

Back-to-the-Landers and the Emergence of a Peasant Paradigm in Manitoba

by

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## **Abstract**

Agri-food systems are driven by competing paradigms. Industrial farming paradigms seek to maximize profits by maximizing yields. The peasant paradigm is defined by desires for autonomy and sustainability and is represented through agro-ecological farming. This narrative inquiry based study explores the learning processes of back-to-the-landers in Manitoba to understand significant learning experiences, learning outcomes and motivations for moving “back to the land”, as well as how learning is shared as a form of social action. Transformative learning theory was used to understand whether these individuals experienced transformative learning, leading them to farm. The study concluded that research participants did not experience transformative learning *if* defined as fundamental perspective transformation. However, all participants experienced *aspects* of transformative learning through a series of “disorienting dilemmas” that motivated behavioral changes. These dilemmas restored values instilled in them as children, and spurred their desires to move back to the land.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1. Background**

Paradigm shifts related to agricultural practice and food systems are needed to restore and protect healthy agro-ecological systems (Wiebe and Wipf, 2011; Perfecto et al., 2009; Lang and Heasman, 2004). Dominant agricultural systems driven by an industrial paradigm contribute to a loss of natural resources due to soil erosion, water contamination, deforestation, reduced biodiversity, and the release of greenhouse gases. These losses impact climate change, among other issues (Pimentel et al., 2005; Perfecto et al., 2009). However, increasing concern about the sustainability and health of our food systems is creating new movements towards alternative food paradigms (Perfecto et al., 2009; Lang and Heasman, 2004).

Some agrarian activists have joined the food sovereignty movement that sees sustainability and food security as dependent on community-based control of food systems (Desmarais, 2008; Wiebe and Wipf, 2011; Levkoe, 2013). These proponents, driven by an ecologically-integrated paradigm, have established mechanisms to undertake this shift, by integrating agriculture and food policy, creating “right to food” legislation, integrating agricultural and ecological systems, and increasing support for sustainable local food systems (Wiebe and Wipf, 2011). They also note, however, that policy barriers to sustainable food systems include top-down decision-making processes about agricultural practice (Wiebe and Wipf, 2011; Pimbert, 2006).

While community-based control mechanisms celebrated in the food

sovereignty movement provide a promising new model for a sustainable food system, there is little empirical data about how such a shift from the current industrial food paradigm can occur (Lang, 2009; McDonald et al., 1999; Kerton and Sinclair, 2010, Pimbert, 2006). One window into understanding this may be offered by back-to-the-landers; people who have migrated rurally to farms. Studies on peasant farmers demonstrate that back-to-the-landers embrace a peasant mode of farming in direct conflict with industrial agricultural systems (Gross, 2009; Ploeg, 2010). Further, their farming practices often aspire to be more environmentally responsible and sustainable. This is because farmers tend to embrace organic agricultural practices, reduce waste and food miles (the distance their food travels), and subsist primarily on food grown on their farms (Coffin and Lipsey, 1981; Jacob, 1996; Gross, 2009). The sustainable farming practices often associated with back-to-the-landers were substantiated by my results and are discussed in Chapter Four.

Understanding the learning outcomes that led people back to the land could also provide important insights into what makes people significantly shift their behavior and become farmers; and this information could be helpful for those working towards food sovereignty in Canada. One approach to understand how paradigm changes can lead to more sustainable outcomes is offered by Transformative Learning (TL) theory. This theory of adult learning explores how individuals become more reflective and clear decision-makers by critically examining the values, beliefs, and systems they have uncritically adopted from others (Mezirow, 1997).

TL theory focuses primarily on individuals, and can help us understand how

farmers are actively working to transform food systems (Kerton and Sinclair, 2010). As well, back-to-the-landers may share their learning by fostering direct relationships with consumers, providing an opportunity to explore how their learning may lead to broader social action and eventually to emancipation from dominant food systems for themselves and for those who access their food (Kerton and Sinclair, 2010; McDonald et al., 1999).

### ***1.2 Purpose and Objectives***

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of back-to-the-landers in Manitoba, specifically focusing on the learning that underpinned their shift back to the land. The study also explores whether any such learning is helping create a more sustainable food system in Manitoba. The objectives were:

- 1) to explore the motivations that led people to join the back-to-the-land movement;
- 2) to identify the types of practices currently used by back-to-the-land farmers and what led them to use these approaches;
- 3) to examine whether, and if so how, farmer learning is leading to social action; and
- 4) to identify whether transformative learning has led people to join the back-to-the-land movement.

### ***1.3 Research Design and Methods***

I come from an advocacy and participatory worldview. Creswell (2007) describes this worldview in research inquiry as intertwined with political agendas often addressing issues of oppression, marginalization, and empowerment with recommended actions for reform. This fits my approach to research, as previous work with small-scale farmers in Ethiopia gave me the opportunity to see how food security research is not neutral. It tends to either support (through the push for agricultural intensification leading to increased corporatization of food system) or challenge (by giving voice to the interests of small-scale farmers) normative and oppressive ideologies. This participatory worldview supports the work done by back-to-the-landers, whose farming practices operate outside of dominant food systems (Kerton and Sinclair, 2010; Gross, 2009), despite government and corporate preference for conventional agriculture (Wiebe and Wipf, 2011). This research intended to explore and understand approaches to farming that challenge dominant food production systems and thereby make healthy, safe, and sustainable food systems more broadly acceptable and accessible.

The research design was qualitative, and to satisfy the research objectives, I used a narrative strategy of inquiry. Narrative research, as described by Creswell (2007), “asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives.” The researcher uses this story along with other “field texts” such as journals, photos, and observation as raw data (Creswell et al., 2007). The researcher analyzes the data and “restories” them into a chronological presentation incorporating both the participants’ and researchers’ views. I used this approach to provide an in-depth account and analysis of how learning over the course of the participants’ lives led

them “back to the land” and to the farming practices they use. Focusing on this learning process allowed me to explore not just what farming practices by back-to-the-landers are more sustainable, but what individual learning over time has led to these approaches.

The research objectives were explored through the stories of seven different back-to-the-landers on four different farms in Manitoba. To prime my narrative approach, I used participant observation by visiting farms, and by spending a number of days during one summer season with a back-to-the-land farming operation. This form of participant observation helped me understand first hand how their farming practices are sustainable and why they use those practices. Participating in the farming operation also led to an understanding of additional values motivating back-to-the-landers. Finally, participating in their work helped build rapport and trust to make the interviews more meaningful. The learning I gained through participant observation prompted questions and conversations about values and beliefs that led to participants’ transformations. As I worked with farmers, I kept a journal to document my own learning. The primary data for my research came through interviews with each farmer in the winter season. These semi-structured interviews focused on the life narratives and learning over time in relation to each interviewee’s move back to the land. To analyze the interviews I used the life-grid technique, which uses a visual grid to organize and co-analyze participants’ stories. The data collection took place between July 2013 and May 2014. The methods are detailed in Chapter 3.

#### **1.4 Research Contribution**

Much of the literature about TL theory uses a case study approach (Diduck et al., 2012). This approach has significant advantages to help understand learning for a larger number of participants within the context of a particular event or process such as environmental assessments. However, it provides less opportunity to understand the depth of experiences participants bring into a process, and the long-term outcomes resulting from the process (Taylor, 2008; Diduck et. al., 2012). A narrative inquiry approach allowed me to examine the experiences and learning over time that may have contributed to each participant's learning process. Through this research I sought to provide additional depth to TL theory literature by commenting on deeper individual experiences and long-term outcomes. I also sought to complement the research of others who have looked at how transformative learning for individuals within food systems is communicated and made accessible to a broader community (Kerton and Sinclair, 2010; McDonald et al., 1999; Pimbert, 2006).

Current literature portrays back-to-the-landers as socially and ecologically conscious, but largely uninvolved in social action (Jacob, 1996). Similarly, TL theory has been criticized for not adequately addressing issues of social action (Mezirow, 1997b; Inglis, 1997). I challenged these assumptions by examining literature on peasant studies to demonstrate how, as a result of transformative learning, back-to-the-landers are involved with social action, albeit in substantially different ways than other modes of social action (Ploeg, 2010).

### ***1.5 Thesis Organization***

The thesis is organized into six chapters. Following the Introduction, Chapter Two provides a literature review beginning with a broad survey of current paradigms governing food systems. Following this is an examination of those who resist dominant agricultural paradigms, and an examination of potential applications of TL theory for understanding the relationship between back-to-the-landers and paradigm shifts. The third chapter details the chosen approach to the study, including strategy of inquiry and methods. Chapter Four describes the farms I worked with on this project and explores my data in relation to the agricultural paradigms for back-to-the-landers. This chapter also explores the first, second, and third research objectives. The fifth chapter focuses on my research in relation to TL theory and discusses learning processes and outcomes of the back-to-the-landers who participated in the study, including instrumental, communicative and transformative learning. This chapter also addresses the fourth objective on transformative learning. The final chapter draws conclusions about each of the objectives and provides my reflections on the relevance of this research for learning and social action related to sustainable agri-food systems in Manitoba.

## **Chapter 2: New Farmers Practicing Deep-rooted Farming**

### ***2.1 Agricultural Paradigms***

The act of eating is one of the most basic human activities. All humans need to eat regardless of culture, geography, class, religion, or background. Despite this universality, how and what we eat is a complex and often perplexing activity (Gopnik, 2011). Today this tension often relates to the environmental, social, and economic sustainability of our food systems (Lang, 2009; Pollan, 2006). How we respond to these questions is largely determined by our frames of reference. Frames of reference are “the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences “ (Mezirow, 1997). The expression of these frames of reference can result in different actions including whether we buy organic food from a farmers’ market, whether we buy processed and packaged food from a grocery store (Kerton and Sinclair, 2010), and many actions in between. Consequently, eating is more than a means of subsistence. It is a social, spiritual, cultural, and political act. It is an expression of one’s frame of reference (Gopnik, 2011; Lang and Heasman, 2004).

Collective frames of reference create a paradigm (Mezirow, 1997). The term “paradigm” gained prominence through the work of Thomas Kuhn. Kuhn was interested in understanding how scientific understanding experienced moments of crisis whereby some frameworks of understanding were replaced by new frameworks (Lang and Heasman, 2004).. The discourse on food, agriculture, sustainability, and natural resources management increasingly tries to understand how paradigms influence our actions, and how new paradigms can lead to more sustainable outcomes (Wiebe and Wipf, 2011; Perfecto et al., 2009; Lang and

Heasman, 2004, Diduck et al., 2012). This first section will explore the discourse on the prominent paradigms driving our food system.

### **2.1.1 State-Assistance and Neoliberal Paradigms**

Paradigms become entrenched and coercive through public policy and socio-cultural norms, which are often uncritically based on assimilated values (Wiebe and Wipf, 2011; Ploeg, 2008). Wiebe and Wipf (2011) define two dominant paradigms that have controlled North American food system since World War II: the state-assistance paradigm and the neoliberal paradigm.

The state-assistance model, developed in the 1940's, emphasized that agriculture is a unique industry, vital to national security and the economy. Consequently, states have a responsibility to support the agricultural industry as a uniquely important industry by developing mechanisms to give farmers more market power and protection from economic shocks and stresses (Wiebe and Wipf, 2011).

An example of this model in Canada is the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB). The CWB was a government-sponsored, farmer-controlled, collective marketing agency for Canadian wheat and barley (Magnan, 2011). Prior to legislative changes in 2012 dismantling the central marketing role of the CWB, all wheat and barley, other than that which is grown for domestic animal feed, was sold through a single desk. This gave the CWB a monopoly on these crops. The collective marketing resulting from this monopoly gave Canadian wheat and barley farmers significant market power, allowing Canadian farmers to be less vulnerable to market uncertainty and price fluctuations (Magnan, 2011).

A second agricultural economic paradigm since World War II is the neoliberal paradigm, which has governed the food system (Wiebe and Wipf, 2011) since the 1980s. This paradigm contrasts the state assistance paradigm, as it insists agriculture has no special status in society, and should therefore rely on the market alone. Consequently, neoliberal proponents have attempted to remove institutions and policies developed to uniquely protect the agricultural sector, such as the CWB.

Debates between the state-assistance and neoliberal paradigms have played out in the political sphere and have divided farmers along lines of farm size, farming methods, and ideology. Rather than being contained to domestic institutions and politics, these conflicts were international in scope. For example, the CWB faced active opposition from transnational grain companies, foreign commodity groups, and foreign governments - most notably the United States (Magnan, 2011). The United States charged steep tariffs on Canadian wheat and barley to diminish the competitive advantage of collective marketing. The United States has also lobbied against the CWB at the World Trade Organization. Ultimately, international pressure and the election of a majority Conservative government in Canada led to the elimination of the single-desk monopoly of the CWB and reduced the CWB's position to a voluntary marketing agency.

Rather than presenting a linear perspective of shifting paradigms from state-assistance to neoliberal, both paradigms have existed simultaneously. This is seen most obviously in the United States where, despite rhetoric and political push for a neoliberal economic model, the United States annually gives more than three billion dollars in federal and state subsidies to the corn industry (Pimentel et al., 2007).

While some argue that corn subsidies keep food prices low, these subsidies have primarily supported the production of ethanol and feedstock, a key factor driving up food prices (Pimentel et al., 2007).

Combining the state-assistance and neoliberal paradigms is, in practice, leading to corporate welfare. For example, industrial agricultural corporations successfully remove farmer safety nets protecting small-scale farmers from shocks, but also receive high amounts of subsidies to grow fuel instead of food (Pollan, 2006; Pimentel et al., 2007; Pimentel, 1991; Henriques and Patel, 2004). Both the state-assistance and neoliberal paradigms are able to work together, as they both reduce agriculture to a profit venture.

Both paradigms described by Wiebe and Wipf (2011) assume the primary influence on agriculture to be state policy, as this is the mechanism through which paradigms become institutionalized and coercive. Technology also plays a significant role, primarily by increasing efficiencies of on-farm machinery, chemical fertilizers, and decreasing energy costs through fossil fuels (Pimentel et al., 2008). While it is clear that the State has played a role in agricultural changes, Wiebe and Wipf's paradigms can lead one to assume farmers themselves have been mere passive actors in a changing agricultural landscape. However, farmers exist in a complicated spectrum between perpetuating and resisting these agricultural paradigms (Ploeg, 2008). To reflect this reality, Tim Lang and Michael Heasman (2004) offer a more comprehensive understanding of paradigms driving agriculture, in which state and farmer are both influenced by changing societal paradigms.

### **2.1.2 Productionist, Life-Sciences, and Ecologically Integrated Paradigms**

The two paradigms outlined above, however, are not the only ones influencing agriculture and food systems. Lang and Heasman (2004) have identified three paradigms: Productionist, Life-Sciences Integrated, and Ecologically Integrated paradigms. The Productionist paradigm is the dominant worldview impacting food systems today. Like Wiebe and Wipf (2011), Lang and Heasman note the rapid change in food systems in a post World War II era. However, Lang and Heasman believe both the state-assistance and neoliberal paradigms operate from a single Productionist objective, “to increase output and efficiencies of labour and capital for increasingly urbanized populations” (Lang and Heasman, 2004, pg. 20).

The Life-Sciences and Ecologically Integrated paradigms are two new paradigms responding to the failings of the Productionist paradigm. In contrast to the use of “chemical sciences” within the Productionist paradigm, both new paradigms rely on biology. The Life-Sciences paradigm attempts to find solutions to current food-related issues through “mechanistic” and “medicalized” means (Lang and Heasman, 2004, pg. 22). It seeks to manipulate living materials in the production and processing of food through biotechnology. The clearest example of the Life Sciences paradigm would be genetic modification. Although Lang and Heasman cite this as a paradigm, they do acknowledge that it is unclear to what extent this is a new paradigm, or simply a technological fix that perpetuates the underlying assumptions of the Productionist paradigm.

Like the Life Sciences paradigm, the Ecologically Integrated paradigm is rooted in biology. However, unlike the Life-Sciences paradigm, it focuses less on the manipulation and engineering of nature, and emphasizes “symbiotic relationships

and more subtle forms of manipulation (Lang and Heasman, 2004).” It recognizes mutual dependency and seeks to enhance biodiversity. Proponents of this paradigm stress agro-ecology, the idea that agro-ecosystems should mimic biodiversity levels and functions of natural ecosystems (Pimbert, 2006; Perfecto et al., 2009).

## ***2.2 Reductionism and Modernization***

All paradigms so far discussed emerge from a post World War II era. Some argue that all of these paradigms stem from an overall modernization paradigm, which not only changed agriculture, but reordered politics, families, religion, and education (Berry, 2002; Ploeg, 2008). Modernization is reductionist. According to Pimbert (2006), reductionism is “the science of parts, as opposed to knowledge and ways of knowing that integrate the parts.” He writes that Post World War II agriculture has been reductionist, and this reductionism has led to corporate control over agricultural labour and nature in “simplified and standardized production systems” (Pimbert, 2006). The reductionism in our food systems has primarily been on economic terms and has reduced agriculture to the intertwined objectives of maximizing production and profits (Perfecto et al., 2009, Ploeg, 2008). Studies on peasantry, to be discussed in a later section, have demonstrated that both the state-assistance and neoliberal paradigms operate on reductionist terms, and are part of a larger societal shift towards modernization (Ploeg, 2008).

Regardless of language, it is increasingly clear in both popular and academic literature that the modernization of food systems and the industrialization of agriculture have resulted in environmental, economic, and social crises (Pimentel et al., 2005; Pollan, 2006). These crises will be discussed in the following sections.

### **2.2.1 Environmental Crises**

The heavy reliance of industrialized agriculture on fossil fuels, synthetic chemical fertilizers, and pesticides is leading to a variety of environmental problems (Pimentel et al., 2005; Pimentel et al., 2008). These problems include (but are not limited to) the high release of greenhouse gases contributing to climate change (Desjardins et al., 2001), soil depletion and erosion (Pimentel et al. 2005), and a loss of biodiversity (Perfecto et al., 2009). These issues are interconnected, as a loss in biodiversity results in poor soil quality. The remaining poor soil is unable to sequester carbon (Desjardins et al., 2001), and the increased amounts of carbon released into the atmosphere contribute to climate change.

Organic agriculture, defined as agricultural practices that do not use synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), or food additives (Gomiero et al., 2008) has demonstrated that these issues are not the unavoidable outcome of cultivating food. Conversely, organic agricultural practices can lessen these impacts and even help resolve some of these environmental consequences (Pimentel et al., 2005; Perfecto et al., 2009).

In North America, the agricultural industry is a large emitter of greenhouse gases contributing to climate change (Desjardins et al, 2001, Pimentel et al., 2008, Gomiero et al., 2008). In Canada, the agricultural sector creates 15 percent of Canada's total greenhouse gas emissions. The average distance food travels before consumption is 2400km (Pimentel et. al, 2008). Comparative studies with organic farms have shown that these impacts can be attributed in large part to industrialized agricultural practices, most notably heavy tillage and poor soil quality

associated with infrequent crop rotation. These studies conclude that a shift in agricultural practices towards more organic production has potential to increase soil-water conservation, increase soil quality, and greatly reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Desjardins et al., 2001, Gomiero et al., 2008).

### **2.2.2 Economic Crises**

As the productionist paradigm exemplified by industrial agricultural is primarily concerned with maximizing profit by maximizing production, the most prevalent critique of alternative agricultural practices is that they are unable to produce enough food to feed the world (Badgley et al., 2007). This critique is rooted in the thinking of Robert Malthus who theorized that, as the world's population grew, food supply would fall behind population growth. Despite strong empirical evidence proving otherwise, these perceptions have endured (Badgley et al., 2007; Sen, 1982). Amartya Sen in particular has demonstrated that hunger and famine are not the result of a lack of food, but the inability to realize other entitlements, or ways of accessing food (Sen and Sen, 1982). Through a study of famines in India and Ethiopia, Sen has argued that famine is primarily a governance failure, since States have the ability and responsibility to ensure entitlements through cash and food transfers or other interventions (Sen and Sen, 1982).

Despite the strong role industrialized agriculture has had in the modernization period, staggering numbers of people still face hunger and malnutrition. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the number of undernourished people globally is 870 million, or 12.5% of the global population (FAO, 2012). While this number of undernourished

individuals has decreased since 1990 (when numbers were closer to 1 billion) dominant empirical research on food security, following Sen's theory on entitlements, correlates increases in food security with more democratic governance. It is argued that this form of governance embraces increased citizen participation, and adopts more effective social protection measures, which reduce the vulnerability of poor individuals to shocks and stresses (FAO, 2012; Davies et al., 2009, Badgley and Perfecto, 2007).

Apart from the environmental concerns and questions about the ability of production to solve issues of food insecurity, there are also important questions about the profitability of industrialized agriculture. In a piece about the ability of organic agriculture to feed the world, Badgley and Perfecto succinctly wrote, "Food security depends on policies and prices as much as on yields" (Badgley and Perfecto, 2007, pg. 80). Far from being self-sufficient, North American agriculture has depended on crop and fuel subsidies (Pollan, 2006; Pimentel et al., 1991) to maintain economic survival. Organic agriculture, on the other hand, is more labour intensive but has been able to demand higher prices for food and has given equal and at times greater economic returns than conventional agriculture (Pimentel et al., 2005). A literature review by Badgley and Perfecto (2007) indicates that a large-scale shift towards organic agriculture has the ability to provide enough calories to support the global population. This, however, is impossible without a paradigmatic change, not only in relation to agricultural practices, but also to the normative nature of wealth inequality.

### **2.2.3 Social crises**

Social externalities resulting from the industrial agriculture paradigm include a range of health issues, strains on traditional cultural practices, and migration from rural communities.

Industrialized societies have the relatively new problem of consuming too many calories. Household spending on food has dropped from 23.4% of a family's annual income in 1929 to 9.6% in 2008 (Lang, 2009). The result has been a higher consumption of foods once considered luxuries including meat, dairy, and sugary foods. This has led to health issues such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes (Lang and Heasman 2004; Lang, 2009). In the neoliberal paradigm, a drop in price due to demand should favour consumers by giving cheaper access to food, but in this case cheap food is hurting both small farmer producers and consumers who are accessing cheap unhealthy food. Some have argued that increased production has increased global food security. However, as stated above, Sen and Sen (1982) have demonstrated that food security is not an issue of productive quantity, but of effective governance ensuring (or failing to ensure) entitlements, or access, to food.

Increases in food production correlates to decreasing numbers of farmers. Since the late 1980's, Canada has lost over 22 percent of farms and farm families due to industrial expansion (Qualman, 2011). Some estimates have predicted a loss of 200,000-400,000 farms in the United States each year over the next 20 years (Berry, 2002). Most of these farms were lived on for multiple generations. The loss of these farmers comes with a disruption to social cohesion, cultural identity and family heritage (Berry, 2002). Norman Wirzba writes that careerism, or specialized

work found off farm, makes us “frustratingly helpless and ignorant in regard to basic human skills - growing food, maintaining a home, caring for and educating children, promoting friendship and cooperation, facing illness and death - as well as financially dependent on other specialists who provide for us what we cannot provide for ourselves” (Wirzba, 2002, pg. xi). As smaller family farms are lost to industrial agriculture, our food becomes increasingly dependent on large multi-national corporations such as Monsanto, Cargill, and Syngenta. The control these companies have over food systems shapes more than our economics, as families move off land into urban areas. This disrupts and reshapes our communities, perceptions of health, and our understanding of land and environment (Berry, 2002).

### **2.3 Food Sovereignty**

The dominance of industrial agriculture, as described above, has been met with resistance. Some agrarian activists have called on society to embrace a food sovereignty paradigm. Food sovereignty has no clear agreed upon definition (Patel, 2009; Wittman, 2009; Qualman, 2011). However, based on literature surveyed, there is broad agreement that food sovereignty has to do with people’s right to define their own food systems and agricultural practices (Pimbert, 2006; Wiebe and Wipf, 2011). Food sovereignty advocates are concerned about power imbalances resulting from corporate and government control over food systems (Patel, 2009).

The political movement, La Via Campesina, has championed food sovereignty. La Via Campesina defines itself broadly as an international peasant’s movement. It emerged in rejection of neo-liberal agricultural policies outlined in the

World Trade Organization General Agreement on Tariffs and (GATT) (Desmarais, 2002). La Via Campesina represents 148 organizations in 39 countries and includes peasants, small and medium scale farmers, rural women, farm workers, and indigenous communities (Desmarais, 2008; La Via Campesina, 2012). The network provides a space for these groups to communicate and debate issues, define a collective identity, build solidarity with others, and define a set of values and demands in the international arena (Desmarais, 2008).

All members agree on certain basic principles, most of which relate to agency and power issues experienced by peasant farmers (Patel, 2009). Some guiding principles include the right for farmers to have control over their seeds, a focus on gender equality, and a focus on agro-ecology (Pimbert, 2006; Patel, 2009; Wittman, 2009). However, there is unsurprising resistance to any centralized authority within the network and there is no central policy making secretariat (Patel, 2009). Desmarais (2008) writes that “La Via Campesina works in an environment of constant tension and reaffirmation. It is a transnational movement of people defined by place.”

On one hand there is a desire to be guided by strong principles and values differentiated from those of industrial agriculture, while on the other hand there is a desire for wide participation, local agency, and the ability for different opinions to co-exist. Food sovereignty proponents are, for example, not against trade, even though this action may place those within the organization in competition with one another (Wiebe and Wipf, 2011). This desire to be both inclusive and exclusive is a tension that is constantly being reflected on and adapted (Desmarais, 2008).

## **2.4 Ploeg and The New Peasantry**

This tension between being inclusive and exclusive is apparent in the struggle to define the “peasantry”. Members of La Via Campesina desire North-South solidarity within a context of disparity. If peasants are defined by social status, then what right do northern farmers have to participate in a peasant movement? Is their participation limited to that of an advocate or ally, or do North American and European farmers have the right to also be identified as peasants? This conflict exists because La Via Campesina desires the ability to self-identify, but also seeks to name and resist power inequalities (Patel, 2009). Desmarais addresses this tension by reflecting on how La Via Campesina has redefined the word *peasant*. She writes, “resurrecting ‘peasants’ is an act of resistance” (Desmarais, 2008, pg. 139). In this context, “peasants” are people of the land who resist industrial agriculture.

It is helpful to look at Dutch writer Ploeg’s (2008, 2010) writings on the new peasantry to further explore who peasants are and what they do differently than conventional farmers. According to Ploeg, contrary to the perception of peasants as backwards farmers or failed capitalists, peasants operate from a different paradigm that actively and intentionally resists corporate agriculture (ibid). Peasants operate on the margins of markets and are constantly engaged in struggles for autonomy. For this study, the peasant way of farming can be summarized in the following ways:

1. Unlike corporate farming that seeks the production of surplus value through the selling of raw commodities, peasants seek the production of value added through on-farm processing, direct marketing, and high-quality production.

2. Peasants are engaged in a co-production process with nature. Production is maximized without deteriorating the resource base and without becoming dependent on external markets for production.
3. Social and material resources represent an organic unity and are not divided by false dichotomies between nature and labour.
4. Peasants seek autonomy from conventional markets and avoid becoming dependent on them. They prefer short decentralized circuits between the production and consumption of food.
5. Peasants are engaged in *pluractivity*. Rather than being an indication that the farming operation is unsustainable, off-farm labour allows for autonomy from the industrial agricultural system by reducing the need for bank loans and credit programs.

Ploeg affirms the redefinition of peasantry discussed by Desmarais (2008), stating, peasants are defined by a struggle for autonomy and a resistance to corporate agriculture. It is a difference not only of practice but also of paradigm. Peasant farming practices stem from a paradigm reliant on a co-productive relationship with land rather than a dependent relationship on global markets (Ploeg, 2008). Ploeg does not seek to romanticize the poverty facing many peasants, but rather seeks to redefine emancipation. Whereas the neoliberal paradigm understands emancipation through a market lens, peasant emancipation is related to the resource base expansion. Ploeg (2008) writes that, “the development of agriculture and the resource base on which it is grounded coincide with and translate into the emancipation of the peasantry” (pg. 26).

Ploeg assumes that peasants are not simply “passive victims” but are actors exercising agency and autonomy in relation to global markets (Ploeg, 2008, pg. 21). More so, their numbers are rising in both rich and poor contexts. If peasants are defined not by social standing but by how they pattern themselves, then this may give confidence to La Via Campesina’s positioning as an international peasant movement. But who are the peasants in North America? In the next section, I will argue that the growing number of back-to-the-landers constitutes one such group.

### ***2.5 Back-to-the-landers***

While many people move rurally for different reasons including retirement, jobs, or to raise their children outside of cities, in this study, “back-to-the-landers” refers to people who move rurally to farm in a specific way. A survey of literature related to back-to-the-landers shows a higher degree of academic writing on this group in the early 1970s and 1980’s due to a sharp increase in numbers (Jacob, 1996). However, the farming crisis of the 1980’s resulted in increased urban migration, and with it came a subsequent drop in academic interest in this group (Jacob, 1996).

North American back-to-the-landers are typically well-educated and socially and ecologically conscious (Coffin and Lipsey, 1981; Jacob, 1996; Gross, 2009). The average land holding size for North American back-to-the-landers is 19 acres, and most back-to-the-landers are, or are close to being, mortgage free (Jacob, 2003). These farming operations are often labour intensive (as opposed to energy intensive) and have been relatively unaffected by policies such as a “green tax” on environmentally harmful agricultural practices. This is because most inputs (like

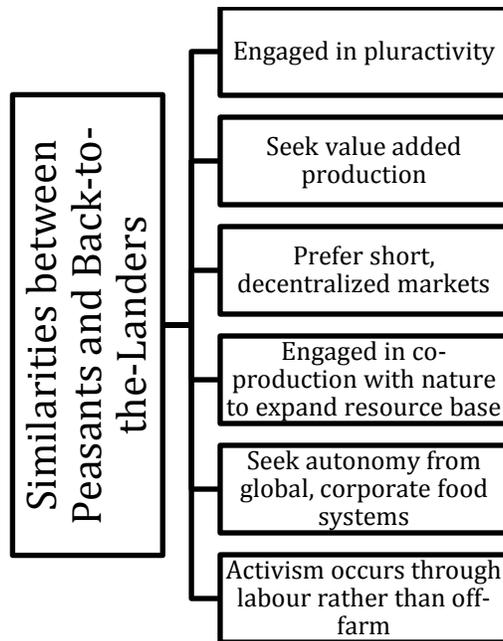
fertilizer) come from the farm itself in the form of compost and manure. Back-to-the-lander families typically use off-farm labour to supplement farm income. Some authors suggest that the presence of off-farm labour suggests these farming options are not economically viable (Jacob, 1996; Gross, 2009). Ploeg, however, calls this pluractivity, or a strategy for reducing economic dependence on corporate institutions (Ploeg, 2008; 2010).

While previous studies (Jacob, 1996) portray back-to-the-landers as socially conscious but not politically active, a more recent study by Gross (2009) portrays them as rebelling against the global food system. This rebellion happens through involvement in strategies like Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in which they produce organic food for local consumption. CSA's provide direct relationships between farmers and eaters, and allow sharing of up-front costs between all CSA members, to avoid up-front credit purchases. These advantages allow them to operate outside of the decentralized and impersonal nature of the global food system (Brehm and Eisenhauer, 2008; Kerton and Sinclair, 2010). This dissonance in the literature between levels of back-to-the-landers' political involvement can be resolved by returning to Ploeg's study on peasants. For peasants, resistance does not occur outside of labour (Ploeg, 2010). Rather than expressing itself in demonstrations and strikes, peasant resistance "resides in the fields, in the ways in which good manure is made, noble cows are bred, beautiful farms are constructed, and fresh milk is delivered" (Ploeg, 2010, pg. 16).

Back-to-the-landers resemble the description of peasants in a variety of ways, some of which have already been mentioned. As shown in Figure 1, they

prefer short, decentralized markets as can be seen, for example, through their involvement in CSAs. They seek to expand resource bases through organic production rather than synthetic inputs, and are engaged in value added production, where processing of goods happens on the farm itself (Jacob, 1996; 2003; Gross, 2009). Back-to-the-landers typically resist participation in global industrial markets (Gross, 2009). They do, however, engage in *pluractivity* in the form of off farm labour as a strategy for seeking greater autonomy in the farming operation itself (Jacob, 2003).

**Figure 1: Similarities between Back-to-the-landers and Peasants**



If back-to-the-landers represent, at least in part, the new peasantry in North America, and if the peasant mode of farming is a more sustainable form of farming than industrial agriculture, it is helpful to understand the type of learning and life experiences bringing people “back to the land” to farm. As the peasant mode of

farming is labour intensive rather than energy intensive, this more sustainable food system requires more individuals than conventional farming would require to farm a plot of similar size. So if we desire to engage with not only food activism but also sustainable food production, it is important to understand the type of learning contributing to such a transformation. The next section will discuss how Transformative Learning (TL) theory can help understand the transformations of back-to-the-landers and agricultural systems.

## ***2.6 Transformative Learning Theory***

TL theory is a comprehensive theory explaining various types of adult learning and how such learning occurs. The theory's origin is in adult education and was developed in 1978 by educator and academic, Jack Mezirow. This theory attempts to explain how adults interpret the world around them (Taylor, 2008). For Mezirow, learning is shaped by our frames of reference; or the associations, values, feelings, and conditioned responses that define our world (Mezirow, 1997). Frames of reference are often uncritically assimilated, primarily from the caregivers and culture around us. Transformative learning occurs when we experience a *disorienting dilemma* that causes us to critically examine our frame of reference leading eventually to the development of a new frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997, 2003).

The disorienting dilemma may be a single event like a car crash or death of a loved one, or it may be a series of cumulative experiences causing us to question our very existence (Taylor, 2008). Mezirow believes that new frames of reference resulting from transformative learning will be more "inclusive, discriminating, open,

reflective, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2003, pg. 58). Consequently, transformative learning can lead to more autonomous and critically reflective individuals who realize their potential to be more liberated, socially responsible and autonomous learners.

Mezirow defines two primary categories of learning: instrumental and communicative (Mezirow, 1997). Instrumental learning involves learning to successfully achieve desirable ends, which may include learning a new skill or practice. Communicative learning involves understanding the meaning of something through effective communication (Mezirow, 1997). This learning often occurs between two individuals trying to reach consensus through discourse to justify a particular belief. Unlike instrumental learning, communicative learning involves purposes, values, beliefs, and feelings and is more difficult to test empirically (Mezirow, 1997).

Instrumental and communicative learning can both lead to transformative learning. However, certain conditions are desirable for transformative learning to occur. Ideally, learners must have accurate and complete information, be free from coercion, open and reflective of alternative perspectives, critically reflective of their own assumptions, have opportunity to participate, and be open to accept the outcome of discourse (Diduck et al., 2012). Transformative learning theorists have admitted that while these are the ideal conditions for learning to occur, such conditions are not always realized (Merriam, 2004).

The goal of transformative learning is not only a new perspective, but also independent and critically reflective thinking (Mezirow, 1997; Merriam, 2004). The

link between critical and autonomous thinking is demonstrated by the concept of *conscientization* developed by Paulo Freire (1970), a significant influence on Mezirow. As learners internalize oppression, they are often unaware of how they are being oppressed. Subjugation of individuals occurs not only on material terms through labour and resource control; it also occurs in the construction of certain dominant norms that devalue the “stories” of those who are oppressed. Oppressed individuals may then uncritically internalize the values of their oppressor, perhaps even at their own expense (Mezirow, 1997b). Transformative learning allows the individual to critically reflect on these internalized norms, and critical reflection precedes and provokes social action (Mezirow, 1997b). It is at this stage that transformative learning can be emancipatory.

Since Mezirow introduced TL theory, it has been applied to fields as diverse as neurobiology and natural resources management. More recent writing has focused on what shapes the transformative experience, rather than the possibility of transformation in relation to a particular life-event (Taylor, 2008). In a literature review of TL theory, Taylor (2008) notes “research further substantiates the relationship between action and perspective transformation.” In other words, transformative learning is not only about changes in perspective or paradigm, but it is intimately tied with action. Interestingly, some researchers have used TL theory to understand social action (Kerton and Sinclair, 2010), while others have criticized TL theory for ignoring social action (Inglis, 1997; McDonald et al., 1999).

This debate in part stems from TL theories focusing on the individual as a unit of learning rather than on systems and structures of power (Inglis, 1997;

Mezirow, 1997b). Because of this focus, some say TL theory can only be empowering (allowing for some measure of individual agency within power structures) rather than emancipatory (able to dismantle oppressive power structures). This idea was substantiated by a study of “ethical vegans” by McDonald et al. (1999). In this study, McDonald et. al., found that a transformative learning experience allowed some individuals to adopt vegan values, but they were unable to express those values openly due to dominant social norms.

While learning occurs at individual levels, discourse has the potential to lead to broader learning and collective social action, and consequently to emancipation (Mezirow, 1997b). As individuals apply learning, new actions are continually tested through discourse and adapted. In this regard, transformative learning is never contained within the individual; it is continually being shared and tested with others.

In the case of farmers, it may be difficult to distinguish between empowering and emancipating actions. For example, moving “back to the land” can be both empowering and emancipating. It empowers new farmers to produce and eat the food they desire, but their act of farming itself is also social action against oppressive agricultural systems. By inviting others into their farming operation through mechanisms such as Community Supported Agriculture, these back-to-the-landers are working towards broader emancipation from industrial agriculture.

## ***2.7 Chapter Summary***

Dominant agricultural practices and food systems are impacted by paradigms. The industrial agricultural paradigm that has dominated food systems in

North America since World War II operates from a reductionist paradigm concerned with the single objective of maximizing profit through increased production. As the literature above reveals, this paradigm has contributed to significant social, economic, and environmental issues including the loss of farmers, large-scale wealth inequality and hunger, soil erosion, and climate change.

Some agrarian activists react to the outcomes of industrial agriculture by calling for a new paradigm of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty critiques the imbalance of power between large industrial agriculture and small-scale farmers and peasants. The food sovereignty movement, led by the loosely structured international organization Via Campesina, calls for farmers and local communities to have more control in determining their agricultural practices and food systems.

Via Campesina's desire to be inclusive of farmers while also critiquing power imbalance between farmers has created a difficult tension within the food sovereignty movement. I argued that one way of resolving this is to provide more substantial analysis of who peasants are, and how their paradigms differ from those industrial agricultural paradigms. Rather than being defined by social status or economic norms, peasants actively seek autonomy from global food systems. They do this through a variety of strategies including pluractivity, value added production, participation in short and decentralized markets, and co-production with nature.

Defining peasantry by terms noted above rather than social status or economic norms allows one to see how peasant numbers are increasing globally, including in North America through the rise of small-scale organic agriculture. Some

would say that 70 percent of the worlds food comes from peasant agriculture (Bittman, 2013). One such phenomenon contributing to rise in peasant numbers is the back to the land movement. Back-to-the-landers often move back to the land to resist the dominance of industrial agriculture. However, this is not an entirely personal and exclusionary pursuit; back-to-the-landers seek to transform agriculture through more sustainable practices and by inviting others into a new food system through direct marketing relationships with consumers.

As the peasant paradigm holds promise for more sustainable agriculture and food systems, it is important to understand how paradigm shifts occur. TL theory can help understand different modes of learning and how individual learning leads to social action. TL theory expects paradigm shifts to occur as a result of a disorienting dilemma, causing one to become more aware of the norms and values they have uncritically assimilated. By becoming more aware of potentially oppressive paradigms coercing individual action, those who experience transformative learning may then seek to dismantle systems of power and embrace a new critically reflective and open paradigm. By using TL theory as a platform and tool of analyzing learning, this research will describe the experiences of back-to-the-landers in Manitoba. It will focus particularly on the learning underpinning their shift back to the land, and comment on whether any such learning is leading to a sustainable food system in Manitoba.

## **Chapter 3: Research Methods**

### ***3.1 Narrative Inquiry***

This research used a narrative strategy of inquiry. Narrative inquiry is more than a process of telling stories; it is a way of understanding how individuals experience the world (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). It is an epistemology, or way of knowing, as well as a strategy of inquiry (Bell, 2002; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). The epistemological assumption is that humans make sense of their life experiences through the structuring of stories (Bell, 2002). In doing so, we pay more attention to certain life experiences that confirm the stories that have been, often uncritically, passed on to us (Bell, 2002).

Narrative inquiry is a collaborative process whereby researcher and participant attempt to tell and reflect on the stories that have shaped the participant, and to re-story those narratives in relation to particular research questions (Bell, 2002; Huber and Whelan, 1999). Narrative research often has fewer participants than other research approaches. Creswell (2008) defines narrative research as involving one or more individuals and asking them to tell stories about their lives. It works well with a participatory/advocacy research paradigm, as it has the potential to revalue individuals' stories, and emancipate the storytellers who have often been marginalized by structures of power (Leshem and Trafford, 2006; Sandelowski, 1999). Stories are not static or detached from context; they are constantly being restructured in light of new events (Bell, 2002). This marks a turn away from reductionist approaches treating data as information governed by a set of constant, observable and testable laws.

As this approach has been employed across multiple disciplines, Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) are not surprised that there is “no consensus on what constitutes narrative research.” In their literature review of narrative research, they conclude that the key common element of narrative inquiry is an emphasis on the importance of learning from participants’ stories. These stories are gathered through a set of interviews and informal conversations, and used as raw data to be studied.

The value of narrative research is that while much research focuses on outcomes, narrative research engages experiences and processes (Sandelowski, 1999). The stories individuals share help one understand human experience, perceptions, and beliefs regardless of how fictionalized a story may be (Bell, 2002). Narrative research generates knowledge that cannot be captured by other quantitative research strategies. It also can create space for marginalized groups, who may currently be excluded from academic discourse, to participate in the knowledge-generating process (Canagarajah, 1996).

### ***3.2 Transformative Learning and Narrative Research***

Throughout this study, a narrative research approach allowed me to understand the broader context in which learning has occurred. While previous studies on TL theory have focused on transformations as the result of a particular phenomenon (Taylor, 2008), narrative research allowed me to explore the broader history, context, and influences contributing to individual learning. It also helped me understand back-to-the-landers’ learning that has occurred over time. By focusing

on a longer period of time, narrative research enabled me to understand how such learning led to social action.

TL theory complements narrative research by providing a lens, language, and platform to understand learning. It has the potential to broaden discourse by helping understand links between individual paradigm shifts and social action. While this research is not explicitly identified as Participatory Action Research (PAR), narrative research can inspire critical reflection about how individuals 'story' their lives. In this way, narrative research actually has potential to inspire transformative learning and, in turn, social action (Leshem and Trafford, 2006; Sandelowski, 1999).

### **3.2.1 Data Collection**

I collected data for this research by using two related methods - participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The approach and benefits of each method are discussed below. I worked with seven back-to-the-landers on four farms in Manitoba. Criteria for choosing farmers included: 1) they produce food for subsistence and market gardens/local consumption; 2) they were willing to participate in multiple interviews; 3) they have been farming for three or more years; 4) they lived in an urban area prior to their move back to the land; and 5) a single family unit is involved in the farming operation (as opposed to an intentional community where multiple families and individuals farm together). The research participants were recruited in an attempt to both meet the criteria outlined, and to find a diversity of farms in relation to farming style and location. Participants were finally identified through a snowballing technique in which farmers and those

involved in the food movement in Manitoba that I met at farmers markets, conferences, or through academic institutions identified potential participants. I also attempted to identify participants through a small-scale directory of food producers that was being developed at the time. A letter was sent to all potential participants with a follow up meeting, phone call, or emails. This letter can be found in Appendix 3.

I planned on working on each farm of the participants for multiple days over the course of the farming season to learn what their practices are and how they are more sustainable. The farmers participating in the research had differing interests in how much time I spent on each farm but all were willing to have multiple interviews and allow me to spend time on the farm. I spent time working on three of the four farms. For various reasons including a burn out of hosting interns and volunteers, one farmer did not want an outside researcher working with them on their farm but did allow me to conduct interviews. Interviews were done with the lead farmer of a family or with partners. When interviewing partners together, I asked specific questions related to each individual story. This is because my data was analyzed in relation to TL theory, which is a theory of how individual adults learn.

### **3.2.2 Participant Observation**

Participant observation involves varying degrees of participation in the day-to-day activities of research participants (Evans, 2012). It uses a variety of techniques to generate data including field notes, jottings, and journaling (Bernard,

1988). Participant observation is often used to enhance other data collection procedures like interviews (Evans, 2012).

This research used participant observation for two reasons. The first was to create space for informal conversations, as narrative inquiry acknowledges informal conversations to be a way in which stories are told (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002). By participating in day-to-day activities on back-to-the-landers' farms (like haying, butchering, fence mending and general chores), I anticipated that stories about farming and moving back to the land would spontaneously emerge through participating in these activities.

The second reason was to build rapport and knowledge to enhance interviews (Bernard, 1988). This proved to be valuable in the interviewing process. By developing a relationship with these farmers and learning the language (and strategies) of farming, I was able to better understand the stories shared by participants.

Participant observation also allowed me to see how these farms operated. For example, I was able to see how fields were planted, how cows pastures were managed, and how hay bales were gathered and stored. It also allowed me to understand some of the emotions of farming, such as the frustration of milking a cow and only to have the cow kick over the bucket at the end, trying to pick up multiple chickens in an open field while they peck at your hands, or coming to terms with killing an animal for food that you have been caring for and feeding for months.

To document participant observation, I jotted notes in the notebook I kept in my pocket while farming. After returning home I wrote key impressions in a journal

and included these notes and jottings. This journaling allowed me to document some of my own emerging questions and to keep details of each site such as farm size, number of animals, and other learning I had throughout my time on the farm. These journals were an important source of data for verifying and clarifying information that came from the interviews, and for filling gaps in the interview data.

### **3.2.3 Semi-structured Interviews and Life-grid Techniques**

The second data collection procedure I used was the life-grid technique. The life-grid technique is an approach for gathering life stories using a visual grid. The grid has time on one axis and relevant topics (e.g., family changes, learning, residence, etc.) on the other axis. This approach has been used within narrative research as a way to construct life histories. It has also been used to note how, for example, individual changes can relate to broader societal changes or other life-events that had not previously been connected (Harrison et al., 2011). In this way, life-grid techniques assist in not only organizing stories told by research participants, but they can also help recall seemingly unimportant events and help analyze stories within a broader context. Researchers who have used life-grid techniques have also stated that the task-oriented, but flexible and transparent, approach in which the note-taking is done can level power dynamics between researchers and participants (Parry et al., 1999; Quinn, 2014).

As this research takes an advocacy/participatory paradigm, I was open to adapting this grid if participants felt the categories were limiting or inadequate. In my research, the life-grid technique was less helpful (and later abandoned) as an interview technique. Instead, I used it to analyze the stories. The first problem I

encountered with the life-grid was that it required the interviews to be recorded. Having built rapport with these participants, I found that the introduction of a recorder to our conversations created an atmosphere of formality, causing participants to speak more hesitantly. My need to then transcribe in real time as opposed to later through a recorded material, meant that filling out a life-grid with participants became too much for the interview. Instead, I used the structure and prompts of the life-grid to guide and organize data from otherwise semi-structured interviews. The side of the grid included topics such as “family/housing”, “school/work,” “food learning,” “farming learning,” “other learning” and “action.” The top of the grid was chronological to demonstrate when various types of learning occurred (Appendix 1). The primary and unintended value of the life grid was in the analysis stage, when it was used it to organize the stories chronologically and thematically.

As indicated previously, research participants preferred to speak in informal spaces and were more guarded in formal interviews. In this way, the stories and learning I gained as a researcher while sitting around a kitchen table after a day of work, while shoveling manure out of a barn, or while milking a cow provided valuable data. The formal interview process was a way to pull these stories together, allowing me to verify stories, and allowing for participants to tell new stories from their childhood and histories. I used a list of questions to prompt conversation and to ensure I was getting data appropriate to the research objectives (Appendix 2). I later contacted the participants for verification when the data in relation to their story was unclear.

### 3.2.4 Data Analysis

In narrative inquiry, raw research data is analyzed for common themes as researchers and participants link stories together. Narrative inquiry emphasizes the process of collaborative analysis with participants to identify underlying “insights and assumptions” these stories communicate (Bell, 2002). The goal of narrative research is not to create a new chronological narrative, but for researchers and participants to build greater awareness of what has shaped participants’ life stories.

The life-grid tool provided a chronological means for me to analyze data. For example, the life-grid allowed me to find commonalities in back-to-the-landers’ childhoods. When considering other categories in the life-grid (e.g., family, school, etc.) I was able to identify other indirect influences impacting their learning, like high school or university experiences. In this way, the life-grid tool allowed me to explore participants’ narratives within a larger social, cultural and political context.

Research data was further organized and analyzed with the aid of NVivo software. I used NVivo to organize narratives around key themes related to my literature review and objectives. Organizing data thematically allowed me to find both commonalities and differences between the stories, for example childhood similarities, motivations, and livelihood strategies. I then organized the data in relation to the specific objectives using key words that came up such a “learning” and “social action” to organize key quotes. Data analysis involved viewing the narratives both thematically and as individual chronological stories. This approach allowed me to identify gaps in stories and to return to participants for clarification and verification.

In addition to the approaches noted above, I used member checking to verify stories. As a result of conducting multiple interviews, I often heard stories multiple times. Participant observation and interviews allowed me to seek clarity and consistency between the stories. I also used participant blogs and public articles written about them as a means of triangulation and verification.

## **Chapter 4: A Profile of Manitoba's Voluntary Peasants**

### ***4.1 Agricultural Context and Research Profiles***

In this chapter I consider the agricultural context in which the research took place, both nationally and provincially. I then describe the farms I worked with on this project. The chapter also explores research data in relation to agricultural paradigms, including tensions between the productionist and ecologically-integrated paradigms presented in Chapter Two. I also present how the back-to-the-landers interviewed relate to the profile of back-to-the-landers in other literature. I will do this by looking at participants' modes of production, and how their profiles fit the description of a peasant agricultural approach as described by Ploeg (2008, 2010).

### ***4.2 Agricultural Context***

#### **4.2.1 The Widening Gap between Farmers in Canada**

The industrial paradigm dominates agriculture in Canada, as farms are primarily focused on grain and oilseed production and beef farming. From 1980 to 2011, Canadian farmers' use of commercial fertilizers doubled (Dorff and Beaulieu, 2014). The 2011 Statistics Canada census shows that those choosing farming as a profession are aging, fewer people self-identify as farmers, and farms are increasing in size. Farmers over the age of 55 operate more than half of the farms in Canada, compared to 37% in 1991. The number of farms in this same period declined from 280,043 to 205,730. Meanwhile, the average farm size has continued to increase from 598 acres to 778 acres (Statistics Canada, 2014).

This trend does not indicate that agriculture is a declining sector, but that fewer people share the profits of farming in Canada. From 2006 to 2011 the number of farms reporting over \$1 million in gross income grew by 31.2% and the number farms grossing \$2 million grew by 22% (Statistics Canada, 2012). These farms, however, still represent a small number of the total farms at 2.4% and 1.6% respectively. At the same time, almost half of all farming households report receiving off-farm income. While census data does not segregate off-farm labour from farm size, one could assume that lower-grossing farms (small and medium size) rely more heavily on the supplementary incomes provided from off-farm labour.

This data indicates a widening gap between farmers in Canada. As farms increase in size and wealth, the number of farmers is decreasing. Farms are becoming more capital intensive and subsequently less accessible for farmers without access to capital. In my research, numerous participants spoke of how new small-scale farmers are increasingly pushed to marginal land as a result of this trend, impacting their ability to make a sustainable livelihood.

#### **4.2.2 Organic Production in Canada**

There is growing national and international demand for more sustainable and organic production. However, long-term statistics about organic production are complicated, as regulations and labeling standards emerged well after the organic movement gained popularity. In addition, regulations and standards continue to evolve. Many farmers who embrace organic farming practices do not go through the organic certification process either because they do not want to, or they feel that the

organic brand has been “watered down” to serve big business (Pollan, 2006). For some, organic agriculture represents an important and positive trend but is not considered a panacea for sustainable agro-food systems. One research participant, NF01, was skeptical of the organic label:

I'm ambivalent when it comes to organic produce in Superstore. Firstly, I never go to Superstore. Secondly, organic baby spinach from California is only as organic as the diesel fuel used to ship it and refrigerate it. Thirdly, for me the baseline test for food is whether it is trustworthy or anonymous. Organic baby spinach from Superstore is closer to the latter category. Mass produced and marketed organic food doesn't really have much to do with the sort of values we pursue. We wouldn't produce food for Superstore nor would we buy food for our kids from Superstore. That said I think it is better if the many people who do shop at Superstore buy organic than non-organic. It sends a market signal that leans in the right direction.

The statistics on the number of small organic farms is also complicated, as many small farmers do not gross over the \$10,000 required to file a farm tax return (Yates, 2012). However imperfect the statistics are, there is a clear indication that organic farming operations are growing. The 2011 Statistics Canada census of agriculture shows a 66.5% growth in the number of organic farms since 2001. The number of such farms is increasing in Ontario and Quebec, but Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Saskatchewan all show decreases in organic operations. Growth in organic production comes from grains and hay; however there has also been significant growth in organic produce and milk (Statistics Canada, 2012).

#### **4.2.3 Agriculture in Manitoba**

Pork, grain, and oilseed production dominate Manitoba agriculture. Common crops are soybeans, corn, spring wheat, and canola. In 2011, there were 15,877

farms in Manitoba, representing a loss of 16.7% farms between 2006 and 2011. During this period, Manitoba lost more farms than the national average of -10%. In addition, the number of larger farms grossing over \$500,000 increased by 25.7% (Statistics, Canada, 2012). In 2011, 15.7% of the farms earned 73.2% of farm profits (ibid). In the same period, the average farm size increased 4.7% to 1,135 acres (ibid).



**Photo 1: Small-scale farm in Manitoba**

#### **4.2.4 Organic Agriculture in Manitoba**

According to the 2011 census, there are 180 certified organic farms in Manitoba representing 1.1% of all farms in Manitoba (Statistics Canada, 2012).

Production on most of these farms focused largely on grain and hay. For the same reasons discussed above, these statistics would not generally include small back-to-the-lander farms.

Support, advocacy and community organizing for small-scale farmers has continued to grow through the work of non-profit organizations like the Harvest Moon Society, Food Matters Manitoba, and farmers' markets. Advocacy efforts reached a wider public audience in summer 2014 when Manitoba regulators confiscated meat products from a popular small, diversified farm in Manitoba, citing concerns about butchering practices and regulations (Anderson, 2013). These actions complicated direct-farm sales, which led to tensions, advocacy and increased conversations between the government and small-scale producers and advocates. Throughout my research, tensions continued, as farmers debated whether they should work within the agriculture system or remain removed from it. OB01 expressed his frustration at the impact of regulations on small-scale producers:

The government's rules and regulations do not have the small-scale producer in mind and discriminate against them in many ways. Our guarantee to you that our food is safe and we eat it as well. My parents eat our food, my children eat our food. We have more and stronger reasons for food safety than any regulation could possibly capture.

As was noted by OB01, advocacy around these issues led to the formation of a working group between producers, marketers and the Province to discuss food safety, gaps in provincial requirements and regulations, and opportunities for future growth. One participant indicated that the Manitoba Government has also partnered with Food Matters Manitoba on an initiative to support local sustainable food production.

### **4.3 Individual Farm Narratives**

The section above provided a glimpse of the national and provincial context within which the back-to-the-lander research participants work. The following section presents different farming profiles of the seven participants as they explained them to me. Throughout this research, I will refer to some of the same quotes by participants to make different thematic points. The decision to do this came from a conviction that narratives are not singular in meaning, but possess multiple meanings and complexity. This was confirmed when I spoke with participants; as we spoke, they were able to address many different issues at one time. Therefore, at the risk of redundancy I chose to re-use quotes if they added meaning to the discussion.

#### **4.3.1 OB Farm**

Contrary to the experience of many back-to-the-landers situated on marginal land, OB Farm is situated on 40 acres of prime agricultural land in southern Manitoba. The farm is owned and operated by a single family. They have a variety of gardens through their property producing potatoes, squash, corn, beans, dill, basil, tomatoes, flax, onions, peppers, and other vegetables. They have a herd of 40 Shetland sheep they raise year-round primarily for wool and meat. At the time of my research they also had three Jersey cows for milking, roughly 40 pigs for meat and breeding stock, over a thousand chickens, and a horse named Old Bill. The large number of livestock requires them to reserve a portion of their land for haying alfalfa; a job that dominates the hot days of summer as they cut and store a few thousand 50-pound bales in the loft of an old barn.

OB01 grew up in rural Saskatchewan. While his relatives were farmers, he did not come from a farming family. OB01 grew up participating in a Mennonite church and was instilled with a sense of valuing simplicity. He moved to Winnipeg to attend Canadian Mennonite Bible College and later McGill University. He became a professional in Europe where he met his wife OB02.

Both OB01 and OB02 spent years travelling through Europe while working. In 2005, they decided to move back to Canada, create a home base, and continue to grow their family. They chose an old farm in New Brunswick, where they felt they would find peace during the summertime from the hectic urban life they had in Europe. They did not intend to farm, but their inability to find fresh local food in New Brunswick like what they could find in Europe led them to begin producing their own food. Over time, they eventually stopped working their jobs in Europe and began farming full time; selling directly to consumers and at farmers markets.

After feeling the desire to be closer to family and community, they eventually decided to farm in Manitoba. Instead of selling their animals and beginning fresh in Manitoba, they decided to move their animals with them. In 2011, they moved into a house barn and have been farming through direct sale in Manitoba. To supplement income they also work outside the home.



Photo 2: Old Bill

#### 4.3.2 IL Farm

IL Farm is located on 80 acres in the Interlake region of Manitoba, a region that attracts a larger number of back-to-the-landers due to the affordability of the land. While much of the land in the area is poor for farming, which leads to the failure of many new farms, this farming family managed to find what they describe as “decent land”.

IL01 and IL02 both grew up in rural areas, but moved to Winnipeg for university. IL01 was a teaching assistant in Winnipeg and IL02 was home with their children and sold yoga supplies while they lived in the city. As they wanted to be able to access local food, they moved to southern Ontario to participate in a farming

internship. After that they moved to the Interlake area and soon began farming. One reason they chose the Interlake was for community. IL01 said:

Community was one thing that was considered when moving, we also had homeschool friends, and the land was affordable. The ideal is to be near like-minded farmers. We knew the homeschool group in Interlake and the land is expensive south of the city. We also wanted to escape the religious aspects of southern Manitoba.

For over 12 years this family farm has produced eggs, chicken, and a variety of vegetables; primarily through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), an approach where individuals pay a set amount for a share of the harvest regardless of harvest quantities. This approach allows consumers to share in some of the risks and rewards of farming while also providing a level of capital and stability for the farmers. For the last eight years, IL Farm has produced enough for 115 CSAs with customers primarily located in the Winnipeg region.

#### **4.3.3 FD Farm**

FD Farm is a vegetable farm located just outside of Winnipeg. FD Farm was one of the early CSA-oriented farms in Manitoba, some years producing enough vegetables to provide CSA shares to 200 customers. Now FD Farm primarily sells at a local farmers market and to a few community groups in the Winnipeg area. As an early supporter of what they call “community shared” agriculture instead of “community supported”, FD Farm has intentionally built relationships with Winnipeg residents through a number of regular rotations of interns, day labour, and direct sale customers. As they have begun to transfer the farm to their children, FD Farm is currently focusing most of its efforts on selling produce at farmers markets.

FD01 grew up in Winnipeg. His parents were urban professionals, but both of them grew up on farms. Growing up, he had a backyard garden; from the time he was six he had his own garden, and by age 10 he was doing most of the garden work. In high school he was an activist and was vocal about issues facing farmers. In the 1980s he went to Bible school, but then decided to study agriculture in university. However, in university he mostly learned about conventional agricultural approaches, as organic agriculture was a fringe movement at the time.

FD01's father purchased land in the 1980's to subdivide for housing, but he was unable to develop this land as it was on a flood plain. He rented this land to a local grain farmer, but also gave FD01 access to the land for growing food. FD01 and his wife began growing produce in the mid 1980's, where they had a small you-pick cornfield, and sold sweet corn at farmers markets. From 1986-1990, FD01 and his wife volunteered in Africa for an international non-profit organization. When they were away from the farm, they would leave the land fallow. When they returned from overseas more permanently, FD01 worked a number of short-term positions for Agriculture Canada, the University of Manitoba, and the Province of Manitoba.

Inspired by the relational quality they found from growing and eating their own food in Africa, FD01 and his wife decided to become more serious about farming in 1991. They started what was then one of the first community-shared agriculture farms in Manitoba. As this was a new concept for the area and demand was high, the farm gained significant exposure. The couple was interviewed by numerous media sources, and when an article was published in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, they received over 200 calls asking where people could send money. They

began working with the government to promote sustainable farming practices, speaking at conferences and developing promotional resources. The farming was successful, with over 200 CSA shares and a successful vegetable stand at the St. Norbert farmers market. Central to their success was the acceptance of apprentices who assisted with labour. The apprentices learned to farm, and many were able to start their own farms. They continued to take a livelihood basket approach, working seasonal jobs in addition to farming. Now, they are starting to ease into retirement, and hand the operation over to their children.

#### **4.3.4 NF Farm**

NF Farm is a family farm located two hours from Winnipeg in southern Manitoba. Situated on almost eight acres of land, this farm consists of multiple gardens, 60 chickens, and two pigs. As they have only recently started this farm compared to the other cases, they have mostly focused on subsistence farming, but have also sold pork and chickens. They have plans to expand production to eventually sell CSA shares, or expand direct sales to more customers.

NF01 grew up in southern Manitoba. His father was a grain farmer, but NF01 did not like the farming practices he experienced. He had aspirations of changing the world, and five days after graduating from high school he moved to Brazil to volunteer for a year. After Brazil he went to university, and became involved with issues related to indigenous communities in Canada. After university, NF01 worked on an indigenous gardening project and began to make links between gardening and social justice.

NF02 grew up in southern Ontario. Her father was the manager of a plant nursery and her mother was a teacher. NF02 grew up in a family that grew much of their own food and made their food from scratch. When she moved to the city, she recalls that buying all her food was a significant adjustment. When she travelled for work, she sought out food markets and the fresh food they provided, as she found these markets to be a space to not feel lonely. Eventually she moved to Winnipeg and found a job that gave her summers off. In the summers she began working on FD Farm. She got involved with issues of economic disparity and migrant labour, and saw farming as an extension of that work. She was concerned about eating food from anonymous sources and not knowing the labour practices of those who were forced to grow their food.

When NF01 and NF02 married, they continued to work on the FD Farm. Their goal was to eventually move out of the city and have their own land to farm. While they were in Winnipeg they remained involved in the local food movement, playing a key role in the creation of the 100-mile Manitoba initiative. In 2011, they found a property outside of Morden, and began growing their own food and raising pigs and chickens for meat.



**Photo 3: NF Farm**

#### ***4.4 Back-to-the-Lander Profile***

The back-to-the-landers in my study fit the profile in the literature of being well educated, socially and ecologically conscious, and engaged in small-scale farming using organic techniques. All of the farmers I interviewed had university degrees, and at least one of them had a graduate degree. The average land holding size in the back-to-the-land literature reviewed in Chapter 2 was 19 acres, which is similar to those I interviewed: the smallest farm size was seven acres and the largest was 40 acres. Back-to-the-lander literature also indicates that back-to-the-landers rely on off-farm income to support themselves, a point supported by my research and addressed in the previous section. However, the literature also indicated many back-to-the-landers are mortgage-free or almost mortgage-free. This was not necessarily true for my participants. Although they were often reluctant to hold

bank loans, many relied on loans from family members to allow them to purchase the land they farm. The significance of this is that it suggests a barrier to new or prospective farmers without startup capital. In areas where agriculture is a viable livelihood, land prices continue to increase. The ability of new farmers to access capital is critical, but also challenges the notions of economic marginalization outlined in peasant literature.

#### **4.4.1 Agricultural Paradigms**

The stories shared by research participants indicate that they engaged in what would most closely be aligned with the ecologically integrated agricultural paradigm, which focuses less on the manipulation and engineering of nature, and rather emphasizes “symbiotic relationships and more subtle forms of manipulation” (Lang and Heasman, 2004). All participants interviewed cited sustainability as a key driver of their agricultural practices. OB01 noted the differences between their approach and the approach of industrial agriculture. “We don’t have control, which you get from equipment, there is a love of the art of agriculture that you don’t have with agri-science which says ‘if you got weeds, then spray.’”

All research participants spoke of the need to view the land as an entity operating in cycles and requiring one to honour these cycles by balancing countless factors. These farmers take energy out of the land in the form of produce, and that energy is put back into the land in the form of compost and manure. FD01 indicated their decision to build a composting toilet on their land as part of their desire to give back to the land what they have taken for consumption. After spending days shoveling manure out of a barn with OB01, I asked whether they would sell compost

if they had more than what could be used on his land. OB01's response was that if they had too much compost, it would indicate that they have too many animals for what the land should hold. They would then, in turn, need to reduce the number of animals on the farm. Similarly, he stated they would not sell compost to another farm, as it felt wrong to take nutrients out of the cycle of their land.

While all farmers indicated a concern for their livelihood, none of them spoke of food strictly in terms of commodity and production. All farmers indicated that food and farming was more than livelihood. Common themes included a concern for health, community, sustainability, and family. For example, NF01 spoke of their desire for trustworthy food from places and farmers that one knows personally, as opposed to "anonymous" and untraceable food. NF01 also spoke of their farming as a "spiritual quest, well-being with the world. Changing the world mindset to be more localized, and trying to live a wholesome life."

In line with the ecologically integrated paradigm as well as the food sovereignty paradigm discussed by Wiebe and Wipf (2011), the farmers I interviewed did not easily differentiate between agriculture and food systems. Many farmers spoke of their practices in direct relation to the health and well-being of those who purchased their food. More so, rather than simply being consumer and producer, these farmers seek opportunities for those consumers to participate in the production of food. OB02 spoke of the relationship between their farm and those that purchase their food as a "food community." OB01 spoke of their joy in "seeing kids grow up and knowing that my protein is doing that." FD01 said:

We wanted to connect urban and rural, we didn't know about CSAs when we went in but we started to hear about this more and so we got info. We

wanted community-shared agriculture instead of just community-supported agriculture.

In this way, the farming paradigm embraced by research participants was not merely motivated by a concern for the land. Instead, participants' farming paradigms readily spoke of holistic values related to community, family, and health.

#### **4.4.2 Livelihood Strategies and Peasantry**

As outlined in Chapter 2, the writing of Ploeg (2008, 2010) and the associated definition and characteristics of the peasant form of agriculture are useful when considering the research data provided by participants. Key elements include:

1. A focus on value added production instead of only the production of raw materials;
2. A desire for co-production with nature rather than reliance on external inputs;
3. Autonomy from conventional markets and a preference for direct marketing; and
4. A diversified livelihood portfolio that includes off-farm labour.

It was clear in the course of my research that back-to-the-landers have considerable similarities to Ploeg's description of peasants in terms of paradigm, modes of production and livelihood strategies.

All farmers interviewed engage in value-added production. Both OB Farm and NF Farm butcher, smoke, and package their own meat. At times, OB Farm also sells wool from their sheep. IL Farm sells a hot pepper paste created from hot

peppers they grow. It was noted by all farmers that value-added production is constrained by government regulations. Three of the farms I worked with named government regulations as a challenge to their modes of production, and their abilities to produce additional products for others' consumption. Research participants indicated that this points to a difference of values between how government and small-scale farmers view agriculture and food. Government regulation is intended to ensure food safety. However, in correspondence with the Province of Manitoba regarding their butchering practices, OB01 wrote:

Another interesting point of discussion omitted from your summary of our conversation is whether style of production has anything to do with food safety. We strongly believe that an animal's access to fresh air, sunlight, and a wide variety of nutritional sources, as well as an animal's ability to express natural behaviour all play a role in ensuring the safety of the food that the animal eventually provides. The use of drugs, hormones, pesticides and chemicals in conventional agriculture also play a role in food quality. Having expressed this opinion we were told, "none of that matters to us."

None of the back-to-the-landers I interviewed relied on external inputs like fertilizers, pesticides or other fossil fuel-based inputs. All farmers stressed the importance of increasing soil fertility through composting and crop rotation. However, many of the farmers indicated that a certain organic purism is at times unrealistic, and they make certain compromises. For example OB Farm, primarily due to the larger land size and presence of animals, relies on a small tractor for hauling compost. However, they have also purchased a draft horse to help them become less reliant on any fossil fuels. Similarly, NF Farm and OB Farm rely on animal feed for chickens and pigs from off-farm sources.

All farmers have engaged in direct marketing primarily through email lists, farmers markets and CSAs. NF Farm sold pigs and chickens primarily to friends and

their local community. FD Farm used to sell through a CSA, but in more recent years focused on selling through local food organizations in Winnipeg and at farmers markets in Winnipeg. IL Farm primarily sold vegetables through a CSA and eggs and chickens to self-organized groups of families in Winnipeg. OB Farm sold vegetables and meat through an email list they call their “food community”, in which they also share about their life on the farm. The farmers noted their desire to connect producers and consumers, and mentioned ways in which consumers/food communities participated in life and work in various ways. Three of the farms were intentional about having regular days for consumers to come and see their farm. For OB Farm, this was seen as a point of accountability for the farm, and was deemed to have greater influence than any food safety regulation.

Only one of the farms relied on agriculture as their only source of income. IL Farm previously relied on seasonal employment like cleaning in the local recreation centre, but has recently been able to focus all income-earning efforts on their farm. All other farms rely to varying degrees on off-farm income. OB Farm earns extra income by teaching voice lessons; FD Farm by working four days a week for a local non-governmental organization. NF Farmers have numerous part time jobs with most of their income coming off-farm. FD Farm described their strategy as the “livelihood basket approach”.

None of these farmers indicated that off-farm labour was indicative of their farm as somehow failing or being simply a “hobby farm”. Instead, they indicated that the supplementary income provided a measure of security and flexibility, which allowed them not only to farm, but also to spend time with family and friends. This

is, in part, because their decision to farm was not only a livelihood strategy but also a lifestyle decision. NF01 did not believe that farming was about a logical livelihood strategy.

Farming doesn't make sense logically. We can get five pounds of oranges from a chain for \$4. How do you compare that with the hard work of farming? For us work is a gift; if you do calculations it doesn't make sense. But this is not an office space. There are pros and cons. This is not a financial decision.

IL01 said, "We take the time to pick berries and embellish life along the way, making wine when we aren't too busy. We just can't go back to punching a clock." NF02 said, "I could have gone the young urban professional route, I had city jobs, but I wanted part-time work so that I could farm." In this way, back-to-the-landers livelihood strategies need to be understood within a broader desire for autonomy and pleasure.

#### **4.4.3 Sustainability**

The back-to-the-landers participating in this research all sought to embrace sustainable farming practices, and their farming practices and approaches were an extension of their worldview. Many participants spoke about the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of ecological, social, and economic relationships, and so their approaches to farming were not limited to mere farming techniques. Instead, when speaking of farming practices they also spoke of family, community, and business practices.

#### **4.4.4 Ecological Sustainability**

All participants recognized the need to make compromises between what is

environmentally sustainable and what is necessary to finish day-to-day work. NF02 spoke of sustainability as an aspiration and trajectory for their farm: “we try to be sustainable, but we are realistic. We do not want our pigs eating GMO feed, but whatever, in our first year we had hungry pigs so we had to. We hope to improve that part of our farming.” She also went on to say, “We are not purists when it comes to organic. This is about social justice. I’m an idealist not a purist.”

OB01 was uncomfortable with whether sustainability was the correct aim for a farm:

We are uncomfortable with the language of ‘so you’re trying to be a sustainable farm.’ We like coffee, sugar, we drive a truck, I think some of the goal is to do the opposite of specialization. What we are doing is anti-specialization. Sounds too negative, but there is a completeness we are striving for; the idea of a farm in a community, in a region. It fills gaps in community. You take care of your circle, and as best as you can, you make sure you support other circles.

OB Farm uses a tractor to move manure and for other chores primarily related to animals. For OB01, a tractor is a necessary and realistic component when one raises animals. However, they aspire to use draft horses as a way of lessening their need for fossil fuel based machinery.

#### **4.4.4.1 Rotations**

For many participants, particularly those with animals, rotation was a key component to sustainability. For OB Farm, a sustainable farm is a mixed farm using nutrients from animals to provide fertility to land for the production of vegetables and grain.

OB01 spoke of their farm as a “choreographed dance.” He said, “Everything is about rotation. The pigs clear the land for planting, cows lead pasture, sheep follow,

then chickens, and then plants.” At OB Farm, feed for animals comes in part from external sources and in part from the farm. They store bales of hay, primarily alfalfa, to feed the cows and sheep. The pigs and chickens were relying on outside feed, but OB Farm purchased a grain mill with the hope of growing their own grain for pig and chicken feed.

This is compatible with what Ploeg (2008, 2010) referred to as co-production with nature. Many participants tend to increase their ecological knowledge so they can work with nature and natural ecological processes to encourage food production. For example, two participants have attempted to use the three sisters method for growing beans, corn, and squash together. In this method the beans produce the nitrogen that the corn depletes, and the squash provides ground cover to reduce weeds. This method is in contrast to conventional farming, where soil fertility is often managed by external, fossil fuel-based inputs.

#### ***4.4.4.2 Local inputs***

Participants without animals often relied on local and natural sources for inputs. NF02 uses manure from the neighbour’s cattle farm. “We use manure from across the road. We are doing more research on pasture management but we also need to be realistic about what is feasible now.” Similarly, FD Farm used chicken manure from a nearby farm. However, FD01 felt it was important to reconsider human/environment relationships when considering waste. They built a sustainable straw bale house on their yard equipped with a composting toilet so they could use their own waste to recycle energy back to the land:

We believe agro-ecological approaches are the future for a sustainable

feeding of the world. With population growth, synthetics are a quick fix that's really just not worth it; people say high input agriculture is required for population growth, but the hunger problem is not a technical one. It's a social one: are we willing to recycle our own waste? This requires a paradigm shift from waste to energy, and to rethink how we think of food.

#### ***4.4.4.3 Biodiversity***

All participants grew a variety of crops and pushed against the monocropping or specialization approach embedded in conventional farms. The participants I interviewed had knowledge of what plants to grow where, what plants grow well next to other plants, and how to rotate crops between seasons to improve soil fertility. This degree of ecological knowledge was something that participants said came from spending time on the land. NF01 said, "When you plant your own food every day, you know what is happening." OB01 said, "I believe two sets of eyes on 40 acres is better than one set for 3000 or 20,000 acres. Nature is too complex for one person to look after that much land. In one or two years we have understood maybe three of our 40 acres."

#### ***4.4.4.4 Co-production with nature***

Lastly, the back-to-the-landers I interviewed understood farming as co-production between complex ecological relationships. Research participants engaged farming in the way that Ploeg (2008, 2010) describes as co-production with nature. These participants expanded their resource base by recycling the energy they took from the land through food, and returning it to the land. On these farms, waste is better understood as compost that naturally increases the land's fertility.

#### **4.4.5 Economic Sustainability**

Economic sustainability for these back-to-the-landers should be considered independently from broader paradigmatic understandings of economic sustainability exemplified by industrialized agriculture. No research participants I interviewed are nearly as economically successful as conventional farmers in Manitoba. However, they did not see themselves to be impoverished, though some would speak of economic stress. None of the participants I interviewed spoke of money as a motivating factor to begin farming in the first place. Economic sustainability for these participants was similar to that of Ploeg's (2010) understanding of the new peasantry, in that it was defined in terms of autonomy rather than surplus.

Autonomy for these back-to-the-landers was defined as freedom from bureaucratic management structures epitomized by office jobs. IL01 said of their decision to farm, "We just can't go back to punching a clock." OB01 said, "I can't work for people, I'm not a cubicle guy." NF01 said, "At the most basic level I'm just doing what I want to do." He also went on to say, "This is not an office space. There are pros and cons. This is not a financial decision." Participants' comments suggest that economic sustainability should be understood and measured by indicators other than those of "surplus" and "deficit" as defined by the Productionist paradigm.

##### **4.4.5.1 Direct Marketing**

Participants strive for autonomy from long, centralized markets in which food systems are not managed directly by producer and consumer, but are instead managed by global market systems. The research participants have resisted these

global markets and instead prefer to sell food directly to consumers. This has both ecological and economic impacts. The ecological impact is that food travels shorter distances between producer and consumer. It also has an economic impact, as farmers receive the total profit for their food items and are able to set their own food prices to help ensure economic sustainability. Perhaps the greater impact is that short, decentralized markets are less susceptible to market shocks. None of the farmers indicated market fluctuations as having a great impact on their livelihood. While their market share is very small, many participants have a loyal customer base that shares risk through the CSA model, in which they pay the same amount regardless of the harvest.

#### **4.4.5.2 Value-added production**

Another approach to economic sustainability is that the farmers I interviewed engage in diversified and value-added production. As noted above, all research participants have diversified farms that include a range of food items. While the ecological benefits of this rotational, diversified approach have already been noted, these approaches also have economic value. The first is that multiple food items allow for resilience against the failure of any single crop. A bad year for one crop may be offset by a good year for another. Value-added production also means participants are able to get the most out of everything they raise and grow. Of course, this looks different on different farms. As noted previously, IL Farm makes and sells “hot pepper paste” from the peppers and garlic they grow. OB Farm sells and uses their sheep’s wool for clothing. OB Farm and NF Farm smoke their own

sausage, and sell different cuts of meat such as chicken breast to increase the value they could get as opposed to simply selling whole chickens.

#### **4.4.5.3**    *Labour intensive*

Sustainability is encouraged in part by an inability to access capital, which limits the ability to purchase external inputs and limits the use of farm machines. OB01 said, “There are also financial limitations. We would have been more tempted by another mode of agriculture but things cost money so we worked with nature, not against it.”

Labour provides a more difficult challenge for the back-to-the-landers interviewed. Organic agricultural production is often more labour intensive than capital intensive, as the use of machines and synthetic inputs is replaced by the use of manual labour. This labour requirement is filled in different ways by different farms. OB Farm benefits from being located in a village community in which neighbours assist each other when its time to cut and bale hay. OB Farm borrowed a hay baler from a neighbor and they helped each other cut and load hay bales. They also invited their food community to assist in farm work at various times of the year. NF Farm invited people to their farm to help butcher of pigs and make sausage. FD Farm connected with a Winnipeg-based food program where urban people come out every Friday to pull weeds and harvest vegetables.

Inviting interns and researchers, such as myself, is also a strategy to mobilize labour. It is worth noting, perhaps coincidentally, that newer farmers were more open to outside labour than older farmers. FD Farm and IL Farm, the two oldest

farms that participated in this research, have recently moved away from having interns and individuals come regularly to their farm.

To summarize this section, economic sustainability for these back-to-the-landers was not understood simply by the maximizing of profits and accumulation of capital. These back-to-the-landers' farming strategies are considerably less profitable when compared to conventional agriculture. However, they did not consider their own livelihood to be one defined by poverty. Instead, back-to-the-landers' values related to social and environmental sustainability informs how they perceive economic sustainability. In fact, over the long term, these participants would consider their economic system to be more sustainable than the economics of conventional agriculture.

#### **4.4.6 Social Sustainability**

In the literature review, social sustainability was considered in terms of the impacts of industrial agriculture on rural communities and public health. Some back-to-the-landers I interviewed perceived themselves as having positive and even a transformative contribution to the sustainability of communities (not only rural). This is demonstrated through participants' desires to connect the urban and rural, and to work towards ecological sustainability and social justice.

##### ***4.4.6.1 Health and Well-being***

The back-to-the-landers interviewed had differing perceptions about the degree to which their decisions affect public health. OB Farm referred to their food as "authentic" and spoke with pride at how their food has had positive health

impacts of those that have consumed their food, as because it is more natural and free of potentially harmful additives and chemicals. However, NF02 said that their work “is not primarily about personal health but about social justice.” She expressed concerns about the public health approach to small-scale agriculture. “The movement is becoming partly about personal health, but nutrition obsession is a plague. You can’t do anything without nutritional info.” However, regardless of what motivations are emphasized, all back-to-the-landers spoke of their food as providing access in Manitoba to fresh and local organic food. Unfortunately, because the full costs associated with this farming approach are taken into account in these small-scale farms (without the subsidies available through government), food products are more expensive and therefore less accessible to people living on lower incomes. FD Farm, through their partnership with a local Winnipeg non-profit, is one farm that sought to ensure access to their food by low-income residents in Winnipeg.

#### *4.4.6.2 Deconstructing Urban-Rural Dichotomies*

Research participants challenged the “back-to-the-lander” label. IL01 said, “I never have considered us to be back-to-the-landers.” OB01 thought the most critically about the issue:

I have a problem with the back-to-the-land label for two reasons. The first is that labeling us back-to-the-landers instead of farmers can be a way of making what we are doing less legitimate, as opposed to simply calling us farmers. The other problem I have is that it gives the notion that what we are doing is simply a challenge to urban living; where we feel that we are seeking to transform rural communities as well.

Consequently this participant in particular spent considerable time engaging both urban and rural populations. This is done by informally engaging his

conventional grain and hog farming neighbours about sustainable agriculture. They have hosted dinners and planned events, and have helped their neighbours (and been helped in return) with chores and large projects like haying. These are all seen as opportunities to engage their rural neighbours. They also invite their urban food community to come and work on the farm.

The transformation that many research participants spoke of related to ecological, community, and food system transformations rather than simply the transformation of either rural or urban communities. When OB Farm faced difficulties with the Manitoba government over food safety regulations they wrote to their food community that “Your way of thinking confirms our hopes, namely, you see what we produce as your food.” These back-to-the-landers move fluidly between urban and rural communities. Many participants engage regularly with, and rely heavily upon, social networks in Winnipeg for sharing about their food products and as distribution sites. Because of this regular engagement, participants spoke of farmers and eaters as needing to work together to transform food systems.

#### **4.4.7 Sustainability Trade-offs**

The data reveals that these research participants strive for sustainable economic, social, and environmental systems. However, they are realistic about their abilities and limitations, and are willing to make trade-offs between ideology and pragmatism. It is important to note that these participants challenge the notion that the current agri-food system is sustainable, and feel that the responsibility to embrace more sustainable practices does not rest on them alone. Finally, there was a strong push against the three pillars of sustainability being understood apart from

each other. They are intertwined, and can only be understood in relationship to one another. Contrary to popular narratives espousing the need for environmental and economic trade-offs, these participants questioned whether industrial agriculture is good environmentally, socially, or economically other than for a relatively few number of farmers. OB01 observed: “we can’t see how the industrial system can maintain itself. It can only collapse. And in extreme collapse there is extreme hope for a new seed to be planted.” Sustainability outcomes will be discussed further in the learning section and in the concluding chapter.

#### ***4.5 Motivations for moving back to the land***

In back-the-the-lander literature, individuals were motivated to live rurally for a variety of reasons including a desire to live responsibly, a desire to escape the life of the city, and a desire to raise children in a rural environment. This was substantiated by the back-the-landers I interviewed. The motivations that led back-to-the-landers to farm are multi-faceted. In all cases, the process was gradual. Three of the farms I worked with indicated an inability to find the food they wanted as a motivation to begin growing their own food. This desire to produce their food eventually led to farming as a business. Two farms I spoke to indicated global issues of economic disparity and environmental crisis as motivations to begin farming. This section will further explore these issues.

##### **4.5.1 Barriers to Accessing Local Food**

It was already noted that the participants I interviewed spoke of the importance of their childhood in developing a value for fresh, local food. This was a

motivating factor for some of the participants, as they felt the current food system created a barrier to accessing fresh, local, sustainably produced food items. Many participants spoke of knowing the taste of fresh food but being unable to find it. For example, IL01 could not find a local food source. He said:

Our CSA grower left and we were without a local food source. We didn't intend to farm, we wanted to grow our own food. We also wanted to live rurally and there were no rural jobs. We love food, we knew what food could be and we couldn't find it.

NF02 said that she grew up knowing what fresh local food was, and developed a love for food and food markets as she travelled internationally:

I started to do lots of travelling to other countries. I always found food in markets. When I moved to Toronto and felt lonely I would walk to Kensington market that was not upscale then. I honed my cooking skills when I was living in communal housing. In Toronto I became aware of food politics. Our house shared groceries and we had to talk through whether we bought organic or non-organic food. Talking about issues helped me think about the politics of food.

This connection to food and food politics was lost when she moved to Winnipeg:

I moved to the city for a volunteer job and worked for one year with [organization]. Buying food was a big adjustment, and my roommates thought I was peculiar. Still worked every summer but yearned for garden. We had meetings and would just sit there, and I was baffled that you could get paid for sitting. I didn't feel like I was working. I yearned for a garden. I had a key moment in food fare in Winnipeg where I wanted to make a zucchini loaf and I couldn't find zucchini. I couldn't get access to fruits and vegetables in downtown Winnipeg. So then I got involved in the Good Food Club and made my way to the FD Farm.

OB01 and OB02 bought a farm property in New Brunswick where they could raise kids instead of being on the road in Europe. When they moved back to Canada they found the food was not as good as what they were able to find in Europe, so they decided to use the land they had to grow their own food:

We started farming to produce food for ourselves. We didn't like the food we

were buying in Canada, as there were huge differences of quality from the food we could get in Holland. We bought an abandoned farm, had the farm infrastructure, so it made sense to start growing food, since we were not singing in the summers. We decided to grow food for ourselves partly because we were snobby Europeans. The quality in Holland was so much better and farmers markets here were still young. In Holland we would not grow food but we would go to the butcher, to the cheese shop, the baker. But when we came to Canada I remember getting sick from the food at Superstore and thinking, "I don't eat food to get sick." (OB01)

The participants who spoke of their inability to access food all had this experience over a decade ago. It is possible that recent years' growth in the local food movement has diminished this motivation in newer back-to-the-landers.

#### **4.5.2 Multiple and Changing Motivations**

All participants had multiple motivations over time that led them to join the back-to-the-land movement. The move back to the land to farm was a gradual one for all participants, and their motivations to continue with this livelihood changed over time. In addition, factors motivating them to move back to the land were not always the primary motivations that sustained them in farming.

As stated above, NF02 was motivated early on by a desire to be able to access fresh local food when she was unable to find it in Winnipeg. However, her work on labour issues for women motivated her to live a life that had less of a negative impact on poorly paid women farmers around the world. Inspired "by a long feminist concern about how [she] was connected to women around the world in everyday things like food and clothing", engagement with food issues was a way of making her work less abstract. She expressed concerns when people spoke "about food in the abstract without knowing where food came from." As she and her husband had children, she was further motivated to move back to the land. "We are

both from the country and we can't raise kids in the city." Finally, she was motivated by her enjoyment of the work saying "It's clear to me when I'm gardening and weeding that this is what my body was made for."

It was noted previously that OB01 and OB02 moved back to the land as a place of rest between professional travels in Europe. As they started producing their own food they became increasingly motivated by the satisfaction they found growing their own food and sharing it with others, and compared this to how unsatisfying they found their work culture abroad:

Not having community, but then having it at the farmers market was great. People would say "you changed my life" or "that's the best sausage I've had." It was great affirmation. The [praise we received] after [finishing our work] felt totally fake. Even when you have a bad night... But when people come back week after week with their children for the food you made, and women say, "I'm pregnant and everything has to change, I need to change how I eat" was a great feeling. Seeing kids grow up and knowing that my protein is doing that or hearing people say "my kids don't have allergies anymore because of your food." [Previously] praise felt so superficial whereas the value of farming felt good, very gratifying. I remember the first time we looked down at our plate and realized that everything on the plate was ours; we had a feeling of "we did it!" (OB01).

OB02 echoed this thought. "We found that there is satisfaction, pride and humility from growing things. There is only so much you can do. But when you pick food from your own storage there is great satisfaction that makes the hard work and mosquitos worth doing it."

NF01 was ultimately motivated by a similar satisfaction. His interest in farming and engagement with food issues stemmed in part from the disparity between rich and poor he found in Brazil and First Nations communities, his desire for solidarity, and his desire to live out theological values. In his words, "part of spirituality and social justice in Canada in moving to the farm is moving to a position

of poverty. Being bent over working hard in the garden has elements of solidarity with those bent over in Brazil.” However, he was also quick to point to his discomfort with this narrative as he recognizes the lack of exposure to poverty they found in their rural home as opposed to their urban life. “Poor people don’t live in the country. You don’t see poverty.” Rather than simply escape from the issues, he continues to advocate for indigenous communities in Canada because “it connects me to social justice issues.” Now that he is farming, he remains motivated by many factors other participants also spoke of; a sense of ownership, pride and of the satisfaction given by physical labour:

For me there was a definite difference between the feelings of satisfaction of growing a cucumber from the satisfaction of attending a good conference. I’ve contrasted this from cubicle life and screen-oriented work. I’ve learned the satisfaction of growing and doing. With manual labour I get to integrate mind, body and spirit. It’s important to have dirt under your fingernails.

NF01 also recognizes that self-interest is also an important motivation, as opposed to purely altruistic or noble intentions. “At the most basic level I’m doing what I want to do. I can build all sorts of spiritual and philosophical undergirding but I’m really just doing what I want to do.” He also notes that the decision to farm is not always a rational or easily defensible one, particularly from a financial standpoint:

Farming doesn’t make sense logically. We can get five pounds of oranges from a chain for four dollars. How do you compare that with the hard work of farming? For us, work is a gift. If you do the calculations it doesn’t make sense. But this is not an office space. There are pros and cons. This is not a financial decision. But we have a different pace of life. You can stop what you’re doing and be interrupted. That’s fantastic. We do not lock our house or car. We spend lots of time outside and have lots of flexibility.

Research data show that the motivations of why people move back to the land to farm are varied. A concern for local and sustainable food systems was a clear

theme and a major motivation for all participants I interviewed. Food and agriculture, however, were not the only motivations for the participants I interviewed. They were also motivated by a desire to give their children a life where they can play freely outside and in nature, a desire for a different type of community, and a desire to connect with broad social justice issues.

**Figure 2: Back-to-the-lander Motivations**

Back-to-the-lander Motivations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Desire to be able to access fresh local sustainably grown food</li><li>• Solidarity with the poor and other farmers</li><li>• Satisfaction with the physical work of farming</li><li>• Desire to live a sustainable lifestyle</li><li>• Desire for social justice</li><li>• Spirituality that comes with farming</li><li>• Autonomy</li><li>• Time spent with family</li><li>• Desire to raise children in nature</li><li>• Rejection of office oriented work</li></ul>

Ultimately, all participants were motivated to move back to the land because of the lifestyle, a love for the work, and a desire to not work in front of a computer screen in a cubicle. In this way, the back-to-the-landers I interviewed fit the profile of Ploeg's (2008, 2010) peasants, as they seek in their lives and livelihood approach for a sense of autonomy from systems and hierarchies. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, the learning that led back-to-the-landers to farm was not the result of any single learning outcome or event. It was instead a long and iterative action-reflection cycle that intertwined instrumental and communicative learning.

#### **4.6. Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduced the context in which this study took place, and introduced the back-to-the-landers who participated in this study in relation to the literature review. It began with the broader agricultural context in Canada and Manitoba, and introduced the growing disparity between two agricultural systems. A profile was then provided for each individual farm that participated in the study, with a brief introduction to individual narratives. Finally, I looked at how the profile of these back-to-the-landers related to the literature on back-to-the-landers and sustainable agri-food systems. It was concluded that these back-to-the-landers engage in environmentally sustainable practices such as a focus on biodiversity, co-production with nature, and local inputs. Viewing these back-to-the-landers' livelihoods through a lens of economic sustainability, I concluded that economic sustainability was understood not through maximizing profits, but instead through a desire for autonomy from economic systems. Finally, I discussed the motivations for back-to-the-landers, concluding that they had multiple motives including a desire for physical labour, a desire to live a responsible lifestyle, and a desire to be able to access locally produced food.

## **Chapter 5: Back-to-the-lander Learning Processes and Outcomes**

### ***5.1 Chapter Introduction***

Chapter 5 addresses the learning processes and outcomes embraced by these back-to-the-landers. The first sections will describe the learning processes related to instrumental and communicative learning. Following this will be a brief section on the learning outcomes of these processes. The final part of the chapter will be a discussion on transformative learning for the back-to-the-landers I interviewed.

### ***5.2 Instrumental Learning***

Instrumental learning, as a domain within Transformative Learning (TL) theory, involves learning to manipulate one's environment either through knowledge of a subject or the development of a new skill (Mezirow, 1997). Participants' ability to learn in this way was critical to the success of their farm, as they all began their farming lifestyle with little farming experience. Participants relied heavily on a mix of peer learning, mentorship, internships, online resources, and books to develop their current expertise.

#### **5.2.1 Apprenticeships**

Apprenticeships and informal mentorship from other farmers were important ways in which back-to-the-landers learned how to farm. IL01 said, "We went to Ontario to do a farming apprenticeship. The interest grew and we got really excited about farming while apprenticing. Our time as apprentices was big as I'm a hands-on learner." Conversely, NF01 questioned how much learning about farming actually occurs in apprenticeships that are not full-time. As an apprentice at FD

Farm, this participant was unsure how much they actually learned about farming saying, “there was limited skill learning at the FD Farm. We were only there part time. If you plant your own food everyday you know what’s happening as opposed to being there part-time.”

Four of the individual participants I spoke to had apprenticed at FD01’s farm. This was a means of sharing learning for FD01, as well as a livelihood strategy. FD01 said, “The apprentices were also cheap labour and we needed help. We were open about that self-interest. We were transparent about everything on the farm: our books, our approaches; we would show everything.” Since FD Farm is close to Winnipeg, aspiring farmers in the city had easy access to a place where they could learn the skills needed to start out on their own. NF02 said. “I yearned for a garden. I had a key moment in Food Fare [grocery store] in Winnipeg where I wanted to make a zucchini loaf and I couldn’t find zucchini. I couldn’t get access to fruits and vegetables in downtown Winnipeg. So then I got involved in the Good Food Club and made my way to FD Farm. I worked at the FD Farm for four years full-time.”

### **5.2.2 Farmer to Farmer**

Another important means of learning about farming was through knowledge sharing from other farmers. This farmer-to-farmer learning was not limited to shared learning between back-to-the-landers or other small-scale producers, as it also included farmers with conventional experience. OB01 said, “We didn’t do any apprenticing but we learned together with another farmer in New Brunswick who used to be a conventional farmer but then switched to organic.” FD01 said:

Farmers learn from farmers; that’s why I’ve felt extension workers are

important when they come as learners. Farmers learn best from other farmers. We were learning from other farmers in Manitoba; some who were just getting into agriculture, and some who were grain farmers but were sympathetic to what we were doing.

These farmer-to-farmer connections create opportunities to build support networks (and to support other forms of learning, as will be discussed in the following section). OB01 said, “We also connected with an organic group ACORN but it was more about connecting with supportive people than any learning about farming.” FD01 said:

At the time (1992) there was no other CSA in Manitoba; we knew of two farms in Nova Scotia and one in Ontario but that was it in Canada. We were young and idealistic in our 30s; we started to connect a bit with the other farms. We wanted to create networks because we felt new and alone.

### **5.2.3 Learning through action**

The most significant form of learning about farming from the participants I spoke to was through direct experiment, learning from their own successes and mistakes. IL01 said, “We learned lots from books and old farming guides, but mostly we had lots of trial and error along the way.” Similarly, FD01 said, “We learned mostly through trial and error. We weren’t on the Internet at that point, but we would make phone calls to others, as there was not much veggie growing expertise in Manitoba. Books were at times helpful but not often relevant to the prairie climate.” OB01 said:

The majority of our learning was trial and error and error and error. We made tons of mistakes. We never realized what blood, sweat and tears meant until we started farming. You get so many setbacks. It takes blood, sweat, and tears. I remember the day I walked into the barn, we butchered 200 chickens and the fridge broke down. They all became compost...all that effort. Or cows have a calf and you lose the mother in birth and all the milk that you need for your livelihood. The farm experience is so much more extreme in life and

death. So you either give up or you have faith. But you also have the same amount of joy. Even in difficult times. I remember when pigs escaped at night, and the joy of running around with flashlights trying to find these 12 black pigs. The laughter and joy go hand and hand with the difficult things.

### ***5.3 Communicative Learning***

Communicative learning is discourse-based learning related to purposes, values, beliefs and feelings (Mezirow, 1997). In my research, this involved learning about topics like farming and food system values, sustainability, or social action. This learning expands (rather than fully transforms) one's worldview. The communicative learning discussed by research participants focused primarily on issues related to food systems, sustainability, community, religion, and politics.

For the participants I interviewed, instrumental and communicative learning were often intertwined. Learning about physical farming practices and skills was connected to learning about food system values and beliefs. For example, as IL01 and IL02 learned how to farm as apprentices, they learned what was (and was not) sustainable about different farming approaches. They also, however, engaged in discourse with other farmers about issues such as corporate power over agricultural systems, agricultural subsidies, food health, and politics. As they developed their own farms, they consistently assessed their farming practices in relation to what they believed were sustainable and ethical agricultural practices. This fits well with Ploeg (2010), who noted that peasant labour is not divorced from belief, values, and actions. For example, when beginning their farm, OB Farm worked with an organic growers' group in New Brunswick. OB01 indicated that this network's purpose was "less about learning about farming and more about

connecting with people.”

### 5.3.1 Childhood learning

A key time period in which instrumental and communicative learning took place simultaneously was during back-to-the-landers’ childhoods. All participants I spoke with indicated the importance of growing up with parents or family members who provided them with access to fresh local food. OB02 grew up in Europe with a food system that was vastly different than what she found in Canada:

I grew up in Holland loving food. It was social and we had quality food. My father would buy eggs from a farm, we went to a butcher because we trusted the quality, we would go to farmers markets, but we didn’t grow food ourselves. That quality of food in Holland now is gone, even from 10 years ago.

NF01 grew up on a conventional farm but stayed away from the farm business and never desired to take over the farm. However, NF01 found that simply growing up close to the land instilled values that eventually led him back to farm:

I grew up on a farm and liked growing up on a farm, but I did not like the direction the farm business was going in. I was offered the farm from my dad and I said no. My dad was sympathetic and has said, “We still haven’t figured out how to farm.” My dad was a medium sized farmer (small farmer by today’s standards). We didn’t talk about farming much but I could tell he was dissatisfied with how things geared to agribusiness. So my dad was not a good advertisement for farming. He didn’t push at all for me to farm. However, I decided I wanted to change the world. I think I came to this from a religious subculture in which I was taught to care about the well being of others. And it’s in our family DNA- a strong sense of right and wrong.

NF02 grew up with parents who owned a nursery. This connected her not only to the value of producing and preserving food, but also to values associated with physical labour:

I grew up on an acreage. My parents weren’t farmers but ran a nursery. My Mother was also a teacher. But for my parents, work was physical labour. At

the nursery I worked as a cashier growing up. I was always moving plants. My parents lived on the land for 40 years and maybe used Round Up once. My family grew most of their own food- lots of veggies, herbs, fruits, and berries. We raised chickens for eggs. My mom canned hundreds of jars of food. I grew up knowing where food came from. My mom baked bread. We cooked from scratch. But I never was aware of being a part of a movement growing up. When we started farming we learned a lot about animals from books and talking to people about raising pigs. But the garden came easier. It was in our bones to garden.

FD01 grew up in the city but developed interest in growing food at an early age:

I grew up in Winnipeg, in North Kildonan. My parents were urban professionals but both grew up on farms. My grandfather was a teacher, but did some farming in Coaldale. I had a backyard garden growing up. But my impression of farming was from my cousins who were conventional grain farmers. Farming for me included huge machines. I was always interested in plants and from the time I was six years old I started a backyard garden that my parents helped me with. By the time I was 10 I was doing most of the work. I had my own plot and growing corn and feeling that was great. In high school I was an activist type of person, doing speeches on global hunger and food. I learned about these issues from more progressive folk who came to church telling stories from overseas.

IL02 grew up rurally but not on a farm. However, her parents instilled in her the value of good local food, “When I was younger we had access to good food. My mother would order raspberries. We knew what food could be.”

#### ***5.4 Shared Learning and Social Action***

As was discussed in Chapter Four, these back-to-the-landers understood their move back to the land partly in terms of sustainability, responsible living, and social justice. This section will explore *how* these back-to-the-landers shared their learning with others as a form of social action. Chapter Two noted how some literature related to back-to-the-landers shows them to be socially and ecologically conscious but disengaged with activism (Jacob, 2003). I challenged this literature through the literature of peasants, stating that this is only true if activism is

divorced from physical labour. Instead, using the writing of Ploeg (2008, 2010) I suggested that it is possible that back-to-the-landers' activism "resides in the fields, in the ways in which good manure is made, noble cows are bred, beautiful farms are constructed, and fresh milk is delivered" (Ploeg, 2010, pg. 16).

#### **5.4.1 Back-to-the-Lander Transience and Action Reflection Cycles**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, instrumental and communicative learning were often intertwined for research participants. This was also connected with external motivations encouraging them to move back to the land. Instrumental learning and communicative learning co-existed in action-reflection learning dynamics. Learning *how* to farm led to increased learning about *what* is sustainable and *why* it was sustainable, and this knowledge helped build farming expertise. As the understanding of farming and food issues deepened, the motivation to extend their farming operation increased, requiring new forms of instrumental learning as they built farming capacity.

For example, OB Farm moved back to the land with the primary goal of having a place of rest between their participation in opera productions. According to them they desired quality food that they were unable to find, so they decided to learn to grow their own food. As this instrumental learning took place and they began to produce food, spaces were created for communicative learning, through talking to other farmers and consumers at events like farmers markets, in which they learned about barriers to sustainable food production. Gradually, this learning dynamic led them to produce more food for themselves and eventually to begin farming full time. OB01 said, "Our philosophy is to feed ourselves first, our

community second, and the world third.”

The back-to-the-landers I interviewed often moved back to the land gradually, which placed them in rural and urban areas in different times of the year. This transience between jobs and urban and rural lives deepened participants’ knowledge of farming and food issues. For example, when living in an urban setting, NF02 felt alienated from local fresh food. She started volunteering at FD Farm and this deepened her understanding of food issues and also increased her farming knowledge. Her urban job focused on economic issues related to women and the devaluing of women’s work around the world. As many women in the world are farmers, her farming work was an extension of her work to promote the economic security of women. Her decision to learn to farm deepened her feminist values and her desire to work for women’s security. This was similar for her husband, who felt that farming was a way of living responsibly after seeing the injustices to people in Brazil and indigenous communities in Manitoba. In this way, NF01 and NF02 were motivated to farm by a sense of activism.

FD01 spent time volunteering overseas while also beginning to farm in Manitoba. The practices and approaches of small-scale farmers overseas motivated and inspired their approach in Manitoba. Linking the separation of farming between rural and urban communities in Canada to that of apartheid in South Africa, they wanted to do something different. “People are separated from farmers and farmers are separated from eaters and it’s a bad thing. We thought, ‘let’s do something different’ and so we came up with the idea of a shared farm.”

In this way, the transience of back-to-the-landers between urban and rural

realities created spaces for action and reflection as they attempted to bridge these multiple realities. These spaces deepened their motivations to eventually move fully back to the land.

#### **5.4.2 Farming as a form of social action**

Participants clearly indicated that social action for them is intimately tied with their approach to farming. OB01 said, “We think about social justice as our lifestyle, not as being organizers of a movement.” This perception was shared by IL01:

We don't like to enter into the agriculture system and like to stay off the radar. We stay off social media, we don't want attention, we don't go to Food Matters. We stay out of the politics. It's not our fight. What we do is countercultural, and the way we do things is an example.

Back-to-the-lander literature suggests that disengagement from society indicates disengagement from activism (Jacob, 2003). However, the back-to-the-lander participants' lives and farms are not secluded spaces but often open and shared spaces. The access back-to-the-landers give to their farm (and therefore to their farming practices) counters the non-transparent and closed farming spaces of industrial agriculture.

This approach to activism places less hope for change in the transformation of, or tinkering with, current systems. Instead, the approach of the farmers I interviewed is to change systems by creating a new and alternative system from the current food system promoted and supported by corporations and governments. The back-to-the-landers I interviewed are not trying to convince conventional farmers to become small-scale organic producers, nor are they really pushing for

larger scale changes to government policy (other than the policies that would help create space for them to farm as they like). OB02 said, “We have two different farming systems and we need to have the right to grow food as we want to grow it.” OB01 followed up on this by saying, “We can’t do anything about corporate farmers” and, “We are sceptical of systems or government change.” This perception of two farming systems is substantiated by literature indicating that there is the conventional farming system supported by government policy and structures, and there is the small-scale farming system operating on the margins of society outside of any government structure (Roberts and Key, 2008; Lang and Heasman, 2004; Wiebe and Wipf, 2011).

This is not to suggest that these farmers are apolitical. Some participants were frustrated with food-based NGOs, stating they are not political enough. Three farmers indicated a frustration with a local organization promoting sustainable and healthy food systems. After a high profile raid on a small-scale farm in Manitoba, this organization engaged the Province of Manitoba on food safety and butchering practices on small-scale farms. In that process, OB01 felt that this organization marginalized the perspectives and participation of small farmers, and that they spoke as though they were speaking on behalf of farmers when they were not. He felt that this organization was more interested in tinkering with the system than transforming it, and that they were too worried about maintaining their relationship with government than with farmers. A similar frustration came from NF02. She said, “[this organization] drives me up a wall. They are so non-political. They are not radical.” In this way, far from being apolitical, these participants were politically

engaged and used farming as a means of living into a more sustainable and just reality.

### **5.4.3 Relational farming and social action**

Manual labour requirements and a desire for shared agriculture create spaces of learning and social action. As noted previously, organic farming practices used by back-to-the-landers have lower capital costs but higher manual labour requirements. One advantage of the food movement is that eaters increasingly want to know where their food comes from and, at times, want to participate in the production of that food. All participants I interviewed invited their customers to spend time working on the farm. FD Farm invited participants in the Good Food Club, a Winnipeg based program to promote healthy sustainable eating, to work on the farm once a week. NF Farm invited their community to participate in a farm work day, where interested people work on the farm and share in the harvest. These spaces become places of shared learning about farming, about farming challenges, as well as spaces to mobilize social action.

After being threatened by the government of Manitoba over food safety practices, OB Farm invited their “food community” to come work on the farm, to butcher a pig together, and to discuss what their collective approach would be to advocate for their right to an alternative food system. The food community used this time to plan how they would engage the Province of Manitoba, including the creation of a phone chain to mobilize the food community to come to the farm if the farm was raided. The community wrote letters to their local MLAs, found legal assistance, and discussed potential long-term solutions that would allow them to

continue to directly buy food from the farm.

#### **5.4.4 Activists that Farm or Farmers who are Activists?**

The two farms that were the most engaged with social activism outside of the farm were those engaged with food-based activism prior to becoming farmers. FD01 described himself as a food activist from an early age. “In high school I was an activist type of person, doing speeches on global hunger and food.” He spent time learning about food systems and working with farmers overseas before becoming a farmer. Before moving back to the land, NF01 and NF02 organized 100-mile Manitoba, in which 100 people committed to eat food from within 100 miles for 100 days. NF01 and NF02 also became engaged with food issues through activism in other areas. NF02 worked on issues of migrant labour and women’s security. This was her primary motivation for working on the 100-mile diet:

At our first meeting for the 100-mile diet we wanted the group to work on migrant labour. We didn’t call it ‘eat local’ we made this about asking others, ‘Is there a sweat shop in your refrigerator?’ We are concerned about economic and migrant issues.

NF01 began to embrace food-based issues through his work with indigenous communities in Canada. “In 1996 I went to a native gardening orientation...this was formative as I started to be able to make links between gardening and social justice.” As was discussed in the previous section on motivations, for NF01 and NF02, farming was an extension of their activism. It was an attempt to live a responsible life rather than simply talk about it.

This suggests that Ploeg’s description of the small-holder, or peasant, farmer’s preference for calling farming a form of activism, may be the result of one’s

experience with activism itself. The difference between how research participants engaged in off-farm approaches to activism may simply be that some participants never wanted to be activists. They wanted to farm, and the forms of activism they have engaged in have been intimately tied to issues directly impacting their farming practices, as opposed to broader societal justice issues related to gender equity, sustainability, migrant labour, and economic disparity. In other words, some farmers interviewed began farming because they were already activists and wanted to live a more socially responsible lifestyle. Other participants, however, became activists because they wanted to farm a certain way that was marginalized by industrial agricultural paradigms.

**5.5. Learning Outcomes**

Based on these processes I have pulled out learning outcomes related to both instrumental and communicative learning. As instrumental and communicative learning outcomes are intertwined I have re-categorized into three main headings: farming outcomes, sustainability outcomes, and social action outcomes.

**Figure 3: Learning Outcomes**

	Learning Outcomes
Sustainable Agriculture	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Agro-ecological farming methods that promote biodiversity</li> <li>2. Co-production with nature</li> <li>3. Composting</li> <li>4. Local/low input agriculture</li> <li>5. Rotation based farming</li> </ol>

	6. Value-added production
Sustainable Food Systems	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Short-decentralized markets between farmers and eaters</li> <li>2. Less processed foods</li> <li>3. The absence of direct government subsidies</li> <li>4. Fewer fossil fuels burned in production and transportation</li> </ol>
Social Action	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Transparent and open farming operations</li> <li>2. Mobilized networks of farmers and eaters pushing government for fewer barriers to small-scale farms</li> <li>3. Community farming days for consumers to participate in food production</li> <li>4. Participation in organic growers networks</li> <li>5. Farming</li> </ol>

### **5.6. Transformative Learning**

As noted in Chapter Three, TL theory explains various types of adult learning and how this learning occurs. So far we have discussed two types of learning represented in TL theory: instrumental and communicative. The following section will describe the third, which is transformative learning. TL theory describes the process whereby an individual adopts a new frame of reference as the result of a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1997, 2003). While early approaches to the theory understood the disorienting dilemma to be a single event, other TL theory researchers have stressed this disorienting dilemma may come from a cumulative set of events (Taylor, 2008). In their studies related broadly to food and TL theory, Macdonald et al. (1999) and Kerton and Sinclair (2009) found that because everyone must eat and norms are ingrained over the course of everyday,

transformed perspectives about food seem more like a “journey” than a “decision” at any one point in time.

Disorientation and critical reflection were a part of every individual’s story. However, transformative learning as the result of a “single disorienting dilemma” did not describe the experience of the majority of research participants. NF02 was the only participant who spoke of a single event sparking a disorienting dilemma. NF02 is a woman originally from Ontario who moved to Winnipeg. She grew up in a family that believed in the importance of local fresh produce. As noted previously, when she moved to Winnipeg and entered university and work life, she faced the disorientation of local fresh food being inaccessible from the grocery store where she was buying food. However, NF02’s “key moment” in the grocery store came within the context of a series of other disorienting dilemmas, which included working an office job. She described her office job in similarly disorienting terms. After growing up in an environment where “work” means “manual labour”, she had trouble understanding how work performed indoors while seated could be considered work. “I hated being inside with my job in summer. I couldn’t do it.” Although NF02’s grocery store event can be considered a “key moment”, it did not result in a paradigm shift. NF02 grew up in an environment in which local fresh food was valued, with parents who grew and preserved their own food. Her disorienting dilemma was the result of a barrier to those values, which, in turn, motivated action in the form of farming.

A series of smaller disorienting dilemmas leading individuals to farm was true for all participants. As mentioned above, the common disorienting dilemma

many participants spoke of was the inability to access local food. OB01 and OB02 were used to a higher quality of food they found in Europe. OB02 said, “We didn’t like the food we were buying as there were huge differences of quality from the food we could get in Holland.” Similar to NF02 they found grocery shopping itself to be a disorienting experience. OB02 said, “I remember getting sick from the food at Superstore and thinking ‘I don’t eat food to get sick.’” Similar to NF02, this was also in the context of a series of other disorientations. OB01 and OB02 were beginning to have children and getting frustrated with the transience and lack of authenticity they found in their former careers. Their dilemma also did not result in a paradigm shift but did result in increased motivation to farm. They believed in good quality, sustainable local food, and the experience of not being able to access it was a dilemma that caused them to farm.

Similarly, IL01 and IL02 described their disorienting experience as being unable to find quality sustainably grown food. IL01 said, “We love food. We knew what food could be and we couldn’t find it. Can you trust a tomato in January?” They both grew up accessing local fresh food, and their disorientation was, like other participants, their inability to access that food in their chosen context.

NF01 experienced disorientation when volunteering overseas in Brazil and working with indigenous communities in Canada. Similar to most other participants, there was no single disorienting dilemma that he experienced. Instead, multiple experiences created space for him to critically reflect on social justice and disparity:

In 1996 I went to a native gardening orientation taught by Menno Wiebe because I was going to BC to work with indigenous communities. After Brazil I went to university, and then started working in Manitoba. This was formative as I started to be able to make links between gardening, social

justice. There was no big a-ha moment, but seeds were planted.

In 96' I lived in an oil patch with aboriginal people and saw impacts of oil on people in most visceral fashion that has haunted and inspired me. It has made it difficult to overlook issues of my own consumption

NF01 suggested that gardening creates space for longer-term learning and reflection:

Gardening is humbling work; it is part of the process. Gardening is a step backwards in the trajectory of history, civilization and urbanization. I think of Barbara Kingsolver who says education is about getting away from soil and working with your hands.

NF01 did not experience a paradigm shift in relation to sustainability or social justice. Instead the paradigm shift that came to him (over time) related to how one engages activism. Previously activism had been external, as he travelled to live in Brazil or with indigenous communities. The disorientation he experienced while working in these communities caused him to want to live more sustainably at home. He learned to understand activism in part as living in “well-being with the world” and “changing the world mindset to be more localized, trying to live a wholesome life.”

As noted previously, FD01 grew up interested in growing food. While volunteering overseas he saw deeper and closer connections between farmers and eaters. People shared in the work and in the harvest. “We were inspired by our time in Africa. The idea that you shared farming, farmers grow their own food and share that food with neighbours. It was more relational.” This experience inspired him to replicate this approach when they returned to Manitoba. However, the perspective that farmers should be supported by communities, and that it is important to know where your food comes from was a perspective fostered in his childhood. He

described having a “romantic notion of working with farmers” in his youth, and in high school “being an activist type of person, doing speeches on global hunger.” The disorientation he experienced volunteering in Africa inspired a new kind of action, but his frame of reference remained intact.

### **5.6.1 Discussion on Transformative Learning**

TL theory, particularly as described by Mezirow, explains the transformative learning experience as a linear progression towards enlightenment as adults break from the oppressive ideologies that dominated their youth (Mezirow, 1997). The conversations I had with participants, however, suggested this may not always be the case. Participants spoke about multiple ‘disorienting dilemmas’, which led me to conclude that Mezirow’s (1997) understanding of transformative learning does not describe the experience of the back-to-the-landers that participated in this research. All participants indicated that their childhood experiences were critical in their later decision to farm. Rather than transforming the frame of reference adopted from their childhood, the disorienting experiences they experienced spurred critical reflection, which, in turn, spurred transformative behaviors. Behavioral change, exemplified in a physical move back to the land, was prevalent, but perspective transformation did not occur.

This does not suggest that individuals do not experience transformative learning in the way described by Mezirow (1997, 2003); my research simply did not substantiate it. My research results provide an opportunity for TL theorists to explore how an individual’s childhood experience and learning over longer periods of time may positively impact one’s ability to learn and be critically reflective

individuals when they become adults.

### **5.6.2 Restorative Learning**

As stated above, TL theory is a theory of how adults learn. My research suggests that TL theory literature should be expanded to better understand how childhood learning could foster critically reflective and socially active individuals.

The importance of childhood experiences in my research can be encouraging for those seeking to instill values in individuals at a young age to live more just and sustainably responsible lives. Transformative experiences are rare, can be threatening or traumatic for individuals experiencing them, and are difficult for external actors to facilitate (Kerton and Sinclair, 2010). Reducing barriers for children to produce and eat fresh, sustainably grown food is potentially more feasible and more effective than capitalizing or facilitating a disorienting dilemma. Rooting learning in one's own childhood experience, in a positive way and helping an individual restore a lost paradigm, is an affirming way to engage adults whose childhood was not traumatic.

While not dealt with adequately in this thesis, one area for further exploration would be to understand back-to-the-landers' experiences in relation to discourse on restorative learning. Growing from TL theory, restorative learning describes a process of restoring personal ethics suppressed through competing societal norms (Lange, 2004). While experiencing the same sense of disillusionment described by the disorienting dilemma in TL theory, restorative learning describes a process that renews perspectives and inspires social action, but does not require one's frame of reference to be transformed. Through a study of individuals

experiencing mid-life crises, Lange described the differences between TL theory and restorative learning:

Throughout the course, the participants clearly stated that they did not transform their fundamental principles, and values as transformative learning theory often supposes. Through their self-reflections, most of the participants echoed Dan in saying that they were able to return to their inner compass, which was submerged under the deluge of adult expectations, cultural scripts, and workplace practices” (Lange, 2004, p. 130).

The restorative process described by Lange allowed participants to be rooted in their uncritically assimilated paradigm while also creating space for critical reflection and subsequent social action (ibid).

All individuals I interviewed experienced components of transformative learning. Many participants experienced the process of eating itself to be a form of disorientation, as they could not access fresh local food in the current industrial agricultural system. All participants had experiences that pulled them out of their day-to-day reality, and gave them space to reflect on how to live a more socially and ecologically responsible lifestyle. However, no participant’s narrative involved a disorienting dilemma that changed his or her frame of reference. Rather, the series of disorienting experiences of participants restored a personal ethic within participants, which spurred them to transformative behaviors.

### ***5.7 Chapter Summary***

This chapter discussed the learning processes and outcomes of the back-to-the-landers I interviewed. While analyzing research data, I found instrumental and communicative learning processes to be intertwined. These back-to-the-landers engaged in instrumental and communicative learning through action-reflection

cycles. As they farmed they learned more about sustainability. This resulted in learning outcomes like the development of an agro-ecological approach to farming, a preference for short-decentralized markets, and the creation of transparent farming operations as a means of sharing learning and sparking social action.

I then looked at the degree to which transformative learning occurred with the participants I interviewed. I concluded that while behavioral transformations occurred as a result of a series of disorienting dilemmas, perspective transformations did not occur. Research participants did not move back to the land because a series of disorienting dilemmas sparked critical reflection. Instead, in all cases, participants were seeking to recover learning that was ingrained in them as children. This sparked the suggestion that further research should be done on the relationship between transformative learning and restorative learning.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **6.1. Chapter Introduction**

This study attempted to better understand the learning experiences of back-to-the-landers and the significance of this learning for sustainable agri-food systems. In particular, I focused on the learning underpinning research participants' decisions to move back to the land, and how that learning contributes to farm-based social action in Manitoba. The objectives were: 1) to identify the types of learning that have led people to join the back-to-the-land movement; 2) to explore the types of practices being used by back-to-the-land farmers and what led them to use these approaches; 3) to examine whether, and if so how, these farmers are sharing their learning with others; and 4) to identify whether transformative learning has led people to join the back-to-the-land movement.

Between July 2013 and May 2014, I spent time interviewing and participating in the life of seven individuals on four different farms. I conducted narrative research to describe the experiences of back-to-the-landers in Manitoba. I used a narrative inquiry approach to fill a gap of TL theory research, as TL theory focuses primarily on the impacts of single events and experiences. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I asked research participants to speak about their experiences of learning over a lifetime, and how these experiences may have influenced their move back to the land. I analyzed the data using NVivo qualitative software. During the analysis stage, I treated each narrative as its own intact single story, and reorganized these narratives into key themes to find commonalities and differences.

## **6.2 Summary of research objectives**

The first objective (identifying the types of learning that lead back-to-the-landers to farm) was addressed primarily in the section on motivations in Chapter Four. The experience of research participants suggested that learning was gradual and multi-faceted, and that instrumental and communicative learning led to an action-reflection cycle, which prompted them to move rurally. Some of the participants' learning was broadly related to a desire to live a more just and sustainable lifestyle. Other learning reflected their desires to be able to access fresh local food.

The second objective (to explore the types of practices being used by back-to-the-land farmers and what led them to use these approaches) was addressed in Chapter Four on back-to-the-lander practices, and Chapter Five on learning. Participants' farming practices included crop diversity, rotational farming, co-production with nature, and the use of local inputs. Their farming business also focused on decreasing food miles between their farms and consumers, with products sold through direct marketing and CSAs. The learning processes and experiences that fostered these sustainable farming practices included knowledge passed down from family, discourse with other farmers through apprenticeships, as well as experiences with poverty and injustice around the world. These experiences increased their desire to live a more just and sustainable lifestyle.

The third objective (to examine whether, and if so how, these farmers are sharing their learning with others) came through primarily in Chapter Five on shared learning and social action. The participants I interviewed understood their

approach to farming as a form of social action itself. Creating an alternative and more sustainable food system was considered part of a movement that challenged the industrial agricultural norms. Rather than being reclusive, these alternative farming operations were transparent spaces. All farms organized events where eaters could learn where their food came from, and how each farm was working to increase sustainable practices. Some participants I interviewed also worked to mobilize networks of farmers and eaters to advocate for fewer barriers to small-scale farms.

The fourth objective (to identify whether transformative learning has led people to join the back-to-the-land movement) was addressed in Chapter Five. I concluded that transformative learning, when understood as fundamental perspective change, did not occur in any of the participants I interviewed. However, *elements of* transformative learning did occur, which motivated participants to move back to the land. For example, all participants experienced a series of disorienting dilemmas that encouraged behavioral change. As all participants noted the importance of childhood experiences in their motivation to move back to the land, I concluded that there is opportunity for further research on restorative learning as a way of understanding the relationship between childhood experiences and adult transformative learning.

### ***6.3 Potential for Encouraging New Farmers***

Throughout the course of this research, I learned about the importance of finding ways to encourage more people to farm. In Chapter Two, I discussed the differing narratives related to whether organic agriculture has the ability to feed a

growing population. This Malthusian narrative has justified industrial agricultural practices based on yields alone (Badgley et al., 2007). The narrative, however, has been challenged by economists like Amartya Sen, who have pointed to hunger as an issue of governance and access rather than production (Sen and Sen, 1982).

This narrative has also been challenged, as organic agriculture does not have the same support in the form of crop insurance and subsidies, nor do organic operations tend to be located on the same quality of land as industrial agriculture (Badgley and Perfecto, 2007). In addition, organic agriculture has the clear disadvantage that it is labour intensive in a sector in which there are fewer farmers and less farming knowledge being passed down generationally. NF02 made this point as well. “The key question in the whole food movement is ‘who is going to do the work [if conventional farms transition to organic ones]?’”

Research findings emphasize that access to fresh local food and access to land and farming are necessary when fostering a desire to farm. Knowledge of what local, quality food could be like were key motivations for all participants I interviewed. All participants also had access to land and farm labour either through family and friends or through internships and mentoring opportunities. This indicates that knowledge of the issues and problems related to industrial agriculture are not sufficient motivations to become a farmer. A love of the work of farming and a love for food are also key motivators. Consequently, giving children access to healthy local food, gardens, and farms may have positive impacts increase their desire to farm. Working with daycare and school lunch programs to provide healthy local food and farm visits may create within children a desire for a sustainable and

healthy food system, and make farming a more normative and viable livelihood choice.

Research participants all cited a desire for more family farms, and spoke of the high cost of agricultural land as a barrier to increasing the number of small family farms. The high cost of land in Manitoba causes organic farms to be sequestered to marginal land, often in the wet Interlake region.

To reduce barriers to organic farming and encourage new farmers, The United States government and non-profits such as Farm Aid have developed a series of programs to train young farmers, provide grants and low cost-financing options, and connect retiring farmers with new farmers. In correlation with these programs there has been a 38% increase in new farmers in the US over the last 5 years (Weintraub, 2013). Similar programs exist in Canada, but are geared more towards industrial farmers. For example, as of October 1, 2014 Agriculture Canada offered on their website a \$20,000 subsidy to a new farmer but only if they are a graduate in agriculture, agri-food science, and veterinary medicine. Only one of the seven participants in my research would have qualified for such a subsidy, as agricultural programs are often heavily weighted towards conventional approaches.

#### ***6.4. Research Learning***

Throughout this research, I learned a number of things. A key learning for me was that qualitative research relies heavily on the researcher's skill set. A strong and rigorous methodology and set of methods is important, but still contingent on one's ability to conduct interviews, gather information when interviewees are reluctant to

share, and organize, analyze, and critically self-reflect on the research. During my research and interview process, my interviewing skills improved greatly. This is in part due to my increased experience from the previous interviews, which taught me how to form questions that encourage participants to share, and taught me methods of gathering more information. My skills related to intangible components of interviewing, like how to make the interviewee feel comfortable and at ease, also increased.

This research challenged my own participatory research paradigm. An unresolved tension through the interviewing process involved my concerns about the factual accuracy of personal narratives. To address this, I resolved to treat each narrative as something that will share important information about how each individual makes meaning of their experiences. In this way, my concerns shifted from worrying about the “accuracy” of each narrative, to focusing on the participants, and how their own story reflected their values and learning. Throughout the process, I needed to hold this in tension with other desires I had as a researcher, which included a desire to understand how a more complex and longitudinal narrative might challenge the linear retelling of narratives often found in TL theory literature.

In my interviews, I found that individuals often tell linear stories emphasizing key points of interest. For example, when speaking about why individuals farm, many participants tended to emphasize social and environmental issues. Throughout this research, I sought to challenge these narratives and explore additional information and deeper narratives, like participants’ desires to raise their

children outside of the city, and the fact that they simply enjoyed farming over the possibilities of an office job. I became more comfortable not simply receiving information, but also pushing for more complex and multi-faceted narratives. The tension between simply gathering information and seeking out deeper narratives is represented in the broader research discourse between social constructivist and critical social science approaches (Creswell, 2007).



**Photo 4: Daniel Leonard Hay Bale Day**

Participation in this research challenged me. Butchering animals, working 14-hour days out in the sun, pushing my body and mind to the limits, and waking up

the next day with the desire to do it all over again forced me to consider what my own path would be both personally and professionally. In the course of this research, I have greatly doubted my ability to work any job in which I am not physically using my body. While my tolerance for cubicles and technology has diminished, my admiration has grown for those who have chosen the blood, sweat, tears, as well as the joy, freedom and autonomy of being a small-scale farmer. Far from being peasants on the brink of survival, these farmers are living deeply and freely with their communities and the environment they rely on.

### ***6.5. Perspectives on the Future of Farming***

To conclude, I will offer the perspectives shared by these participants about their hopes for the future, and about the possibility of creating a more sustainable, just, and healthy food system. In the interviews, I asked all participants to tell me what their hopes were for the future. This did not relate specifically to any research objective, but did allow participants a space to speak openly about their own farm and where they see the future of the broader sustainable food system movement. And now, as is fitting with narrative research, participants' stories and experiences will form the final research conclusions:

The paradigm shift is happening. The number of small farmers here is growing. I was invited to be a keynote speaker at a CSA conference in Ontario and of the 300 people present, 90% of them were in their 20s or 30s. These are different demographics than who is farming conventionally. At the same time, St. Norbert's market is busy but it's not as busy as Superstore (FD01).

Our future plans will take four lifetimes. When we slow down then what? We've thought about apprentices living in the house, creating a learning hub, pass the farm on and retire by sharing knowledge. I am optimistic about the future of our farm. It's very productive land, and we are excited to see what

ten years will show for our food...At the same time there is a heavy trend moving in the opposite end, larger corporate farmers. We can't do anything about corporate farmers. We can't see how the industrial system can maintain itself, it can only collapse, and in extreme collapse there is extreme hope for new seed to be planted. Our lands are being taught to take care of themselves (TM01).

Need more farmers, and we are encouraged by new farmers coming. We don't offer advice unless asked. Starting to farm requires character depth. Old farmers criticizing us was also motivation. Our advice to new farmers is to be hesitant and to talk to someone who has already done it. Growing food is a life-long commitment. There is lots of enthusiasm in new farmers that is misguided. You've got to make your own mistakes though. But be careful because enthusiasm is a weakness (IL01).

We have learned lots. We are happy we moved here and our garden was fantastic. The pigs were a challenge but we will have pigs again. We are getting seven eggs a day from our ten laying hens. We have good quality land to do what we want to do- build a green house, have lambs, chickens, and pigs. We are part of a food movement globally not just here (NF02).

We don't regret our move at all. Our children never want to live in the city again. It's gratifying. We homeschool. We have a difference pace of life. You can stop what you're doing, be interrupted. That's fantastic. We do not lock car or house. We spend lots of time outside and have lots of flexibility... People often say about farming, "That's so romantic" as a way to dismiss things, but I have nothing against romance (NF01).

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## Appendix 1: Sample Life-grid

<b>Year/ Life Event</b>	
<b>Family/ Housing</b>	
<b>School/ Work</b>	
<b>Food Learning</b>	
<b>Farming Learning</b>	
<b>Other Learning</b>	
<b>Action</b>	

## **Appendix 2: Possible Questions/Prompts in Life-grid Interviews**

1. What exposure did you have to farming growing up?
  - Did you have lots of exposure to the outdoors?
  - If so, what did that look like? Gardening? Playing? Hiking?
  - When you were younger did you ever think you would be a farmer?
  - If not, what changed?
2. What motivates you to farm?
3. When did you start to think seriously about farming?
  - What other things were going on in your life and around you when you were considering this?
  - What caused you to finally decide to actually farm?
  - Why farming and not a different life change?
4. How do you find success for your farm?
5. Do you think that others should consider farming?
  - Do you make attempts to share your learning with others?
6. What are your hopes for your family and farm in the future?
  - If you have kids, do you hope that they also farm?
7. Would you consider your farming style sustainable?
  - Is it more sustainable than conventional farming?

### **Appendix 3: Letter to Potential Research Participants**

Dear.....,

My name is Daniel Leonard and I am a Masters student at the Natural Resources Institute at the University of Manitoba. I am researching the experiences of back-to-the-landers in Manitoba. The purpose is to understand what has led back-to-the-landers to farm, how it is sustainable, and how their learning is being shared with others. The goal is to understand how agricultural practices are changing in Manitoba and what contribution back-to-the-landers are making to this. The research strategy is “narrative inquiry.” This strategy uses individual’s life stories as the “data” from which to explore key research questions. In this research looking I am looking at individuals stories in relation to how their own story has led them to participation in sustainable food systems.

I am interested in discussing working with you on this project. This would consist of a good portion of your time in from July 2013-January 2014. I would begin by working with you on your farm to understand your practices and so that we can get to know each other more. When things slow down in the winter, then we would conduct two interviews to understand your own story back to the land. All of your information would be kept confidential. One potential risk to the research is that your farm would be identified due to the fact that I am only working with 5 farmers. To mitigate this risk all of your information will coded and kept in a locked place. Pseudonyms will be used unless otherwise requested. All notes and data will be destroyed after 2 years.

Your participation in the project is always voluntary. Should you at anytime in the process decide you do not want to participate in the project you can opt out. No reasons are needed. My participation on your farm is on a volunteer basis only and no compensation should be given.

Let me know if you are interested. If you are interested then I would like to be able to meet together and discuss the project further, including any of your questions. I look forward to hearing from you.

I hope that my research will show the value of your practices and that in some small way perhaps address some issues/difficulties that you may face.

Sincerely,

Daniel Leonard

University of Manitoba  
Natural Resources Institute  
303-70 Dysart Road