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ABSTRACT

Low-wage migrant workers in wealthy nations occupy an ambiguous social and legal status that is inseparable from global economics and politics. This article adds to the growing and diverse literature on temporariness in labour and citizenship by reviewing Canada’s internationally recognised ‘model’ programme, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). Specifically, we present research on a small but rapidly growing peripheral pocket of workers in Nova Scotia, a less populated and more economically depressed province. Interview with former SAWP participants demonstrate how the uncertainty characterising the legal, immigration, and employment status of seasonal agricultural workers is socially practised and individually experienced. In particular, we show how specific elements of current migrant labour regulation have everyday effects in organising and delimiting non-work dimensions of migrant workers’ lives. In attending to the spatio-temporal dimensions of migrant workers’ lives we develop the concept social quarantining as a characteristic feature of former workers’ experiences ‘on the contract’.

As wealthy nations become increasingly reliant on migrant labour, temporary foreign work as a category of both labour and migration has become subject to intense public and policy debate. For example, Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) has come under increased public scrutiny. This attention has circled around major media stories: a dreadful early morning crash that killed 10 migrant agricultural workers in Ontario; franchise locations of a global fast food chain allegedly abusing the programme; reports that a major bank has soon-to-be redundant Canadian workers training their lower-wage temporary foreign replacements. These, and other less exceptional media reports, led to widely publicised promises by the federal government to review and reform the TFWP. This culminated in April 2014 with a rebranding of the TFWP, where the federal government asserted that for all future jobs they would be ‘Putting Canadians First’ (ESDC 2014). Curiously, these changes left the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) largely untouched; as a central low-wage category of temporary foreign work in Canada with limited pathways to residency, this programme is often celebrated as...
a best practice model worldwide. These policy changes initiated by a conservative government maintained the status quo for seasonal agricultural workers, one of Canada’s most insecure and racialised categories of temporary foreign workers. While this study examines one specific Canadian programme, we argue for the relevance of this case beyond its particular context. We build on research on migrant workers on the periphery (Stenning and Dawley 2009) by attending to particularities of a regional context where there is little recent history of immigration and a relatively weak labour market. We nuance analyses of the increased folding together of precarious citizenship status (Goldring and Landolt 2011) with labour market insecurity and precarious employment (Vosko 2006), by offering sensitising concepts for understanding everyday effects of migrant worker regulation. Our study examines how contemporary conditions and practices of ‘labour citizenship’ (Dauvergne and Marsden 2014, 239) within the global labour–migration nexus play out in one semi-peripheral region of Canada.

Literature on low-wage temporary foreign work in Canada and elsewhere identifies many on-going concerns: labour exploitation and working conditions; ambiguous legal status; access to support networks and services; racism, prejudice, and practices of inclusion/exclusion. Scholarship that critically scrutinises the growth of temporary migrant labour continues to demonstrate the need to research and theorise a diversity of examples. The key contributions of this paper are twofold. First, there is no published research specific to seasonal agricultural workers in Atlantic Canada, with most research in Canada focused on larger migrant worker populations in Ontario and British Columbia. This small but rapidly growing peripheral pocket of workers in a less populated and more economically depressed region has thus far been overlooked, and studying their experiences provides for intra-national comparative work. Second, and of wider relevance, this article investigates through this specific case study, how the uncertainty characterising the legal, immigration, and employment status of seasonal agricultural workers is socially practised and individually experienced; to this end, our research develops sensitising concepts for thinking through the imbrication of precarity in both legal and employment status that characterises SAWP regulation. We identify social quarantining as an everyday effect of SAWP regulation, and we show how specific elements of SAWP fold together labour market shortages, limited legal rights and limited residency rights, to produce social quarantining. We define social quarantining as the spatial and temporal isolation of workers from the rhythms of everyday social life in the broader communities where their housing and workplaces are located. While this concept may have resonance beyond the specificity of our case, we show how social quarantining is an everyday effect of the specific restrictions placed on SAWP participants. Below, we discuss how social quarantining is constituted through the spatio-temporal patterning of workers’ everyday lives, and consolidated through restricted leisure and mobility. We demonstrate how these restrictions make it extremely difficult to engage in the kinds of social activities that might overcome – or at least blunt – social quarantining.

We develop this argument through the following. First, we provide a summary of recent transitions in Canada’s immigration profile, and review the strengths of the existing research. Second, we provide regional context for understanding how our Nova Scotia study augments recent research on the social dimensions of seasonal migrant labour. Third, we explain our method for gathering in-depth interviews with former workers
who have transitioned to permanent residency or citizenship through spousal sponsorship, an especially notable group given the extremely limited pathways to citizenship for SAWP participants. These former workers have security of immigration status and so occupy a qualitatively different relationship to their experiences as foreign workers than current workers. Finally, we describe the experiences of these former participants, with a focus on how the programme structure and the nature of their work and housing mitigates against the development of informal social ties to local communities that cultivate opportunities for cross-cultural solidarity and community-building. We use the interview data to extend our understanding of the spatio-temporal contours of migrant worker insecurity and to illustrate how social quarantining operates at the nexus of temporary labour and migration practices.

Recent transformations in Canada’s immigration profile

There has been a traceable ‘resurrection’ (Castles 2006) of temporary worker programmes in wealthy nations; ‘guest worker programs that admit migrant workers on a temporary basis to fill jobs in high-income countries are once again in vogue’ (Ruhs and Martin 2008, 244). While Canada’s migrant labour regulations may, at first glance, seem relatively benign, it is timely to review Canada’s internationally recognised ‘model’ programme, the SAWP, especially within the context of Canada’s burgeoning numbers of temporary foreign workers (ESDC 2015). Canada is an interesting case because of its relatively progressive labour policies and its relatively conservative immigration policies. Accordingly, there is a strong tradition of academic critique of immigration and labour policy and practices from a range of disciplines (Goldring and Landolt 2011; Lenard and Straehle 2012; Satzewich 1991; Sharma 2006; Vosko 2006, 2010; Vosko, Preston, and Latham 2014). As Dauvergne and Marsden note, compared to Australia, the U.K. and U.S.A., Canada’s ‘relative transparency about rights restrictions based on skill level has attracted the most intense scholarly critique’ (2014, 232). The SAWP, in particular, has been a target of rigorous examination; as Hennebry and Preibisch (2010) have demonstrated, its status as a best practice exemplar is more myth than reality. This section provides a brief overview of research on SAWP and summarises the strengths and contributions of the existing literature. Further, this section highlights a need for more research on: (1) seasonal agricultural workers in specific communities outside of major agricultural centres and (2) seasonal agricultural workers’ social experiences and networks.

Established in 1966, the history of Canada’s SAWP is now well documented (Basok 2002; Satzewich 1991). From its inception to the early 2000s, the programme grew steadily, but over the last decade, SAWP has dramatically expanded, from 11,825 participants in 2005, to 34,045 in 2013 (ESDC 2015). Today, it admits temporary workers from Mexico and select Caribbean nations. The growth of the programme indicates Canada’s move ‘away from a policy of permanent immigrant settlement towards an increasing reliance on temporary migrant workers’ (Sharma 2006, 20), especially in lower-wage/skill categories. Research in this area is now increasingly critical, highlighting in particular how the constriction of rights becomes embedded within the conditional labour contract. While SAWP’s boosters claim that it is the ‘world’s most successful program’ (FARMS 2014), the programme is emblematic of concerns around migrant labour in high-income nations.
Certainly, there are a number of long identified concerns with SAWP. First, the ‘tied’ nature of the work, where work permits and workers’ residences – not to mention the possibility of re-entry in subsequent years – are legally tethered to one specific employer. Thus, a peculiar kind of patron–client bond muddies the employer–employee relationship and augments migrant worker uncertainty and insecurity. For instance, complaints about overwork or inadequate housing risk jeopardising current and future work. Further erosion of workers’ autonomy includes, for example, a compulsory 16% deduction from Jamaican workers’ wages for a remittance/saving scheme apart from standard Canadian tax deductions (Wells et al. 2014). Another unique feature compared to other temporary foreign workers in Canada is the requirement that workers return to their country of origin after every season. Employers must offer a minimum of 240 hours of work within a period of six weeks or less, to a maximum duration of eight months’ work between 1 January and 15 December. These cut-off dates, combined with the limitation on duration, make it near impossible to achieve the security of permanent residency which, among other things, requires evidence of continuity of residence in Canada. The cumulative effect is that SAWP workers have no pathway, if desired, to permanent residency except family sponsorship, that is, by marrying a Canadian citizen. In contrast, similar programmes like the Live-in Caregiver Program carry many restrictions but also provide some pathways to residency. As Hennebry (2012) notes in her survey of nearly 600 migrant farm workers in Ontario, the average length of participation in the SAWP was 7–9 years (13); with workers in a state of ‘permanent temporariness’ (12). In this sense, SAWP is best characterised as a ‘circular migration system’ (13).

Existing scholarship stresses the structural organisation of vulnerability in terms of both employment and immigration status, showing how impacts for workers range from day-to-day marginalisation to labour exploitation to physical and emotional ill-health (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997; Basok 2002; Goldring, Berinstein, and Bernhard 2009; Goldring and Landolt 2011; Hennebry and McLaughlin 2012; Nakache and Kinoshita 2010; Preibisch and Hennebry 2011; Reed 2008). Furthermore, each worker’s continued presence in Canada is almost completely contingent on maintaining good relations with one employer. As Satzewich (2008, 261) notes, ‘these workers face extra-economic coercion to remain in the jobs for which they were originally recruited’ (see also Vosko 2016). Added to the looming threat of deportation, SAWP participants are faced with a number of potential challenges: family separation; geographical isolation; poor or unsafe transportation; social exclusion, discrimination, and racism; language and literacy barriers; poorly monitored and enforced safety and labour codes, and, disparities in terms of access to health care services and eligibility for benefits. Thus, the programme generates vulnerability in complex ways. For example, as Basok, Bélanger, and Rivas (2014) illustrate, workers themselves reproduce, as an employment security strategy, the regimes of discipline unleashed by the threat of deportation. Further, other research emphasises orders of racialisation of migrant labour and interrogates animating assumptions around workers’ gender and sexuality (Huesca 2015; Preibisch 2003, 2004; Preibisch and Encalada Grez 2010; Preibisch and Hennebry 2011; Satzewich 1991).

In addition to analyses of the legal regulation of migrant labour and the structural organisation of vulnerability, earlier research on the SAWP highlights its social dimensions, including a general indifference of local communities to migrant workers that, at
times, transforms into pointed hostility (Cecil and Ebanks 1991). Others have shown how workers’ symbolic invisibility within the larger community combines with long hours and language barriers to inhibit inclusion (Smart 1998) in the local community’s ‘social world’ (Basok 2002, 125). Similarly, Colby (1997) cites racism and a low Hispanic population in Canada as barriers to developing stronger social ties for Mexican workers. Preibisch (2003, 2004) focuses on social inclusion and exclusion in her work on the growing networks of relationships that have emerged with the steady presence of workers in specific communities. Preibisch’s research supports this social exclusion thesis, noting factors such as spatial segregation, long work hours, employer disposition, community avoidance and racism as recurring issues, but also demonstrates how processes of social inclusion emerge where churches, social justice organisations and personal connections provide growing networks of relations between local communities and migrant workers. Further, Preibisch specifically notes the difficult social status of migrant and resident romantic relationships. Similarly, Binford’s (2013) recent book shows some evidence of progressively stronger versions of social inclusion at work, but warns against overstating this progress.

For both critical labour and citizenship studies, what makes temporary foreign work so distinct is that it binds insecure labour with insecure citizenship. Importantly, temporary status is not in and of itself the problem (Vosko, Preston, and Latham 2014), but, as Rajkumar et al. (2012) argue, we must scrutinise the divide between permanent and temporary. For example, taken together, the intersecting axes of work, security and settlement policies formally institutionalise and bind temporariness and instability for some more than others. To this end, Goldring, Berinstein, and Bernhard (2009) show how temporary foreign workers in Canada are part of a growing category based on precarious legal status, one that highlights the ambiguous divide between legal and illegal residence; instead, we have, ‘the systemic, legal and normalized production of a range of precarious, or less than full, im/migration statuses’ (243). Dauvergne and Marsden (2014, 239) identify ‘labour citizenship’ as a way of framing how differential rights and entitlements are increasingly relevant to contemporary circuits and ideologies of labour migration that validate ‘temporary’ as value-neutral. Echoing the call of most critical scholars, they argue for the creation of more pathways to permanence for migrant workers (240). Other recommendations hinge on bridging the distance between theoretical rights and protections afforded to migrant workers, and the persistent barriers and limitations that confront them, from stronger intergovernmental communication and coordination (Nakache and Kinoshita 2010) to more support for migrant integration and autonomy (Hennebry 2012).

That various features of the SAWP raise serious social, political, and policy questions is now beyond dispute. This article enhances our understanding of how the interplay of labour and immigration regulation spills over to impact the social landscapes of workers’ everyday lives – an increasingly important theme in the existing literature (Binford 2013; Hennebry 2012; Preibisch 2003, 2004). We advance an everyday effects approach, examining how federal-level migrant labour legislation plays out in the quotidian experiences of those subject to SAWP regulations. Through a focus on lived experience, an everyday effects approach explicitly connects workers’ everyday lives to the regulatory frameworks that shape, mould, restrict, and produce particular kinds of experiences. The task of this approach is to demonstrate how specific policies and restrictions impact workers’ everyday lives. We pursue this emphasis through an under-researched
example in Atlantic Canada. As evidenced by the data reported below, issues identified in the literature above, particularly around housing and isolation, are both intensified and augmented in our case, due, in part, to Nova Scotia’s geographic isolation, the limited presence of temporary foreign workers, and the relative absence of formal supports for migrant workers in this part of Canada.

**Contexts and communities: SAWP in Nova Scotia**

Nova Scotia follows the national trend of marked growth in temporary foreign worker programmes. In the past decade, more people have entered the province as temporary workers than as permanent residents (CIC 2015). The actual number of SAWP participants in Nova Scotia remains relatively modest compared to other provinces: British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec together accounted for over 90% of all participants in 2013. That said, the rate of growth of the SAWP in Nova Scotia has outstripped the national rate and the rate of all other provinces (ESDC 2015; HRSDC 2010, 2011) for most years of the last decade. The number of SAWP participants entering Nova Scotia more than quadrupled between 2006 and 2013, from 310 to 1310. Over the same period the total number of SAWP participants entering Canada grew by less than a third (26,610 in 2006 to 34,045 in 2013). What makes the program’s relatively rapid expansion in Nova Scotia especially noteworthy is that it occurs in the absence of provincial population growth, continuing rural depopulation, low immigration, and relatively poor immigrant retention.

There are some distinct provincial features to consider. First, traditionally dependent on declining primary industries (fisheries, mining, and forestry), Nova Scotia is labelled a ‘have not’ province with unemployment rates consistently above national averages. With a relatively small population (921,727 in 2011) and population growth below 1% between 2006 and 2011, employment and immigrant retention are persistent issues. Ontario, on the other hand, has a much larger population (12,851,821 in 2011) and more robust population growth (5.7%), where rural areas and small towns (such as Bradford, Leamington, Simcoe, Chatham, Niagara-on-the-Lake) receive in the region of 20,000 SAWP workers every year (ESDC 2015). Secondly, besides a small but well-established African-Nova Scotian population and some racialised immigrants mostly concentrated in cities and towns, the province is less racially and ethnically diverse than Ontario and British Columbia. Thus, in the context of relative homogeneity, workers are more visibly ‘marked’ as different in the rural communities in which they arrive (Brekhus 1998). Third, the goods and services that have emerged elsewhere once migrant worker populations become well established by a seasonal presence year over year are largely absent in Nova Scotia. For example, in Ontario communities with a consistent presence of seasonal workers, Catholic services in Spanish are offered and local supermarkets stock Mexican and Caribbean groceries (Preibisch 2003). In the summer of 2011 we observed one local supermarket stocking small amounts of such items, all of which were quickly bought up by migrant workers and, thereafter, restocked irregularly. A local Catholic Church also began offering services in Spanish in 2010. These are small and scattered offerings to workers, and the faith-based, social justice and community health organisations that are well established elsewhere in Canada to support and advocate for migrant workers have not yet been institutionalised.
In what follows we consider the experiences of former seasonal agricultural workers who lived and worked in the Annapolis Valley – a stretch of fertile agricultural land in western Nova Scotia – and who have since made the transition to permanent residency. We highlight the experiences of these men as migrant workers, focusing especially on their social landscapes and the informal ties that they developed during their time ‘on the contract’. In examining these experiences, we find that the legal regulation of workers’ housing and employment produces forms of social and spatial isolation that we call social quarantining. Simultaneously, these regulations pose consistent barriers for the kinds of sociability that might allow workers to overcome social quarantining.

Method

Our analysis is based on data obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews with former SAWP participants from the Caribbean who have acquired permanent residency through their Canadian spouses, and who have settled in or near the rural Nova Scotian communities where they once participated in the SAWP. Given the absence of formal organisations, we initially recruited interviewees through informal ties that we developed with current and former SAWP participants, and subsequently through snowball sampling. Therefore our findings are not generalisable, but given the dearth of research on this topic our study is a first step in developing a more comprehensive picture of the social lives of SAWP participants on the Canadian semi-periphery.

We conducted a total of six in-depth interviews in English, each lasting between one and two hours. Our participants were Caribbean men of African descent who had spent from three to eight years as seasonal agricultural workers between the early 1990s and 2010. Two had also worked in Ontario before working in Nova Scotia. All participants gained permanent residency and settled in Nova Scotia after marrying Canadian citizens. Beyond basic factual information, interview questions were open-ended and we solicited stories and accounts of particular experiences, probing with further questions when participants’ accounts required elaboration or clarification. Coding of interview transcripts generated 18 themes, which were then grouped together under three broader themes: work, housing, and social life.

While neither our sampling strategy nor size permit generalisable inferences, we are confident that issues raised and similarities across the experiences of our participants point to consistencies relevant to current workers in Nova Scotia, and perhaps beyond. While our sample is small, our interviews provide insight into how individuals understand their own experiences; our approach stresses the value of workers’ own accounts of their everyday lives, something that is especially important when faced with policies that demonstrate general disregard for workers’ experiences. Significantly, we identify a number of major impediments to the development of links to local communities, specifically, factors connected to work, housing location and transportation that impact participants’ capacity to informally socialise with local communities. In foregrounding salient elements of workers’ experience during their non-working time, we develop the concept of ‘social quarantining’ as a feature of the SAWP experience in Nova Scotia, and show how social quarantining is a direct effect of the weaving together of these various impediments.
Given the features of a system that institutionalises worker vulnerability, former workers whose immigration status is now more secure are able to speak more openly with less fear of repercussions; this is especially significant in more isolated areas with few formal supports for migrant workers. Further, they bring with them a reflexive distance as well as unique point of temporary-versus-permanent comparison unavailable to current SAWP participants. Hence, those we interviewed are part of a small but important category in this semi-peripheral and under-researched region.

In the next section, we report on our interview data, beginning with the basic elements of the organisation of workers’ time and housing conditions. We show how these elements constitute social quarantining. Then we turn to the range of restrictions on workers’ leisure time that both consolidate social quarantining and demand extra social labour.

Constituting social quarantining: the spatio-temporal patterning of workers’ everyday lives in Nova Scotia

All participants arrived in Nova Scotia on flights from the Caribbean with between 6 and 15 other agricultural workers, but none knew any of the workers that they travelled with in advance of their first contract.5

When I came I didn’t know no one… there was fourteen of us [on the flight], not one. (Michael)
Nobody. I meet guys after I come out here, from back home who was down here. But at start I didn’t know nobody. (Peter)
No, they was from a different district than me. (Joe)
No, I didn’t know nobody. (Chris)

Upon arrival, farmers had arranged to pick the workers up from the airport to bring them right to the farms where they would spend the bulk of their time in Canada. Having dropped their belongings at the on-farm ‘bunkhouse’, they were brought to the nearest bank to organise their accounts, before returning to the farm to get to work. All participants expressed surprise at the fact that they were expected to work within hours of their arrival:

We got here in the morning, I can’t remember what time now … he sent us off to the bank to get our banking done. And came back to the farm, we thought, we flew from [the Caribbean] … you’re jet lagged … oh no … Get out there and go weeding! [laughs] (Joe)

This signalled a taste of what their time working ‘on the contract’ would be like: long hours and farmer expectations of a consistently fast work rate. Furthermore, all participants spoke about the heavy workload and their initial difficulties in coming to terms with the fact that they were expected to work outdoors in all weather.

Workin’ here is different to home … if it is raining you still got to work. We wasn’t accustomed to that. (Michael)
Workin’ seven days, rainfall, sunshine … still gotta be out there. (Lee)
We get up at 6 o’clock, out the door at 6:30, in the ground for 7 o’clock. Sometimes we don’t leave the ground ‘til the sun fall. Long hours. And that’s just for planting … in the harvest season, when cuttin’ the vegetables, longer hours … all day going into the night and then instead of going in and going home you go in the barn and packin’ all that up in boxes. (Bob)
you work till about 8.30, 9 then you got to come home and get something to eat, get a bath then off to bed. (Joe)

Some participants felt that the farmers generally expected too much from workers:

Basically the farmer program is good ... but the farmers ... work them to the bone. I don’t think farmers set out to be bad, but it’s their welfare, their living. (Michael)

Sometimes him don’t want to say you can take five now … you can’t take five, can’t take it. (Chris)

That said, it is important not to overstate the extent to which participants spoke negatively about their employers. While all participants emphasised the heavy workload, participants were loath to speak ill of the farmers for whom they had once worked. Simple acts of kindness on the part of farmers were generally interpreted in very positive ways, especially on days where workers were permitted to finish early (wages are hourly), or where the employer gave some small token of appreciation:

Sometime [the boss] will come here and say ‘guys, today we really don’t have to push it that much ... work ’til 1 or ’til 3’. That was nice. (Michael)

One time him gave me a case of beer … for working good … when the sun was hot … that was a nice drink for the guys [laughs] … nice when they do something like that, take the stress off. (Chris)

While explicit statements about relationships with employers were positive, further probing revealed some deeper on-farm problems with knock-on effects for all elements of workers’ lives in Canada. For example, some farmers instituted curfews, thus placing further constraints on workers’ ‘free’ time:

There are rules that you’re not supposed to stay out. There’s curfew after certain times at night, not supposed to be off the farm after … can’t remember if it’s 10, between 9 and 10 … must be on the farm. No visitors. (Joe)

They’re very strict. The farmers really want you to do your work … once you do your work, he would tell me, we work good during the week, on a Saturday … he say go out, but not too long. Can have friend come around … but long as don’t sleep here it’s fine. (Michael)

By 12 o’clock he wants everyone in … go out meet friends, feel good, but be back. (Bob)

The possibility of being sent home for raising the employer’s ire clearly kept workers in check: ‘if you do something wrong and the boss doesn’t like it then he … send him home, replace him with someone else’ (Chris). No participant reported testing the consequences of breaking curfews: whether or not a formal curfew was in place, participants noted that the majority of their fellow workers rarely stayed out past 11 pm and never stayed out past midnight. In discussing Mexican migrant workers in Canada, Binford (2009) notes that this sort of ‘interior conditioning’ arises in part because the programme is structured in a way that farmers can request specific workers again in the future. This means that, in general, workers do not wish to stand out to their boss for anything but hard work and subservience (Huesca 2015). More broadly, the concerns about workers abandoning their jobs and immigrating illegally that animate much public discourse around migrant labour in the U.S.A. is largely absent in Canada. Basok (2000) argues that the paternalistic nature of relations between farmers and workers in Canada mitigates against failure to return to host countries. Indeed, the extent of farmer control over worker leisure time has long been noted by critical work on the SAWP (Andre 1990,
Non-work rules imposed by employers, then, have the consequence of delimiting workers’ social lives. Clearly, multiple factors constitute social quarantining. The temporal constraints placed on workers by virtue of long working hours and curfews are matched by spatial constraints connected to their housing. As a condition of their work permits, all of the former workers interviewed on this project had lived in employer-provided housing of varying quality, from older farmhouses to trailers and outbuildings. Just as restrictive as curfews – whether implied or explicit – were the impediments living conditions placed on workers’ capacity to use their free time as they wished. There are two dimensions of note: the interior space of the bunkhouses and their physical location.

Conditions in bunkhouses were generally poor and often overcrowded. Joe pointed out that the bunkhouse he shared with several others was ‘disgusting … musty smelling, like dogs, smells awful’. Peter spoke of ‘two or three guys in a little room, single beds’ and Chris noted that ‘there were at least six or eight men in the bunkhouse’. Overcrowding is easy to name, but closer scrutiny yields fuller understanding of its consequences for the development of workers’ off-farm lives. In particular, the number of people sharing washroom and kitchen facilities meant sacrificing sleep in order to use the kitchen, or spending free time at the end of the day and on weekends waiting:

You got to get up 5.30 in the mornin’, six or seven guys in one trailer, so everybody can’t get up at the same time. (Bob)
Get up 5.30, two guys come out to use the stove, and use the washroom. Then two more guys start gettin’ their lunch together. (Michael)
Rush rush rush … when I cook my food I cook food for two days … more easy for me to cook food for two days than cookin’ every day. Otherwise you waitin’, waitin’ every day. (Peter)
What time we have is on Sundays … if we get it … but on Sunday you’ve got to wash your clothes, cook your food … get a two or three hours sleep. By the time you do that it’s time for work again ’cause you got at least six or eight men in the bunkhouse, got one stove … everybody can’t use the stove at once, so just waitin’. (Chris)

Thus, any leisure time that workers had was almost entirely organised by the intertwining of work and living conditions in the bunkhouse.

Another constitutive element of social quarantining is the physical location of employer-provided worker housing. Layered on top of issues with housing quality, because the bunkhouses were located on the farms where the participants worked and were relatively far away from local towns and villages, workers were dependent either on their employers or on the (usually one) farmer-designated driver from amongst their co-workers for transportation to do basic provisioning. All participants emphasised these constraints, noting especially problems with weekly trips to cash cheques, send money to family back home, and shopping.

Here, again, free time involves either waiting or rushing:

The thing about shopping … the farmer will give us only sometimes an hour, two hours on a Friday … We’ll be scrambling to get what we got to get. In that time, if you want to go and buy groceries … by the time you get in the bank, sometimes half an hour, 45 minutes before you get to a teller … so many guys, so then when you get to town you only got an hour to shop. Not enough time. (Bob)
We never really used to get a good time to do shopping. It’s rushed, fast-paced, fast fast. We go to the bank, and stand in line. We used just to go to TD [bank], and there used to be a whole long line. (Joe)
In fact, banking posed a particular problem. When Chris first came, workers requested employer permission to leave early on Fridays; they needed to cash their cheques and make remittances to their families back home before the bank closed:

but that wasn’t good enough for the boss ‘cause he wanted us to work ‘til 5. He introduced us to Royal Bank, where you get the debit card … So he can haul you ass there ‘til 6 o’clock if he want. You don’t have to get in the line. You just get the debit machine. (Chris)

The absence of shops within walking or biking distance, or of public transit or other transportation options to the nearest town, meant incurring unexpected costs to meet basic needs. Because of time constraints one participant talked about how he resorted to using a taxi which would cost up to $25 each way.

Sometimes I’ve got to go to town on a Friday, cash my cheque, then Saturday, leave an hour early, I get a cab and go into town to get my groceries. (Bob)

Thus, while the long hours and heavy workload certainly impacted participants’ capacity to develop informal social ties with Canadians, their overcrowded housing conditions also caused them to lose valuable free time, as did the isolated location of their housing and restricted access to transportation. The living conditions in employer-provided bunkhouses created a serious barrier to workers’ enjoyment of their minimal free time. More precisely, participants’ non-work time, mobility, and interactions were governed, more or less in their entirety, by the heavily restricted nature of their conditions of employment and relationship with their employer. Consequently, whether they intended to or not, farmers exerted almost as much control over workers’ free time as they did over their work time.

Consolidating social quarantining: downtime and restricted leisure, or, ‘we was in the bunkhouse a lot’

For those we interviewed, the development of informal social ties had characteristics specific to the contexts of their working lives and housing conditions. When asked about opportunities for socialising outside of work hours, all participants were quick to point out that, given the exhausting nature of their work, the vast majority of their free time (beyond basic provisioning) was spent in or around the bunkhouse:

We’re tired when we’re working. When work is done … we stay home, get some rest. (Peter)
You’re tired, need to get some rest. If we’re not working today, we stay at home, play domino, cook, we eat and get some rest because tomorrow is another workday. (Michael)

As discussed earlier, conditions in the bunkhouse were generally poor. Nonetheless, the bunkhouse was the primary physical setting for workers’ limited leisure time. On occasion, participants did go off-farm, not only to shop, but also to socialise:

We go to the bar, a couple guys and we go down for a beer, one beer, sometime two [laughs] and just get a cab back home … always gotta work the next day. (Joe)
You workin’ so much, so it’s kind of hard to go out, to go people’s houses, to really sit down and have a good time. (Lee)

Restricted access to transportation, and relative physical and social isolation, meant that the minimal off-farm leisure time that participants had was spent for the most part with fellow migrant workers:
When you went out to socialise would you meet other people, people who you didn’t work with? (interviewer)
No, not people I didn’t work with … mostly with the same people [from the bunkhouse] all the time we go out. (Michael)

Further probing on opportunities for off-farm leisure revealed that participants were sometimes invited to parties elsewhere, but these were the exception rather than the rule:

Every once and a while someone would say come over. Not too much, cause it’s all about work … Sometimes you get one day off and you can’t just go hang out somewhere, you need to rest. (Chris)
We get invited sometimes, but we never really go cause the times that people would invite us out is times where we have to work cause we have a schedule … If you go you can’t stay too long. You just go for an hour or two, cause next day you gotta get back up. 5.30, 6 the next morning there’s 6–7 guys in one trailer looking to use the stove, the washroom, getting lunch together, so is hard to go to people’s houses. (Joe)

Instead, participants sometimes partied at the bunkhouse:

I used to throw my own parties at the farm [laughs] I would talk to the guys, I would tell the boss, if we gonna have Saturday or Sunday off, he’d say ok, we going to have a little party. Invite some people … invite Canadians that we meet … we’d buy some liquor, and get some food. (Joe)

Beyond these occasional parties, the vast majority of leisure time was spent at the bunkhouse:

Stay in bunkhouse, listen to music, cook food. If outside nice, sit down on the lawn, drink a couple beers. (Lee)

Even in the context of the erosion of the standard employment contract (Vosko 2006), those afforded the full legal rights that come with broader access to the labour market may separate their working and home lives. Thus, the informal ties that workers with broader rights can develop may be said to be largely unregulated and diffuse. SAWP participants are denied opportunities to develop such ties. Relationships in both their work and home environments are heavily circumscribed: they have no control over who they interact with in work situations or with whom they live in the close quarters of the bunkhouse, nor do they have control over transit between job sites or from a job site to accommodations, or from the bunkhouse to local shops and services. This means that SAWP participants have very little opportunity for the development of the kinds of spontaneous or voluntary social relations that others might take for granted. Furthermore, absent the opportunities to develop the informal and ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973) that sociologists have long known to facilitate access to labour market opportunities, half of the former SAWP workers we interviewed continue to have difficulty finding secure employment.

While there is clearly a relationship between workers’ spatial and social isolation, it would be an oversimplification to reduce workers’ social isolation to the physical location of their work sites and homes. Having very little opportunity for voluntary movement, even when participants ventured from the socially insulated environment of the bunkhouse to local towns, they remained in many ways separate from the broader community. Thus, off-farm interactions available to migrant agricultural workers became concentrated
in a narrow range of times and places: Friday evenings at the bank and in a local supermarket, and at one of a handful of local bars on an occasional Saturday night. More or less all other interactions are intra-group with fellow farm workers or with their employer, and the majority of these, too, are on the work site.

**Limits to sociability**

Given the general absence of diverse contexts where migrant workers might spontaneously develop informal ties with rural Nova Scotians, how and with whom do such informal ties develop? All participants agreed that the single most important contacts that they made in their time as migrant workers (besides their employers and their future Canadian spouses) were former migrant workers who had settled in the area. Whether or not they were fellow countrymen, former workers who had settled in Nova Scotia gave current workers some small sense of community in Canada. For example, former workers visited farms early each season to say hello, and to see if there were any people they recognised from their countries of origin. Occasionally they picked up shopping and supplies on weekdays when work hours were longest.

And the guys that live here, used to come and visit ... They would come and visit you and they'd see that you were out of bread, pop, whatever. They run into the store. (Peter)

The continuity offered by former workers who had settled became increasingly important from year to year as some migrant workers returned and others did not, so that returning participants often worked with entirely different crews each season. In addition to providing a modicum of stability from season to season, former workers who had settled in the area also provided informal support and acted as intermediaries in developing friendships with other community members:

So I make some other friends, and I meet [a former worker who settled]. [He] been here long time and knows lots of people, so through [him] I know some more guys ... who livin' here now. So that's how I make friends. (Michael)

My friend who I worked with, he got married a year before me ... that way I start to meet Canadians. Like if we get a little break on weekends, we will go to the bar, meet people and have a little bit of a good time. (Joe)

That these former workers gained permanent residency through family sponsorship by Canadian citizens demonstrates that social contacts do occur, and occasionally they develop into intimate relationships. Several of our interview participants were introduced to their present day Canadian spouses through the spouses of former workers. So, while our interviews make it clear that workers’ social contacts in the wider Nova Scotian community were quite restricted, in four cases it was former workers or their spouses that provided the initial mediating contacts through which other workers came to settle in rural Nova Scotia by marrying Canadian citizens. While it may be tempting to style these former workers as 'migrant pioneers' (Somerville 2015), given the small number who gain permanent residency, these cases, while instructive, are somewhat exceptional.

Thus, for the former workers who we interviewed, opportunities for wider social participation came about through fellow workers marrying Canadians. Chris said, '[t]he only other thing is weddings, we have a good party after that, we meet lots of people then'.
Significantly, it is through workers’ Canadian spouses that informal ties and bonds of friendship between former migrant workers and rural Nova Scotians tended to happen; that is, those informal bonds develop once they are no longer ‘on the contract’. Michael said, ‘I don’t make friends until I meet my wife, then we get married, and through her … I meet people’, while for Joe ‘I meet a lot of people, when I get married. People that I didn’t know, a lot of people.’ Wider participation in the community only began in earnest once participants were on the path to permanent residency through marriage. While this is clearly positive for those who develop intimate relations with Canadians, it also demonstrates the relative underdevelopment of the ordinary informal social ties key to community belonging. We should also note that social quarantining in this example has a gendered dimension. The gender blind nature of much work on seasonal agriculture workers been duly noted and partially corrected (Preibisch 2003; Preibisch and Encalada Grez 2010). In our case, social quarantining segregates an all-male workforce in ways that may bolster hetero-normative models of masculinity through homosociality, while simultaneously these conditions temporarily re-frame the gender divide of day-to-day domestic labour (e.g. cooking, cleaning).

Conclusion

Our interviews reinforce key points within the existing literature on the social experiences of seasonal agricultural workers elsewhere in Canada, while stressing how Nova Scotia’s relative homogeneity and sparse rural population heightens workers’ social isolation. Our research demonstrates the weight of social labour that accompanies the paid labour contract. We have shown how this extra social labour derives primarily from the social quarantining of workers. Social quarantining is, foremost, a socio-legal product, created through the combination of legal restriction, temporal constraint and spatial isolation; it is an everyday effect of seasonal agricultural worker regulation. Social labour, then, is the ‘work’ involved in developing social ties independently of work sites, and our data suggest that workers’ primary social engagements are largely restricted to former workers from their home countries. Our interviews capture the negotiations and transactions that establish daily routines, experiences, possibilities, and prohibitions. Thus, the deeper consequences of the multiplying vulnerabilities in both work and immigration status become tangible in our research through identifiable impediments to the development of social ties and participation in the wider community: employment demands (work hours, housing); location (geographical separation from community, services); and, transportation (inaccessibility of community, separation).

Though our focus is on one specific Canadian programme, this case holds wider relevance to our understanding of how regional diversity shapes migrant workers’ experiences in peripheral locations. Furthermore, as a sensitising concept ‘social quarantining’ focuses attention on how the tying together of temporary immigration status and labour market insecurity produces everyday effects not immediately apparent in research emphasising working conditions alone. In highlighting workers’ spatial and temporal isolation from the rhythms of everyday social life in the broader communities where their housing and workplaces are located, social quarantining deepens and extends our understanding of the everyday effects of temporary foreign worker regulation.
While it is clear that migrant workers occupy an ambiguous status in terms of rights of citizenship inseparable from national and global economic and political contexts, this ought to be understood as part of a wider and growing validation of precarity within the labour market, the immigration system and the economy more broadly. Vosko (2010) has noted that several factors shape precarious employment: employment status; form of employment; labour market insecurity; social context and social location. By dint of the strict limitations it places on labour mobility and housing restrictions, and the intertwining of legal and employment status, SAWP regulation augments and extends precarity into non-working dimensions of workers’ lives. Our interview data and analysis works to ‘people’ this intersection between labour and migration regulation by paying close attention to the everyday effects of migrant labour regulation.

To conclude, we recognise that this article is a stepping off point for developing a stronger picture of intra-national variation that may be instructive for both national and international comparison. Certainly, tensions around migrant labour generally increase with economic insecurity; in Canada, the recent reforms to the TFWP name ‘restricting access’ and ‘putting Canadians first’ (ESDC 2014) as central mandates of their revamp – especially for low-wage positions. But this suite of reforms has little impact for SAWP; except for the promise of more inspections and better employer compliance, SAWP is largely exempt. As an undesirable category of work with a well-established labour market need, it is also the least threatening to public perceptions around employment security. However, we argue that by not modifying SAWP, despite many recommendations from years of research and policy reports, SAWP in Canada is currently subject to a moment of regressive policy making that is representative of an increasingly stratified ‘global mobility divide’ (Mau et al. 2015) of migration and citizenship in the age of austerity. Within this context, workers’ agentic capacities are confronted by the weight of structural constraint in their everyday lives through SAWP regulation. Clearly, labour market mobility, affordable and diverse housing, and achievable pathways to residency would facilitate social connections to overcome, in part, the deleterious everyday effects of social quarantining.

Notes

1. On average, 187 agricultural workers per year became permanent residents between 2004 and 2013 (CIC2015).
2. There are minor discrepancies in official statistics. For example, HRSDC (2010) reports 625 SAWP workers in Nova Scotia in 2008, while ESDC (2015) reports 620. We rely on the most recently available ESDC statistics; these use positive Labour Market Impact Assessments.
3. Nova Scotia is not unique here; across Canada immigrants who live in small towns and rural areas are less likely to be members of visible minorities (see Yoshida and Ramos 2013).
4. Given the small size of the immigrant and visible minority population in this part of rural Nova Scotia, to maintain the confidentiality of our research participants, we use pseudonyms and do not identify countries of origin. Nor do we report personal details of their romantic relationships or family lives as such details would quickly make them identifiable.
5. Importantly, even those who initially came because of a friend or family member did not end up working together. For example, for one participant, it took three seasons to get a job on the same farm as a friend, while for another, it took two seasons to end up with his brother. Both of these participants spent time on farms in southern Ontario before being united with their friend/family member in Nova Scotia, though only for the duration of the contracts. This reunification was only possible through coordination and negotiation with employers; participants emphasised that these sorts of arrangements were the exception rather than the rule.
6. But workers’ isolation is not absolute; two participants had attended a local church when their work schedule permitted and transportation was available. (see Horgan and Liinamaa 2012).

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