residents tended to be very concerned when there was a possibility of contamination.

In *Pesticide monitoring and fish kill investigations on Prince Edward Island, 1994-1999*, Mutch et al. (2002) analyzed the link between pesticides and wildlife[58] when they examined twelve fish kills between 1995-1999. Although researchers could not directly link pesticides to the death of the fish, they found the link between pesticides and fish kills "compelling" (Mutch et al. 2002: 98). They suggested that pesticide limits found at the site were lower than the legal limit; however, at the time the fish died the concentration may have been higher initially but then quickly decreased "due to flushing and dilution" (Mutch et al. 2002: 98). They also believed that pesticides were a factor because the fish kills had occurred only in "cultivated watersheds subject to pesticide application, and after rainfalls" (Mutch et al. 2002: 98). They concluded that if pesticides were not a factor, fish kills would occur in all sorts of environmental conditions. However, since each fish kill was preceded by heavy rainfall, it suggested that agricultural run-off was a major factor in the events (Mutch et al. 2002: 98). One participant, a retired agricultural reporter and NFU supporter, described this time as the *wild west* of agriculture on PEI but also seemed to think that things were improving:

> I think the whole wild west period, where there were fish kills, and it was a very bad stretch and there's some of that overhang on farmers. Many in the general public don't trust farmers. The first thing they'll say is, "Oh, they cause fish kills, and they poison the air and the water."
>
> I think there was a stretch there that things got a little out of hand; I think more recently, over the last four or five, six years you've seen much more emphasis on research, on crop rotations, on organic matter. All of the tests that the provinces were doing on organic matter, it was a straight line down and farmers realize that that can't go on forever. So, I'm much more optimistic that a lot of the issues are being addressed now by farmers. I follow many farmers on Twitter and see them

[58] When many fish die from pesticide use or natural causes it is called a "fish kill" (Government of PEI 2020).

> speaking proudly of cutting down their Sudan grass or putting a cover crop in for fall. Farmers just wouldn't have done that ten years ago.

Nevertheless, as recently as 2018, a farm called Brookfield Gardens was convicted of "allowing the release of a deleterious substance into a waterway in violation of the federal Fisheries Act" (Yarr 2018b) and was defended by the Federation of Agriculture who blamed the event on rain and climate change. David Mol, the Federation president at the time, explained that no buffer zone was big enough to stop heavy rainfall. The president ignored the role of pesticides and stated, "You're not going to stop the power of water" (Yarr 2018b). The judge disagreed and suggested that mitigation was possible: "One measure was to not plant row crops at all when environmental risk could not be properly addressed" (Yarr 2018b). Pesticides were not the only way run-off could harm fish; as recently as March 2022, a farm was fined $50000 for killing 630 brook trout when a manure hose disconnected and sent manure into a local pond (McEachern 2022).

"Soil health" and the politics of potato irrigation

A *New Farmer* from Prince County, who was both a member of the Federation of Agriculture and the NFU PEI, summed up their thoughts on the potato industry on PEI, and linked "soil health" to sustainability, productivity and economic viability. They suggested that changes were possible through "less mainstream kinds of farming." The farmer also noted that the PEI Department of Agriculture and the Federation of Agriculture acknowledged the need for "soil health":

> [T]o think that PEI potatoes should compete in the centre of the continent with potatoes from Alberta or Idaho or the growing areas that are in the centre of the continent — that they should compete in the long-term—

> with rising energy costs and with a need to reduce reliance on fossil fuel, that doesn't make sense. So, economically it doesn't make sense.
>
> But it also doesn't make sense for the **health of the Island soil**. There are measures that the Department of Agriculture and the Federation of Agriculture are promoting to make potato growing less destructive of the soil, including huge funding now for planting cover crops that will be plowed into the soil to enhance the soil rather than leave it bare all winter. So, plant a cover crop and plow it down in the spring. And that all makes sense but it's at the edges, it's loosened at the edges of what is really a fundamental problem, which is that reliance on potatoes as the main agricultural products from PEI is economically risky and not environmentally sustainable.
>
> It's not that there aren't people in the Federation of Agriculture who are doing things other than potatoes — the Federation promotes its members that are doing livestock or organic farming or even more less mainstream kind of farming — growing flowers or herbs for essential oils or whatever. But potatoes are still the main economic driver of agriculture on PEI and therefore it follows from that the potato industry is the main driver of agricultural policy. It's changing, it's changing very quickly and there are wonderful things happening in the Department and in the Federation, but I think we need to keep strengthening that voice that says there are other ways to use Island land that are productive and sustainable. Other ways besides growing potatoes.

According to soil scientist David Powlson in "Soil health—useful terminology for communication or meaningless concept? Or both?" (2020), the concept of "soil health" emerged following an earlier adoption of the term "soil quality" in the 1970s. However, when used in reference to air and water, "quality" suggested that both lacked pollutants such as "nitrate, pesticides or phosphate in water or nitrogen oxides, ammonia or particulates in air" (Powlson 2020: 248). This was not possible for "soil" because there was no "pure soil"; soil existed in varied forms in nature, with varied amounts of chemicals and organic matter. In the specific case of "water quality," it was possible to

have pure, uncontaminated water (Powlson 2020: 248). Additionally, "soil health" could damage "water quality" which was an important issue to participants.

A *New Farmer* working with cattle and sheep discussed the lack of environmental protections in the LPA, specifically regarding soil erosion and water:

> [T]here is this kind of mishmash of goals and policy instruments that were chosen because they could avoid some of the really hard questions, it seems to me. You go after non-residents, you go after corporations, and most voters are going to think "Ok, those are the villains, not me." And yet, soil erosion which Royal Commission after Royal Commission on land use in PEI has identified as a huge problem. Soil erosion wasn't addressed at all by the LPA…
>
> I'm saying the LPA would have to be set in a broader context of land use regulation, but it would have to be a more nuanced land use regulation than, for example, we have with the Water Act. I don't know if the island has the resources, has the staff to come up with that kind of very particular and very site-specific focused legislation, that's why they have a blanket prohibition on things and then they come out and look at the site and say "Oh, this is ok here."

This participant explained that legislation was difficult to enforce on PEI due to population size: fewer government employees mean fewer features, including buffer zones, are assessed promptly. To deal with this, according to the participant, the government enacted blanket prohibitions and moratoriums and then granted exceptions behind closed doors. A moratorium is precisely what occurred with the Water Act, and led to concerns that some farmers had more access to water for irrigation than others.

An example that many participants referenced and that garnered attention in the province, occurred during a drought in the summer of 2020. That summer, five farms were granted permission to pump surface water from the Dunk River when its water levels were low, and some continued pumping after the exception dates had passed. The details of the exceptions were only made public when CBC News accessed files from the

P.E.I. Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action under freedom of information legislation (Chapin 2021). MLA Lynne Lund referenced this case when she voiced her concern in the lead up to the enactment of the Water Act, in a letter to the editor on April 7, 2021:

> While we have plenty of water as a province, at the local level things are experienced differently. Our groundwater isn't held in one shared pot that we either have or don't. We have many aquifers, and some are far more strained than others. What happened last summer with the Dunk River is a good example of that.
>
> This is why a blanket approach to water management will leave some communities worse off than others, and it leaves farmers in those communities with unequal access to water. What we really need to understand is how much water we can access in any given watershed without causing harm to the ecosystems. Then we need to figure out how many large users of water are within that watershed in order to determine what would be the fair share for each (Lund 2021).

An NFU PEI Representative also wondered if the Water Act, which came into effect in June 2021 (Fraser 2021), could be relevant if "nobody understands what the spirit and intent means." In this case, the purpose and goals of the Water Act were to "support and promote the management, protection and enhancement of water resources within the jurisdiction of the province" (Government of PEI 2023d: 3).

Enacted after consultations in 2015, 2017 and 2019, the Water Act had passed in the legislature once before, in 2017[59]. A significant part the Act was the removal of the ban on high-capacity wells, which had been in place since 2002. According to the Government of PEI (2023c), high-capacity wells extract water at 4L a second or more

[59] The water act "was passed by the PEI legislature in 2017 but never enacted" (Fraser 2021).

and are used as agricultural irrigation water sources as well as in aquaculture, food processing and on golf courses; there are over 300 of these wells in the province (Government of PEI 2023c). Currently, at least 29 out of 36 of the high-capacity wells already in use in agriculture are directly or indirectly connected to Cavendish Farms (PEI Communities, Land and Environment 2017). For example, the farms that currently use high-capacity wells are either owned by Mary-Jean Irving (Higgins 2019), owned by top contract growers for Cavendish Farms (Walker 2018), or are linked to Cavendish Farms contract growers who have previously served on the PEI Potato Board as executive members (PEI Potato Board 2012). After the Act was passed, a moratorium was still in place with exceptions: those with permits to "[draw] above the level of domestic household consumption" —wells that had been grandfathered in— and new high-capacity wells built on four farms for a proposed agricultural irrigation research project could draw water (Fraser 2021).

Dr. Michael van den Heuvel, a Canada Research Chair in Watershed Ecological Integrity at the University of Prince Edward Island, proposed the irrigation research project, which he claimed needed to be funded by the private sector, as well as the government (K. Campbell 2020). In a presentation to the Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability, van den Heuvel explained that the project had secured the private sector funding it needed — from Cavendish Farms— to be eligible for federal funding. Therefore, the farmers involved would have been compensated by Cavendish Farms for the cost of the irrigation equipment. In sum, the high-capacity wells would be on farms connected to Cavendish Farms, and those farms

would benefit from the research process, which could have taken four years to complete (K. Campbell 2020).

However, three days before the Act came into effect, new regulations were released to allow licenses for high-capacity wells for everyone, with participation in the Soil Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) as a of the condition of access (CBC News 2022). The SHIP is a "soil health" advisory service that uses soil tests and field management information to "assess both soil loss potential and soil condition" which would lead to a discussion regarding possible farm management plans and suggest "actions to support soil health". It is unclear if there are any deadlines or penalties associated with non-compliance with the developed plans (Government of PEI 2022b).

A *Youth Recruit* calver was skeptical of "soil health" plans to gain access to irrigation. He explained that when potato contractors were strongly advised to irrigate their land the expense of irrigation equipment often meant that to recoup costs crop rotations would cease:

> *What do you think about the idea that as long as they have a plan, they can get the extra irrigation?*
>
> Well, I guess if they can demonstrate that they can at least maintain **soil health**. Because what happens is— and I've seen it happen right next door to me—the first casualty of an irrigation project being put in is proper crop rotation. Because they've got to recover that investment, it's such a huge investment.
>
> This one particular farm I'm thinking of, right beside me. The farm [was ruined] 30-35 years ago, so this potato farmer bought it. He put in water diversions to control water flow in the spring, strip cropped it, made a deal with his dairy farming neighbour to supply manure, was on a strict three-year rotation, all those years and he turned that farm right around —the soil on that farm— right around, 180 degrees, growing potatoes every three years.

> So, he's a contract grower for the Irvings [and] was told to put in an irrigation system. So, the first thing that disappeared was the three-year rotation. The other thing that disappeared was instead of planting these alternating strips of crops, different crops; it's all 150 acres now of potatoes or 150 acres of this, 150 acres of that.

The cost of embracing the numbers

On a cattle and sheep farm, I spoke with two NFU PEI *New Farmers.* One farmer sat for the interview and the other took me on a visit through their farm. They were both retired university professors. As we walked around the hilly farm we passed four large white dogs, lambs and sheep. In the interview, the farmer explained how they had transformed the place over the last fifteen years. When they started the work, they lived in a small cottage built on the property. The participant explained the commitment required to work to reverse the *unhealthy* or "depleted land":

> [W]e bought this farm in 2010 and when we bought, it was land that had been used that wasn't owner-occupied, no buildings on it, no power, no water source, no wells, no lanes, no fences and so on. Parts of it were leased out to people who were using it in the potato rotation, but it was clear that the land was being depleted. That the fertility of the… that the organic matter was being depleted, that the land was subject to erosion. We looked at it and thought, "Well, this would be a great retirement project and we'll buy this farm, and we'll have cattle and sheep, and we'll do regenerative agriculture." We've put a massive amount of work and money into creating the farm as it is today. It's still in progress.

We walked down to a slope with a trout stream running through it. This gully, now built up, had been eroded when they bought the farm, and the fish had now returned. We then turned to the grazing fields, the soil of three separate pastures had all been tested and their composition was found to be identical; however, they continued to grow cattle forage differently, one field grew an abundance of the varied forage — trefoil, multiple varieties of chicory, grass and blue grass — while the others would grow them sparsely. The

farmers had not yet figured out why. They had partnered with the University of Prince Edward Island Climate Lab and installed a weather station to learn as much as they could about the climate of their farmland and to try to mitigate climate fluctuations.

> I've seen huge changes in what is in the weather. We have a UPEI weather station, which we got a year ago, so we can keep track very carefully, but climate change is real, and it's affecting us because we don't use commercial bagged fertilizers, we're using manure to fertilize our fields and that's slower than the bagged fertilizer. But we're **trying to build up the life in the soil itself** and the last 4 years we have had periods of drought here that has been devastating. It used to be that I would look out and I could see rain falling along [the highway] and it wouldn't fall here, it happened so much I thought: "You must be imagining, it can't be that it's raining everywhere else but [here]."
>
> Now that we have the weather station, we can see it. Yes! It's raining everywhere else but [here]. And even in the 12 years since we bought the farm — we've had the animals since 2015, we bought the farm in 2010—I have seen these changes in the weather patterns that make the farming much harder because we don't know when it's going to be safe to plant anymore, we don't know when it's going to be safe to make hay anymore. We're growing grasses and forbs[60] and legumes in our pastures. We're working on getting perennials in our pastures which have more resilience to fluctuations in the weather.

We headed downhill toward the cattle, they had a mix of Milking Devons, Belted Galloways and Kerry breeds. They planned to expand their work with Kerrys and Milking Devons. In the distance, near a pond and wooded area, the farmer spotted a Milking Devon calf with its mother; we walked closer. The farmer suspected that the calf was about two hours old, he inspected the mother to see if she had fed the calf. He believed so, but we started back to the house to alert his wife. We walked around a pond, added to the property with help from Ducks Unlimited, and walked up the hill toward the

[60] For example, Chicory.

house. The farmers admitted that if they did not have access to a retirement pension, the farm would not have survived as long as it has:

> Some of the income that supports this farm or that supports us, and therefore supports the farm, is pension income because it's a retirement project. So, we're in the same position as people using off-farm labour, paid wage labour to support the farm.

This farmer spoke highly of the importance of the marketing for organic goods and the work of the Prince of Wales'[61] in the Dutchy of Cornwall:

> He is creating markets for organic products. So, it's not just that he's promoting wool and older lamb, but he has a brand of food products in the UK now called Dutchie Originals, I think. So, he buys the products that his tenant farmers are producing, and he processes them — not personally, of course — but he set up the processing facility. That there is this market for what's produced, and it's sold. Then it's a Dutchy subsidiary that he has set up [to] market these— so the farmer doesn't have to do it— and the farmer gets a premium market for growing organic stuff.

The description of the Dutchy is a form of supply management, which many of my participants supported.

"Soil Health" and Supply Management

A supply-managed crop limits the amount of the crop a farmer can produce (Schwartz 2020: 162). In the case of dairy supply management, each farmer has a quota of dairy — one cow is equal to one quota— and the total number of quotas in Canada is fixed (Schwartz 2020: 162). Therefore, a farmer could only add to their dairy farm if they bought quota from another farmer, usually one who had left the industry. According to the supply management section on the national NFU website, in Canada, supply management is in effect for dairy, broiler chickens, laying hens, turkeys and hatching

[61] Now King Charles.

eggs. The NFU is a proponent of supply management because it gave autonomy to farmers instead of leaving them "at the mercy of processors" (NFU 2024h). They also believed it contributed to food sovereignty by avoiding food waste and ensured farmer income without subsidies from the Canadian government. This is accomplished by

> controlling the amount produced, preventing shortages, and keeping under-priced imports from being dumped into our market. As a result, Canada does not experience wide fluctuations in supply and prices, and our system does not require massive government subsidies that are used by other countries to support farmers' incomes in these sectors (NFU 2024h).

An NFU PEI representative and organic farmer from Kings County explained how supply management protected dairy farmers and helped the soil because farmers could financially support their farms:

> It [supply management] protected the soil for them too because dairy farmers were growing crops for their animals, and have the manure back on the soil, so they had some pretty decent land. But that was just because they had supply management which — nobody could come in and buy them out.

Without supply management, processors could make farmers accept their price and drive farmers to produce more for less money.

In the context of dairy, milk could be dumped and wasted if the processor refused to pay for any overproduction. As one *Youth Recruit* in Prince County described when he spoke to me about his neighbours rejected potatoes:

> My neighbours over here, they're gone now, one year they had a great big pile of potatoes under contract, the contract … the oil company [Cavendish Farms] doesn't take the potatoes, so the potatoes sat there and went to rot. So, three and a half million pounds of potatoes went rotten and ended up dumped behind my barn, while 21% of the households in PEI were food insecure. But there was no way to get those potatoes to hungry people because the system is not geared for that.

Supply management, according to the NFU, could be considered the antithesis of contract farming.

Many of my participants were as passionate about supply management as the LPA, and some believed that if both were available farmers would be able to sustain themselves and then be able to take care better care of the land. They believed that supply management and marketing were important tools in giving farmers a reasonable income. Most participants expressed the notion that if agricultural landscape was comprised of many smaller farms, all supply managed, it would allow a guaranteed income and with that the soil would be treated in a better way. Therefore, to participants "soil health" became a rationale for a particular economic arrangement that was in contrast to contract farming. According to McMichael (2020: 28), contract farming "represent[ed] the epistemic subordination of labour to capital" due to an emphasis on efficiency and less on "farmer knowledge and practice." According to participants, supply management favoured the knowledge and practice of farmers and small-scale farmers prioritized natural resources and agroecological methods.

An NFU PEI Representative from Prince County explained that he believed that the combination of supply management for the potato industry and enforcement of the LPA could have created a different reality for farming on PEI, one where a farmer could have more control over their livelihood:

> How do we keep land values from skyrocketing and keep farmers from being able to afford to buy land? Had the LPA been followed, farmers receiving what they should be getting for their product, then there would be less pressure for the farmer to have to grow twice as much for less. Therefore, putting less pressure once that farm got up to its maximum limits, and that's where supply management was very good. We were getting what we needed to get to cover the cost of

> production. So, had that model prevailed, had the LPA been followed, then there would be less pressure on producers to get bigger, to grow more for less for the processor.

On PEI the dairy industry is supply managed. A NFU PEI dairy farmer from Prince County explained that this made dairy farming highly organized and predictable, especially when producers were part of Amalgamated Dairies Limited (ADL). According to this farmer, ADL was an organization that is held in such high regard by farmers that some were "more into ADL than church." In 1953, ADL began as a co-op with seven independent dairy producers but has now grown to 165. In 2016, ADL expanded and invested in new milk processing plants in both Summerside and Charlottetown (Government of Canada 2021).

Therefore, not only were dairy farmers able to make a living, but their farms were also considered to have some of the "best" soil due to the ability to spread manure from their herd onto their forage fields. The same dairy farmer used to trade manure for hay with a neighbouring farmer. The downside of dairy was the prohibitive cost of entry and the fact that another dairy farmer must either retire or die for a new farmer to buy in through the quota system.

"Soil health" and Colonialism

Farmers spoke about their agroecological practices on many farm visits during my fieldwork, these practices did not seem to be reserved for certified organic farms and were also apparent on farms that were concerned with dairy and cattle. They included the use of manure from the cattle to fertilize grain and forage fields, trading hay with other farms that did not have the capital to access manure, as well as larger areas for cattle to

graze. Interestingly, according to Joshua MacFadyen (2016), these seemingly modern agroecological activities had their roots in the history of mixed-use farms on the Island, where livestock was important in the "balancing act" (MacFadyen 2016: 163) of farming during that period. Manured fields produced higher yields, and mussel mud, primarily crushed oyster shells was used as a lime substitute. The extraction of "mussel mud" from the shoreline was also a "PEI winter tradition and a unique part of the province's folklore" (MacFadyen 2016: 171). One non-farmer participant, a labour organizer and active supporter[62] of the Cooper Institute, described how he learned about the importance of soil from his grandfather and noted the use of mussel mud as well as the understanding that hedgerows were an important trait of a farm field:

> I remember talking to my grandfather who farmed all his life and talked about the quality of soil was declining because of big agribusiness — the potato monoculture and stuff like that. So, that was part of discussions that I had with my grandfather, who talked about building up soil. When he took over a farm that was depleted, he just spent a lot of time— in terms of mussel mud and building it up and talking about all the efforts — and then he saw that all this soil being … land being… like hedgerows being cut down and soil run-off and depletion of nutrients in the soil. Talking to him or my parents or other people, that was a big concern of theirs. Protecting the land not only meant ownership but also meant the quality of the land as a resource for future generations.

He went on the explain that he felt the most pressing issue concerning land on PEI was "soil health":

> I think the **health of the soil** is paramount because if we don't have that —United Nations, a few years ago, had "Year of the Soil"[63] and I remember being at this dinner a little while — probably 3-4 years ago, the premier of Auckland was

[62] This participant stressed that he was not part of the "core group" of the Cooper Institute but "certainly was involved in their activities and actions and support[ed] them."

[63] In 2015, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations "declared 2015 the International Year of Soils". The objectives of this initiative were to raise awareness, educate and advocate for "the importance of soil for human life", including expanding ways to collect and monitor soils globally (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2015).

> there … and I talked about how, in a typical teaspoon of **healthy soil**, the amount of microorganisms and mycelium and just everything that was in the soil is astounding. Then, I know when talking to my grandfather, he said, "Well these other fields that where people are just growing a monoculture and not doing anything to protect it, the **soil isn't healthy** as it once was." So, I think, when you look at what soil is and how it needs to be and the value of **healthy soil** in the long term, then that is astounding when you look at the numbers of living organisms and things in it. It's incredible.

Erosion and wind buffers were particularly important, and a point of pride, for participants from the NFU. During farm visits, they would point out their small fields, separated by fences and hedgerows; these attributes often separated their farms, both physically and conceptually, from the farms around them.

Interestingly, Janzen et al. (2021) explained that "perceptions of health" related to land are context and value-based, determined by human values and ideas around the function of land. The authors describe grasslands "perhaps somewhat similar to the pre-settlement era" (Janzen et al. 2021: 3) in southern Alberta covered in a large variety of wildflowers. They suggested that current soil health measurements "would likely show that has low organic matter content, stony texture, alkaline pH, and a thin topsoil layer" (Janzen et al. 2021: 3). As agricultural land, the measures of "soil health" would render it useless, but "if the function is to broadly uplift the human spirit, then the soil's health is surely sublime" (Janzen et al. 2021: 3).

In PEI, current markers of "soil health" important to participants —specifically hedgerows — could also be considered indications of colonialism. In "Making Private Property: Enclosure, Common Right and the Work of Hedges," Nicholas Blomley (2007) described the role of hedgerows in land dispossession in England and as a site of politics.

Agriculture manuals as early as 1669[64] encouraged hedgerows along with a new way of looking at agriculture:

> These books began to use a radically new rhetoric of improvement, productivity, ingenuity and profit. Evangelical in their zeal, they characterised improvement as a divine imperative. Passive ownership was an affront to God's will; innovation and enterprise were to be encouraged (Blomley 2007: 6).

Blomley acknowledged the work of hedgerows as barriers for wind and shelter for animals, but also noted that they were often described as a barrier against people, notably the "paranoid concern at the incursions of the poor" (Blomley 2007: 9). It appeared that English commoners took these attitudes to heart, as the hedge became a site of struggle, and "hedge-breaking" became increasingly policed (Blomley 2007: 11).

Chris J. Griffin suggested that English enclosures and colonization were related. In "Enclosure as Internal Colonisation: The Subaltern Commoner, Terra Nullius and the Settling of England's 'Wastes'" (2023) he suggested that attitudes around commoners in England, especially the attitude that those who lived in forests were "clamorous and rude" was backed by popular discourse at the time and "mirrored pro-enclosure John Locke's belief that those who lived in forests and woods were 'irrational, untaught'" (Griffin 2023: 105). He explained that the concept of creating "productive colonies" came at a time when the English had less internal conflict over the commons and the concept of improvement:

> [T]he abstract concept and the actual practice of creating colonies was rooted in the idea of settling and making productive, this invariably (at first at least) meaning improving the land through cultivation and the creation of pasture, the integration of lands into the economy. Further, the idea of making productive colonies, of growing the economy (and population) through expanding the settled

[64] *Systema Agriculturae* by John Worlidge (Blomley 2007)

> area, came into political thinking at the same time that enclosure was no longer viewed by the English state as an evil, that is to say the early decades of the seventeenth century (Griffin 2023: 101).

Therefore, what was now viewed by my participants as a favourable indicator of "soil health" in agriculture began as a colonial project of "improvement" and exclusion. Of course, removing hedgerows in the current context would not revert farmer fields to their pre-colonial condition.

In *Vital Decomposition: Soil Practitioners and Life Politics* (2020) Anthropologist Kristina M. Lyons drew on Anne Stoler to describe the traces of colonialism in the soil of rural Colombia. Lyons suggested that reducing descriptions of soil to capitalistic notions of "quality and health" ignored the "imperial debris" (Stoler 2016; Lyons 2020: 64) of land:

> Trajectories of violence — what, borrowing from Ann Stoler (2016), we might call "imperial debris" or "colonial presences(s)"— are the metamorphizing rock, decomposing layer, transplanted sediment, and soil granules clinging to forms of life that have been uprooted and subjected to extractive-based forms of death…
>
> She continued…
>
> How can soil health be assessed without first asking whose territories are being occupied; which enslaved and indentured bodies worked now-exhausted plantation fields; and which actors amassed tracts of land through violent eviction and illegal contracts (Lyons 2020: 64)?

In PEI, the Mi'kmaq were displaced upon the arrival of Europeans and now temporary workers were made invisible as they maintained Island agriculture[65]. Nevertheless, in the current agricultural landscape, PEI farmers are in a precarious position due to the

[65] Described in more detail in the chapter "Absentee Landlords."

financial constraints of agricultural competition; a topic that emerged often in my fieldwork.

Against "Soil Health"

Janzen et al. (2021) explained that reference to "soil health" in scientific literature emerged in the late 1900s, and has since increased dramatically, so much so that the authors claimed that "reference to soil health now seems almost mandatory in many soil science fora" (Janzen et al. 2021: 2). They questioned whether the term and metaphor "soil health" was helpful in soil biology and suggested that a discussion around the concept may revitalize the soil science discipline. In reviewing previous definitions, the researchers found three prominent themes:

1) Functionality: the soil has a function and utility beyond those of human needs and the function of soil cannot be measured solely by the composition of the soil;
2) Vitality: soil is a living system of processes "many of which ware mediated by the numberless, mostly nameless biota in the soil";
3) Sustainability or resilience: a healthy soil sustains into the future, it is not fixed in time. Therefore, "soil health" is not a metric that can be reached. A healthy soil has an "enduring capacity" which is determined in the long term (Janzen et al. 2021: 2).

Based on these three patterns the researchers suggested their own definition: "Soil health is the vitality of a soil in sustaining the socio-ecological function of its enfolding land" (Janzen et al. 2021: 2).

This definition constituted what Tania Murray Li (2014) described as a hindrance to packaging land as a "resource for global investment." Li explained that land needed to be classified as "underutilized" (Li 2014: 592) to work as an investment, and to do so would require that all current land use, including history and the "socio-ecological function" of the land suggested by Janzen et al. (2021: 3) would need to be ignored and discarded. Therefore, an expanded definition of "soil health" would directly contradict the concept of land as a commodity.

Janzen et al. suggested that soil scientists should move away from previous indicators of "soil health" that focus on the fertility of the soil and that are intertwined with the concept of productivity, yields and profitability. In making this shift, they hoped that soil biology would move into more qualitative territory and steer the field "toward broader societal goals" (Janzen et al. 2021: 3).

Kristina M. Lyons explained that the focus on "soil health" aligned soil to the "techno-scientific modes" (Lyons 2020: 64) of looking at land that assigned it to the use of capitalism that had, and continues to, lead to dispossession. She wondered if in some way soil could be freed from the confines of scientific assessment it would allow the difficult soil-human relationships to be brought to the forefront and perhaps reorganized and reimagined:

> What kinds of relations and sensing might the pairing of the sciences and arts aspire to restore by first asking: reparations for whom? At the very least, the dominant and reductionist logics of a singular soil vocation provision would not be left unexamined. At best, we might learn how to tell granular stories that work against the selective forgetting of the soil's corporeal generosity, a generosity that is unevenly distributed and always composed of situated trajectories of human-soil ruptures and co-laborations (Lyons 2020: 65).

In PEI, the focus on "soil health" obscured the relationships that have led to agricultural inequity in the province. This sentiment was also clear when Lyons participated in the Eighteenth Latin America Soil Science Conference in San José, Costa Rica. At this conference a soil ecologist stood and asked an important question: "What are we asking of the soil over the next forty years? That it resolves all of humanity's problems?" (Lyons 2020: 52).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed "soil health" as a concept that could be considered a keyword to interrogate environmental issues, public perceptions, and inequities in the agricultural landscape of PEI. Raymond Williams (1976: 22) stated:

> New kinds of relationship, but also new ways of seeing existing relationships, appear in language in a variety of ways: in the invention of new terms (*capitalism*); in the adaption and alteration (indeed at times reversal) of older terms (*society or individual*); in extension *(interest*) or transfer *(exploitation*). But also, as these examples should remind us, such changes are not always either simple or final. Earlier and later senses coexist, or become actual alternatives in which problems of contemporary belief and affiliation are contested.

The NFU PEI conception of "soil health," was also used by conventional agricultural groups and the government in a way that reduced soil to a substrate for commodity farming, and not an organism that lives and evolves, entwined with human activity since the beginning of the earth. Also, a link was illuminated that connected "soil health" farming practices to colonialism and dispossession. Additionally, this chapter pointed to the power that agriculture has attributed to "soil health" metrics at a time when soil scientists questioned whether an emphasis on "soil health" should be allowed to stand as a catch-all solution for global issues.

Chapter 5 — Conclusion

On the afternoon of February 17th, 2024, I attended the land forum "The Silencing of the Land" organized by the Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands (Atlantic Briefs Desk 2024). The promotional graphic, sent through email and posted on Facebook, contained the subheading "When government, media and Islanders are silent about land issues, the effect is devastating. Join us to discuss why this happens and what we can do about it" (Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands 2024b).

In contrast to the land forums I attended one year earlier, the hall was not standing-room only. I struggled to find farmers that I recognized from my attendance at previous NFU PEI meetings or other land forums; by the end, I had identified only three.

Former Green MLA Michele Beaton devoted her talk to a review of the Cavendish Farms Brendel land sale that inspired this thesis. Her presentation made it clear that since I had started this project, some things had changed while others had not. First, the Department of Agriculture and Land was now simply the Department of Agriculture. This move, she said, eliminated a problematic conflict: "I was extremely happy to see 'land' moved back in under 'communities and municipalities' where it deserves to be, not with agriculture because I do believe it was in conflict when it was there in the first place" (Williams 2024: 14:55). Second, the report produced after the review of the Brendel sale was "buried" with the privacy commissioner, an office of two people (Williams 2024 1:44:47).

As she summarized the uncovering of the Brendel sale, it seems as though the "conflict" that she described was related to the Cavendish Farms:

> Fortunately, we caught one land transaction back in 2019 that would have gone through without anybody ever identifying it and it's because of how it went through. We heard a lot of people talk in the community, lots of people will have mumblings or rumblings that there's this happening or that company has got too much land, or that company has got too much land, these combined people are all working together, and their consumption of land is too much. There's a lot of rumblings there and it's very difficult to actually find out if what those rumblings are saying are actually true or not. In 2019, somebody who I trust very, very explicitly came to me, and said the Irvings have purchased 2200 acres of land and I said, "I can't find it." How do I find how that land transaction has happened when you don't know how to work through a system? … In 2019, we had the proof, that trusted person came to me and said here's the property ID (Williams 2024: 21:15).

She then described two groups of PEI farmers, ones with the right lawyers or "enough money" and "everyday farmers". Here "everyday farmers" were a variation of "family farmers", who did "the right thing" and "cared for the land":

> [Contravention to the LPA] causes a whole lot of distrust, frustration and anxiety within farmers because why should somebody get to do it, but not all farmers get to do it. Only the ones that have figured out or hired the right lawyer or had enough money to pay for, are able to circumvent the Lands Protection Act. Not everybody, also not everybody wants to because there's a lot of farmers out there that respect the land, there is a very small part, very small number in my belief that will and are, and they're doing it for corporate profits. (Williams 2024: 32:00).
> …
>
> When I speak about "everyday farmers", many of them are incorporated and they're incorporated… it's probably two siblings, they've inherited from their father, they're third, fourth, fifth, sixth generational farms and a lot of them are in that sweet spot of 900 to 1500 acres. There are so many farmers out there that are doing the right thing, and they are caring for the land, and they are good sorts for the land…" (Williams 2024: 35:27).

Beaton also addressed farmer "silence." She suggested that farmers should not have to work on land issues but should be consulted or "listened to":

> You can't hold it against them for not speaking out when they have to live next door to the neighbour or they're the ones that are leasing the land to them so they can actually manage their crop rotation. This is not on the farmers. Farmers

> should not have to be the ones that fix this situation, and we shouldn't be calling on them to do that, they're already working hard enough. But they do know where the situations are and if you listen to them, they will share with you (Williams 2024: 36:30).

NFU PEI representative Douglas Campbell has not written an Op.Ed. since 2022. Additionally, as of mid-May 2024, Douglas Campbell had stepped down from his position of District Director after seven years. He was replaced by Rita Jackson, a Canadian Armed Forces veteran who farms in retirement. Also, the Women's District Director position was left unfilled after the previous director moved to the national organization as the National Women's Vice President (McGuire 2024). These changes suggest a move to involve more women in the organization and the need for outside income to make time for farming advocacy. However, it also hinted that the national NFU may be a more enticing organization for women farmers.

Beaton continued by suggesting that the Island Regulatory & Appeals Commission (IRAC) was to blame for the issues with the LPA and asserted that their lack of transparency in land investigations had potentially fuelled suspicions around the Buddhist community. According to Beaton, not even the Buddhist organizations themselves know whether they are, or are not, in contravention of the LPA: "[T]hey were investigated by IRAC [in 2018] and what I did find out is not only were they investigated by IRAC, IRAC would not give them the results of their investigation … How is that fair?" (Williams 2024: 45:20).

In this thesis, I examined three keywords specific to the NFU PEI and PEI land politics at a time when the LPA was publicly debated.

“Absentee Landlords”

According to my participants, the concept of “absentee landlords” was well-known and widely accepted in PEI. It was a term related to belonging, as it illuminated conflicting ideas around who is or is not accepted as a resident or “PEI citizen.” The period in the Island’s history related to “absentee landlords” evoked the idea of land worker tenants fighting for access to, and control over, land but in doing so disregarded the role of these tenants in the colonization of the province. The concept and its place in PEI’s past were related to John Locke’s labour theory of property and the idea that those who “improved” land should own it. However, when the District Director of the NFU PEI used the term to incite Islanders to action around land issues, it took on a different meaning. The new meaning suggested the fear of resident landowners losing their land: “It’s ours now, and we need to keep it that way.” The term was no longer a called for the rights of the land worker, who are now often Temporary Foreign Workers, refugees and immigrants and who supply labour to an industry dependent on them for preserving a “way of life” for the, usually, white landowner. Added to this was the contrasting language between two types of newer resident landowners—traditionalist Christian and Buddhist groups. Both communities, who seemed insular to outsiders, and with distinctive customs, arrived on the Island at roughly the same time; however, participants and local journalists characterized them in different ways. The new Mennonite and Amish groups were described in ways that suggested the vocabulary of colonization: they were “industrious pioneers.” In contrast, the Buddhist groups were depicted by research participants as “foreign” and “moneyed.” This suggested that participants were suspicious of the Buddhist groups due to what they saw as an economic advantage over the general

population of PEI. However, it may also be due to the direct words of Buddhist representatives who expressed that they thought they "could do what they want" with the land. This philosophy was contrary to the farming methods of the Amish and Mennonite groups, which are held in high regard by research participants. As a result, the Christian Traditionalist groups were looked upon favourably and evoked nostalgia from some participants, who applauded their mixed farming practices. Therefore, the concept of "absentee landlords" brought to light different characterizations of landowners and land workers and how these varied meanings become obstacles for the NFU PEI in their campaigns against land consolidation and farm loss.

"Family Farm"

The "family farm" concept depended on the relationships implied by the word "family." However, how these relationships were described or understood were not agreed upon. Even though the creation of the Lands Protection Act (LPA) had been characterized as a fight for "family farms," there was currently no mention of "family" or "farms" in the LPA. My participants would point me to the NFU definition of the "family farm," which was central to the organization. According to the NFU and the UN, family labour was an important aspect of the "family farm" concept. Some participants struggled with the definition due to their employment of paid labourers. Others wrestled with the idea of "family" due to their awareness of changing farmer demographics and their knowledge that other types of farming relationships existed, such as co-ops.

Nevertheless, participants used "family farm" as a shorthand to describe farms that benefitted rural communities through closer connections with neighbours and

ecological farming practices. The conversation often pointed to who was not a "family farm," namely the Irvings or Cavendish Farms and VANCO Farms. Interestingly, both agribusinesses used the concept of the "family farm" in their marketing to align themselves with a sort of local authenticity that the ambiguous idea of the "family farm" provided. The ambiguity of "family farm" also allowed agribusiness to camouflage their use of Temporary Foreign Workers and land holdings. The Federation of Agriculture also employed the "family farm" to promote a heteronormative "family farm" ideal, while at the same time, obscured non-family farm labour. This type of emphasis on the "family farm" had been exploited and used as propaganda, most recently in Hungary during the 2010 election, which resulted in the sale of small farms to the wealthy. In reality, the participants who would describe themselves as "family farmers" yearned for an agricultural landscape in PEI where farmers were not alienated from the land or their communities.

"Soil Health"

Examining the term "soil health," the uneven relationship between large agribusiness and contract farmers, the history of environmental issues and colonialism related to agriculture, and the role of the potato in all of these issues, were brought to light. In this chapter, I discussed Raymond Williams' definition of "organic" as it related to the NFU PEI concept of "soil health." Then, I discussed how "soil health" was rationalized by industrial agriculture in part due to the fear of worldwide famine and a push to reduce the number of farmers needed to produce food. However, this push also sought to simplify and centralize agriculture by using cheap petroleum chemicals and expensive machinery.

According to participants, this combination made agribusiness and corporate farming detrimental to "soil health," and led to loss of farmland control. The state of the "health of the soil" is a term that had also alerted the general, non-farming public to the state of the land in rural areas. In response, the Department of Agriculture launched "Soil First Farming" which, through the brand's language, reduced soil to nutrients and animals to "integrated livestock" in the pursuit of higher yields and tools to tackle the province's climate goal promises. This, coupled with contract farming, made the actual living organisms related to land— including minerals, animals, and humans— invisible. I examined the history of soil issues in the province and their connection to farm consolidation and the potato. Water issues were directly related to "soil health" and access to water for farming seemed to benefit large agribusiness disproportionally. Smaller farms that sought to take the environment and soil into consideration did so at high costs. At the same time, farming methods of the past that were discussed as a way to champion "soil health" and were described with nostalgia. However, these methods had their roots in colonialism and notions of "improvement." They left behind "imperial debris" of the displacement of the Mi'kmaq, and led to the invisibility of Temporary Foreign Workers. Nevertheless, Island farmers were currently in precarious positions due to the cost of agricultural competition. A solution proposed by many participants was the adoption of supply management, a system that could give farmers more control over their livelihood as they would only produce a fixed amount, foresee expenses and, in theory, could also plan to deal with "soil health" practices and costs. In the context of soil science, some soil biologists suggested that the definition of "soil health" should be expanded to include the "socio-ecological" function of land. This definition removed the

necessarily capitalistic notions of agriculture and commodities that "soil health" lent itself to. Added to that, the concept of "soil health" agreed upon by both participants and the Federation of Agriculture brought to light how this concept seemed to be looked at as the band-aid solution for all social and environmental issues.

In this thesis, the NFU PEI participants were, at times, outsiders who struggled against large agribusiness and, at the same time, part of a dominant culture of agriculture on PEI. Raymond Williams (1976) explained:

> No single group is 'wrong' by any linguistic criterion, though a temporarily dominant group may try to enforce its own uses as 'correct.' What is really happening through these critical encounters, which may be very conscious or may be felt only as certain strangeness and unease, is a process quite central in the development of a language when, in certain words, tones and rhythms, meanings are offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed (1976: 11).

This thesis revealed the complexity of the keywords "absentee landlords," "family farm," and "soil health," and in doing so, at times unveiled agreement, conflict, and contradiction that emerged through the use of these concepts in the NFU PEI's campaign against land consolidation and the loss of small farms.

On the afternoon of February 17th, 2024, at the land forum "The Silencing of the Land", preceding presentations about land ownership disputes and lack LPA enforcement, Kaelyn Mercer a Mi'kmaw youth from Ktaqmkuk (also known as Newfoundland), currently working for the Native Council of PEI, spoke about silences (Williams 2024: 6:16):

> I now reside here in Abegweit or "the Island cradled in the waves." Abegweit is part of Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and stolen land of the Mi'kmaq, which also

> includes Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and the Gaspé region of Quebec. The Mi'kmaq have occupied this Island for over 12,000 years, being stewards of the land, our Mother Earth.
>
> This territory is covered by Peace and Friendship Treaties which recognize Mi'kmaq rights and establish ongoing relationships between Nations, making us all Treaty People. While I acknowledge the land we are on, I must remind everyone that acknowledgment must go beyond a statement, we must transform our words into action to fight to honour the voices of Indigenous peoples everywhere and create genuine reconciliation.
>
> What is a land acknowledgment when Indigenous people's land is still not rightfully given back to us when colonial governments are continuing to exploit and extract for their own power and greed. Indigenous identity is rooted in the land. It connects our ancestors, provides us with medicine and knowledge, and sustains all Beings. Our ancestors always have a strong connection to the lands and waters with *ways of knowing* that respect and protect Mother Earth for generations to come.
>
> Indigenous ways of knowing, languages, social interactions, spirituality and worldview are based on the deep connection into the land, water and ecosystems. But through forced assimilation, including and not limited to reservations, residential schools, the Indian Act and the 60s scoop, these *ways of knowing* were ostracized for over the last 400 years. Indigenous voices and ways of life have been silenced. Silence has been forced through centuries of colonization, displacement, and oppression.
>
> The immense connection to the land that indigenous peoples had, including my peoples was seen as barbaric to the settler and they had a goal of teaching us to be civilized, to live and be like them. Land was seen as a commodity, something to be bought and sold, a resource to manipulate for human satisfaction. The *Doctrine of Discovery* initiated in the 1400s and the *Terra Nullius* concept which means "land belonging to no one" devalued Indigenous sovereignty and facilitated resource exploitation without consent. Indigenous people were forcibly displaced from their traditional lands so settlers could use the resources for power and financial gain.

The silences described by Mercer were audible that afternoon, as I sat to listen to settler stories of the buying and selling of land.

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Appendix A – Tentative Guiding Interview Questions

During the interview you may skip over any questions that you do not wish to answer.

1. Tell me about your history with the NFU PEI.
    a. How did you get involved, what roles have you played in the organization?
    b. Representative: Tell me about the road to your role as representative.
    c. Are you a farmer? (For non-farmers: What is your interest in the NFU PEI and farming issues more broadly?)
2. Member: Have you thought about taking a formal leadership role in the NFU? Tell me about that.
3. Why is it important to you to belong to the NFU?
    a. What NFU issues are most important to you?
    b. Are there issues that the organization prioritizes that are less important to you?
    c. Where would you like to see the organization going in future? Are there other issues you would like it to work on?
4. The NFU emphasizes the importance of supporting the family farm in PEI. What does that mean to you? (What makes a farm a "family farm"?)
    a. Is this a priority you share? What would be the best way to go about supporting family farms?

5. The NFU PEI has been active in land issues around corporate land ownership on PEI for decades. In your opinion, what are the most pressing issues concerning land on PEI? Is the PEI Lands Protection Act the best way to pursue these?
    a. What would you change in the LPA if you could? What should stay as is?
    b. What do you think about the land ownership limits for corporations?
6. There has been a lot of media attention around corporations, loopholes and the Lands Protection Act. What do you think about the media coverage?
    a. Do you think it is a good representation of the important issues and what is really going on in the debates around land ownership?
7. Tell me about your work (if a farmer: farm type of farm, type of ownership, type of customer)
    a. What has changed in the way farming is done in PEI over the years?
    b. What do you think about these changes?
8. Are you active in any other organizations or government committees? If so, tell me about them. Do you see them as connected to your involvement in NFU PEI?
9. Are there other local or provincial issues that are important to you?
10. What do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities for farming on PEI now?
11. How do you imagine the future agriculture in PEI, where do you hope to see it going?
    a. What do you think is needed to get there?
    b. How do you see the NFU playing a role in this future?
12. Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix B – Farm Visit Checklist

During the farm visit you may skip over any questions that you do not wish to answer.

1. Could you show me around your farm and tell me about the activities you carry out here?
2. What is the history of the farm? How did you come to farm here? How has the operation changed over time?
3. How large is your farm? What do you raise or grow?
4. What does a typical year look like on your farm?
5. What kind of activities go on here? Could you show me some of these activities?
6. Show me what you think are some things that makes your farm different from other farms around here?
7. Are you considering new activities or other changes to your farm in the next few years?
8. Anything else you think it's important for me to know about your farm or the experience of farming here more generally?