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Acts of Citizenship in Time and Space among Agricultural Migrant Workers in Quebec during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT *Migrant farm workers recruited under Canada's temporary employment programs work in difficult environments, under poor working conditions, and live in unsafe housing in remote rural communities. Fearful of repatriation or replacement, many accept their working and living conditions as part of a necessary sacrifice to improve their living conditions and those of their families in the countries of origin. At the same time, some migrant farm workers assert their agency by escaping from farms, subverting regulations, or challenging various forms of discipline used to control their bodies and activities. Following Isin and Nielsen (2008), we refer to these actions as "acts of citizenship." Drawing on research conducted among migrant farm workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in the province of Quebec, Canada, we situate these acts, particularly the tendency to escape from abusive and exploitative working relationships, in a particular space and time shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, we demonstrate the link between these acts and certain conditions and opportunities that arose at that time, such as increased support for migrant farmworkers by a non-governmental organization and the facilitation of movement of migrant farmworkers across the Canada-U.S.-border by the "migration industry."*

KEYWORDS migrant farm workers; Canada; COVID-19; acts of citizenship; political assertiveness

As widely documented, migrant farmworkers recruited to work in Canada on temporary employer-tied contracts toil in difficult and risky environments while living in crowded and unsafe accommodation in remote, rural

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communities (Basok, 2002; Binford, 2013; Hennebry et al., 2016; Preibisch & Otero, 2014). They are pressured to work long hours, fast, and with little rest (Basok et., 2014; Bélanger & Candiz, 2015; Hennebry et al., 2016). Fearful of being repatriated, replaced by other workers, or disciplined in another fashion, migrant workers often have to comply with these demands (Basok & Bélanger, 2016; McLaughlin, 2010). They accept their working and living conditions as a necessary sacrifice they must make to improve the living conditions of their families and provide a more secure future for their children (McLaughlin et al., 2017).

At the same time, despite their precariousness and "deportability" (Basok et al., 2014; Vosko, 2019), some migrant farmworkers assert their agency by escaping, subverting regulations, or challenging various forms of discipline that are used to control their working bodies, leisure activities, as well as expressions of sexuality and love. These forms of resistance can be collective or individual, formal (i.e., strikes, rallies and protests) or informal "everyday forms of resistance," to use Scott's (1985) famous expression (Basok, 2002; Basok & Bélanger, 2016; Cohen & Hjalmarson, 2020; Grez, 2019; Perry, 2020). In this article, we explore how the COVID-19 pandemic created new conditions and opportunities among migrant farmworkers to assert their rights and engage in "acts of citizenship" as we call them, borrowing this concept from Isin and Nielsen (2008). We refer to these actions as acts of citizenship because these workers do not merely engage in resistance, but rather, they claim rights to access protections and benefits that are denied to them by virtue of their insecure residency status in Canada. The Canadian state generally reserves these rights to those who are legal citizens or residents, and by engaging in acts of citizenship, migrants challenge the exclusionary boundaries of belonging. Drawing on research conducted among migrant farmworkers during the COVID-19 pandemic, we illustrate how migrant farmworkers confront their employers either on their own or with the help of solidarity organizations, in addition to adopting certain informal or minor acts of citizenship. Furthermore, we contend that migrant farmworkers resist exploitative and abusive conditions by escaping from farms, a practice we call "mobile acts of citizenship" in this article. These acts aim to disrupt the socially unjust treatment migrant farmworkers experience in Canada. Following Isin (2009), we see these acts of citizenship as "instances of rupture" that have emerged in response to new opportunities and particular measures and practices adopted under the COVID-19 pandemic. We, therefore, situate these acts of citizenship in a particular space and time, namely, in Quebec during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the pandemic raised new risks and concerns for migrant workers and triggered new fears and anxieties among them. In an atmosphere characterized by heightened stress, some workers, dissatisfied with their working conditions or treatment by their employers, may have felt more determined than ever before to seek alternatives. Second, in an effort to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus and regulate the safety of such "essential" workers, the Canadian federal state and provincial authorities provided funding

to some non-governmental organizations to support farmworkers by welcoming them at the airport and providing them with information about the virus. These organizations were thus able to establish contact with a wide range of workers in Quebec and instruct them not only about COVID-19 but also about their labour and social rights as farmworkers in Canada. In this study, we analyze how the initial contact between migrant workers and RATTMAQ (Assistance Network for Migrant Agricultural Workers in Quebec) enabled workers to access to RATTMAQ's support when they needed to confront their employers or seek other solutions. And third, the presence and growing visibility in the region under study of a "migration industry" that facilitates the unauthorized movement of migrants from Canada to the USA has presented migrant farmworkers with an alternative to working in Canada, prompting some to escape from their farms.

In the sections that follow we start by reviewing the conceptual literature on acts of citizenship. We then outline our methodology and present an overview of the two streams of recruitment of agricultural workers under the Canadian Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). We then discuss specific acts of citizenship among the migrant farmworkers employed in Quebec during the pandemic, focusing, in particular, on escape or acts of mobile citizenship, as we call them. By relating these acts to specific conditions that emerged during the global health crisis in Quebec, we draw attention to the situatedness of acts of citizenship in time and space.

Acts of Citizenship

Non-citizen migrants are often excluded from many rights, protections, and benefits reserved for citizens. Even though they face numerous obstacles to asserting their agency, they nevertheless engage in activities that challenge exclusionary practices. Critical citizenship scholars see these forms of agency as acts of citizenship aimed at redrawing the boundaries of inclusion (Isin 2009; Isin & Nielsen 2008; Nyers, 2015). For Isin (2009), acts of citizenship are "those acts that transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political" (p. 383). Emphasizing the transformative potential of these acts, researchers (e.g., Nyers, 2015; Rygiel, 2011; Schwiertz, 2021; Squire, 2017) have documented that by making claims for rights and recognition, migrant citizens, as Nyers (2015) calls them, transform the legal regimes and institutions of citizenship.

While voicing concerns individually may be a risky alternative for many migrant farmworkers, collective strategies of resistance have been possible, particularly when assisted by unions or grassroots organizations (e.g., Basok & Bélanger, 2016; Mešić & Wikström, 2021; Sexsmith, 2016). By collaborating with grassroots organizations, such as RATTMAQ, as in our case study, these workers transformed themselves into actors capable of asserting their agency.

Migrants may decide, depending on their circumstances, whether to engage in formal forms of mobilization or employ informal contestations (Paret & Gleeson, 2016; Rogaly, 2021). Among temporary migrant farmworkers in Canada, such informal practices of resistance may include collective slowdowns (as is the case among the migrant farmworkers discussed below), working in unauthorized jobs, reappropriating farm produce, and falsifying hours of work (Cohen & Hjalmarson, 2020).

These forms of resistance exemplify what some critical citizenship scholars would call minor or informal acts of citizenship (Darling 2017, p. 189; Squire, 2011), including speech acts (Isin, 2009), that is, linguistic expressions of new understandings of actors as subjects worthy of having and claiming rights.

Critical citizenship scholars see these and similar acts of citizenship as performances. By creating a scene, actors constitute instances of rupture with established scripts perpetuated through habitus, practice, conduct, discipline, and routine (Isin 2009, p. 379). As Mešić and Wikström (2021) elaborate, ruptures constitute "a break from existing understandings, practices and routines of citizenship, with the result that the order of things no longer remains compatible with what it previously had been" (p. 521). By rendering visible migrant farmworkers and the conditions under which they toll on foreign lands these instances of rupture may provoke public and political action to bring about greater respect for the migrant workers and the contributions they make to local economies (Mešić & Wikström, 2021).

In addition to speaking up against social injustice, migrants may opt to switch to another employer or get transferred to another position within the same organization (Gansemans & D'Haese, 2020, p. 399). When these options are impossible, they may decide to quit their job, an option Hirschman (1970) identified as "exit."

In the Canadian context, several researchers (e.g., Basok & Bélanger, 2016; McLaughlin & Hennebry, 2013; Perry, 2020) documented that when faced with abusive working conditions, some migrants, recruited through the TFWP, absconded from their authorized job placements, and remained in Canada without status. Perry (2020) and Basok and Bélanger (2016) recognize subversive subjectivities in these acts of escape. Perry (2020) sees them as "ordinary yet powerful agential practices" that take place "outside the realm of the visible" (p. 428). He contends that while exit from work does not destabilize the systemic nature of exploitation, "it can provide workers with a dignified means of refusing unfree labour relations and a life overtaken by work… thereby providing a channel for expressing autonomy in the face of everyday precarity" (Perry, 2020, p. 434). By escaping from their current employers, workers thus remove themselves from the space of institutionalized precarity and "carve out an autonomous life that is at once meaningful and imperceptible to institutional mechanisms of power" (p. 436).

Emphasizing migrants' autonomy in shaping migratory trajectories and overcoming obstacles, Mezzadra (2004) draws attention to escape as a way through which migrants subvert "rigidities of the international division of

labour" and thus "constitute one of the eradicated and denied motors of the radical transformations which have influenced capitalist modes of production" (p. 274). Castracani (2019) uses Mezzadra's notion of the right to escape as a form of resistance among temporary farmworkers in Quebec. We label these acts of resistance as acts of mobile citizenship.

By "mobile citizenship" Basok and Candiz (2020) refer to "the right to move safely and securely within a territory without fear of being detained, robbed, assaulted, or kidnapped," while the "acts of mobile citizenship" are conceptualized as strategies adopted by migrants to continue the journey without interruption (p. 2). Even though this concept was developed to address the mobility of transit migrants (that is, those who travel through certain territories and countries towards a preferred destination), we suggest in this article that it can also be used to capture the mobility of migrant farmworkers in the labour market, including escape to a neighbouring country.

In this article, we are interested not only in the acts of citizenship but also in the structural conditions that contribute to these acts. Situating our analysis at the macro-level constituted by the COVID-19 pandemic, we link it to changes at the micro- and meso-levels. At the micro-level, the pandemic magnified tensions in workplaces that were already present on farms employing migrant workers even before this health crisis commenced. At the meso-level, we recognize that the changing role of RATTMAQ in the lives of migrant farmworkers in Quebec was made possible by new forms of funding during the pandemic. Finally, we suggest that border restrictions put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed to the emergence of new opportunities for the "bastard migration industry" (Hernández-León, 2013) that facilitated the illicit movement of migrants across the borders. We see the rise in visibility of this illicit industry among the workers as another meso-level structural component that made the escape strategy possible. In identifying these structural conditions at the micro- and meso-levels during the COVID-19 pandemic, we situate the acts of citizenship we discuss in a specific space and time.

The Study

This research project was conducted in the greater Quebec City and Chaudière-Appalaches region (see Figure 1) between July and October 2021 in partnership with the Quebec City regional office of RATTMAQ.[1] This region, known for its production of fruit and vegetables, particularly strawberries and raspberries, receives approximately 2,000 agricultural workers annually. In the last 20

[1] This Partnership project was funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Development Grants. Nº 890-2020-0024. This research has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of *Université Laval;* REB Clearance # is 2021208 A-8 R-1 / 29-06-2022.

years, the introduction of late strawberry varieties has led to the intensification of agriculture and the extension of the season (Bélanger & Candiz, 2015).

We conducted a total of 22 qualitative interviews with migrant farmworkers recruited to work in Canada through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP): 18 from Guatemala recruited through TFWP's Agricultural Stream and four from Mexico employed under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP), also a component of TFWP (see Table 1). The absence of women in our study reflects their under-representation in the program. According to Zhang et al. (2021), in 2017 only 7.6% of foreign workers in agriculture were women. Furthermore, in the region where research was conducted very few farms employ women.

In-depth qualitative interviews, conducted in Spanish by the authors in public places, focused on the decision to participate in the program, strategies for being admitted into the program, the impact of COVID-19 on participation in the program, working and living conditions in Canada before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their knowledge about their eligibility and access to rights and services.

RATTMAQ was instrumental in the recruitment of study participants. During the pandemic, RATTMAQ was in a unique position to provide outreach to most (if not all) workers in Quebec, as discussed in more detail below. We accompanied RATTMAQ staff to meetings with workers in public places, such as supermarkets, restaurants, soccer fields or parks, as well as farm visits requested by workers who experienced problems with their employers. We used the opportunity to distribute information about our project to migrant farmworkers and invite them to participate in our study. We also used the snowball technique by asking the workers we interviewed for the names of others who would be willing to participate in our study, thus correcting the over-representation in our sample of the workers who had had previous interaction with RATTMAQ and who, as a result, would be more aware of their rights. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software.

Participants[2]	Age	Sex	Country of origin	Program	Number of seasons	Sector
Adrian	33	H	Guatemala	TFWP	2	aviculture
Cristian	39	H	Guatemala	TFWP	12	fruits & vegetables
Enzo	35	H	Mexico	SAWP	1	fruits & vegetables
Rogelio	25	H	Guatemala	TFWP	5	fruits &vegetables
Ernesto	41	H	Guatemala	TFWP	13	fruits & vegetables
Guillermo	29	H	Guatemala	TFWP	1	pigs
Leandro	26	H	Guatemala	TFWP	2	aviculture
Hernan	33	H	Mexico	SAWP	7	fruits & vegetables
Lionel	30	H	Guatemala	TFWP	6	fruits & vegetables
Ignacio	39	H	Guatemala	TFWP	10	fruits & vegetables
Dante	31	H	Mexico	SAWP	4	fruits & vegetables
Javier	26	H	Mexico	SAWP	3	fruits & vegetables
Gaspar	26	H	Guatemala	TFWP	3	nursery
Wilfredo	31	H	Guatemala	TFWP	1	pigs
Adán	26	H	Guatemala	TFWP	4	fruits & vegetables
Reinaldo	23	H	Guatemala	TFWP	4	fruits & vegetables
Maximiliano	40	H	Guatemala	TFWP	5	fruits & vegetables
Melchor	42	H	Guatemala	TFWP	6	dairy
Gregorio	35	H	Guatemala	TFWP	11	dairy
Guido	20	H	Guatemala	TFWP	2	fruits & vegetables
Nestor	38	H	Guatemala	TFWP	10	fruits & vegetables
Fernando	31	H	Guatemala	TFWP	11	fruits & vegetables

Table 1. Characteristics of participants.

[2] All names used in the chart and in the article are pseudonyms.

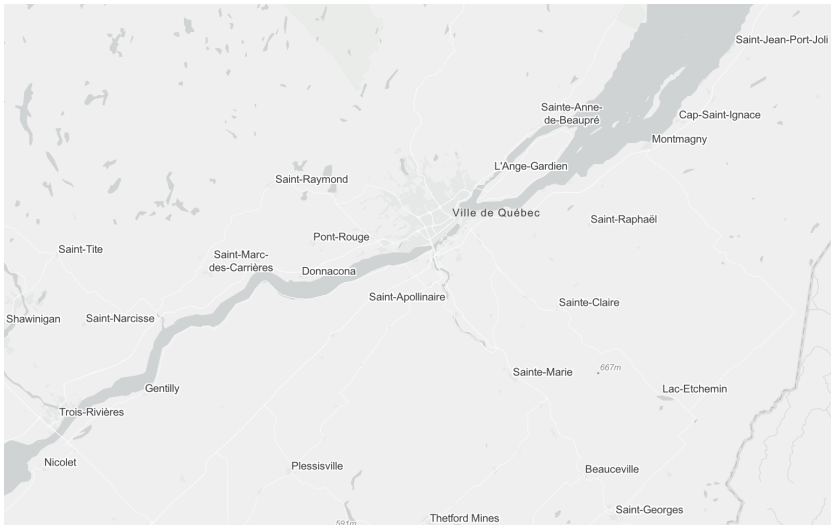

Figure 1. Quebec City and Chaudière-Appalaches Region (source: Department of Geography, Université Laval).

The Canadian Temporary Agricultural Worker Program

Rooted in the 1966 bilateral agreement with Jamaica, the SAWP has expanded to include other Commonwealth Caribbean countries and Mexico. Additionally, in 2002, Canada introduced a new program, known currently as the Agricultural Stream of the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP), that allows employers to recruit workers from any country, and, unlike SAWP, it requires no bilateral agreements with sending countries. In the Agricultural Stream program, most of the workers come from Guatemala (Statistics Canada, 2022a). In 2021, Canada received a total of 61,000 farmworkers recruited on TFWP contracts (Vosko et al., 2022). Among the 18,216 farmworkers authorized to work in Quebec in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022b), most were granted employer-tied contracts through the Agricultural Stream program.

Under TFWP, migrant workers authorized to work in Canada are "permanently temporary" (Hennebry, 2012; Rajkumar et al., 2012); that is, they lack access to permanent residency and corresponding social and political rights. Furthermore, tied by contracts to specific employers, they are subject to unequal power relations (Gayet, 2010), an important factor in their vulnerability and precarity. In this sense, TFWP is responsible for an institutional production of precarity (Goldring & Landolt, 2013) that shapes working conditions of the migrant farmworkers and their access to health, social relations, and housing conditions.

Research on migrant farmworkers in Canada has also emphasized the disproportionate power granted to Canadian growers to select ideal workers for their farms by granting them the unilateral power to assess workers' performance and thus playing a decisive role in migrants' current and future opportunities to remain the program (Basok, 2002; McLaughlin, 2010). Fearing deportation, migrants often perform their submission (McLaughlin, 2010; Basok & Bélanger, 2016) to employers. Deportation, in this case, refers not only to the immediate repatriation of contract workers to their home countries following their dismissal by an employer, but also to the denial of future opportunities for these workers to participate in the program (Basok et al., 2014; Vosko, 2019). Employers who threaten the repatriation and replacement of workers create an environment of fear that forces migrants not only to increase their productivity and compliance, but also to compete with other workers, whether from their country or nationals of other countries, for what they view as scarce positions in the program (Basok et al., 2014; Basok & Bélanger, 2016; Perry, 2018). Yet, even under these conditions, migrants engage in certain acts of citizenship, albeit informal, to break their subordination.

Migrant Farmworkers in Quebec: Compliance and Resistance

Whether migrant farmworkers will assert their rights and challenge the socially unjust treatment on the part of growers depends in part on whether the policy framework permits workers to change employers. By and large, those who are not permitted to do so tend to accept harsh living and working conditions (Fialkowska & Matuszczyk, 2021), a strategy that some researchers coin "constrained loyalty" (Gansemans & D'Haese, 2020; Sexsmith, 2016). The lack of mobility within the labour force and the disproportionate power granted to employers to determine whether a worker is to remain in the program or be repatriated supress agency among migrant farmworkers in Canada. In fact, agricultural employers often opt for those workers who are perceived to be more docile (Preibisch & Binford, 2007).

It is noteworthy that in Quebec, Mexican agricultural guest workers were gradually replaced by Guatemalan workers (Preibisch 2012, p. 72), believed to be more obedient. Guatemalan migrant workers interviewed by Valarezo and Hughes (2012) mentioned that in their pre-departure seminars, IOM trained them to be docile and submissive (Valarezo & Hughes, 2012, p. 106).[3] A Guatemalan worker interviewed in our previous research project,[4] confirms that Guatemalans are obedient, something he sees as their advantage over

[3] Until 2010, IOM Guatemala was the official partner for recruitment services of F.E.R.M.E (Fondation des Entreprises en Recrutement de Main-d'œuvre agricole Étrangère)

[4] "A Decision to Become Undocumented: Mexican Migrants in Leamington, Ontario" funded by the Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS) in 2011, directed by T. Basok in collaboration with D. Belanger and H. Rivas Sanchez.

Mexican workers: "they tell the Guatemalan, 'your job is to do this and very well,' and he goes, and he does it… and the Guatemalan doesn't make the decision to do a job however he or she pleases but prefers to ask first instead."

Yet, in the current study, we came across many workers, Guatemalan and Mexican, who did not wish to accept the status quo and engaged in acts of citizenship that challenge the stereotypes of docility and obedience (Côté-Boucher, 2008). They asserted their rights in various ways. Although rare, some migrants chose to confront their employers and demand better working conditions and justice for themselves and others. Ernesto assisted a co-worker who had been injured by an automated harvester to obtain compensation from *la Commission des normes, de l'équité, de la santé et de la sécurité du travail (CNESST)*:

> It was risky for me, but I have been helping many co-workers who have been injured by machines at work… and the bosses do nothing, they say nothing, and they even started to fix the machine to make it look as if it was his fault. But I recorded them, and they didn't want that, I took photos because the machine wasn't right. The boss pressured my co-worker to work faster, and he grabbed the chain, and then all three fingers came off. Nobody did anything, they wanted us to be quiet and I told him that we were going to fight. He went a month without pay. He didn't want to apply for workers' comp because the boss did not want to waste time to fill out papers. And then I decided to take the risk and that's why I got in trouble, because I insisted that these things be done for him. And he did receive compensation, something like $10,000. (Ernesto)

The threat of dismissal from their jobs and subsequent repatriation is always present. However, there are certain conditions that at least some workers find unbearable, forcing them to confront their employers. Among them are situations of physical or verbal abuse, or refusal on the part of employers to assist injured or sick workers on their farms. Enzo recalls how he reminded his employer of his responsibilities to take care of the migrant workers that work for him:

> I told my boss: 'Thanks to us, you have what you have, yes, and I speak on behalf of everyone... If we get sick, if we need this or that, you have to take care of us as the boss. And you don't.' Here, the priority is my health and my rights, and I don't want them [the bosses] to consider us as garbage or as slaves who manage us as they please, it shouldn't be like that. (Enzo)

Fearful of confronting their employers directly, some workers seek help from their countries' consulates, although consular officials are often reluctant to protect their co-nationals (see Basok, 2002; Basok et al., 2014; Binford, 2013; Valenzuela-Moreno, 2018). Rodolfo was one worker who requested and received support from the Guatemalan consulate. In this case, and contrary to what has been reported in other studies, the Guatemalan government representative took the workers' side and reassured them they have a right to assert rights. As Cristian recalls:

> They told the boss that if he was going to treat his workers badly, he was going to pay a $300 fine or he would be thrown out of the program.[5] The migrant workers have the same rights as the local workers, they said to him. They told us that we should not be afraid, and that we should feel free to tell them what was going on here. They were there to help. (Cristian)

Through these acts, workers seek to protect themselves against abuse. Unable to join unions, they are forced to develop alternative resistance strategies by confronting the employer directly and seeking help from consular offices, even though these acts may jeopardize their future in the program. For Reinaldo, a Guatemalan worker, requesting help from consulates is worth the risk involved:

> I am going to do it. Not just for myself but for the other workers who will continue to work here. I don't want them to worry. We have to put pressure on the consulates so that they come to see how we are doing, and the bosses are going to feel more pressure, they are going to know that we have someone who defends us, who supports us. (Reinaldo)

The workers are fully aware of the risks they take when they assert their rights, however, they prefer taking these risks to tolerating their current conditions. As Gaspar elaborates:

> I've just arrived here. It's possible that they will send me back to Guatemala, and this is the fear that we all have. If they send me back to my country, I will not be able to come back to Canada. And that's why many workers do not say anything to the boss. 'We better keep quiet, even if we don't get paid fully for our work.' But I say to them, 'Well, at least in my case, I am not going to accept it.' We are human beings, not animals. (Gaspar)

In the examples presented above, Reinaldo and Gaspar are engaging in a speech act (Isin, 2009) in which they proclaim themselves and their co-workers as subjects with rights. By doing so, they denounce the daily injustices they face under this program. And, while proclaiming the right to assert rights is not the same as confronting employers to demand these rights, the former may under certain circumstances lead to the latter.

The least risky option within this context of deportability is to adopt hidden or informal strategies of resistance. To counter the pressure to increase productivity, some workers engage in collective slow-down, as was the case on Ernesto's farm. Ernesto explains that they adopted this strategy to protect those who could not keep up from dismissal: "we go at the same pace so that no one

[5]According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2021a), an employer found non-compliant can receive either a monetary penalty (averaging $13,000; see Regino, 2022), a ban from participating in the program, or both.

is left behind. So, among ourselves we take care of this problem and help our co-workers" (Ernesto).

Confronting the employers on their own or with the help of consular officials, employing informal strategies (such as collective slow-down), and engaging in speech acts that represent and articulate the understanding of one's rights, are among the citizenship acts used by migrant farmworkers in Quebec (and elsewhere) before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. While escaping from the farm had been another act of citizenship, or what we call acts of mobile citizenship, prior to 2020, the global health crisis has created new opportunities that enable workers to consider abandoning their current employment, as we discuss in the sections that follow.

Acts of Mobile Citizenship among Migrant Farmworkers

As mentioned earlier, research on migrant farmworkers in Ontario has documented cases of workers who absconded from their farms and stayed behind in Canada without a work permit (e.g., Basok & Bélanger, 2016; McLaughlin & Hennebry, 2013; Perry, 2020; Preibisch & Binford, 2007). Among the infrastructural elements that made the escape possible were social networks with members of their diasporic community, the presence of contractors supplying undocumented workers to employers, and the high demand for agricultural workers, whether legally authorized or undocumented (Basok et al., 2014). These conditions were predominantly absent in the Quebec City region in the past (Bélanger & Candiz, 2014, 2015). Furthermore, paternalistic relationships with their employers, as well as constant surveillance of the farmworkers at work, at home, and in other spaces within the communities that received them, made it nearly impossible for these migrants to abandon their jobs (Basok et al., 2015; Bélanger & Candiz, 2015). Yet, the present study, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, paints a different picture. Among the migrant farmworkers we interviewed, some left their farms or knew of others who had left. Some attempted to cross into the USA, while others tried to obtain an open work permit. We discuss each escape strategy below.

The first type of escape is *from the country.* According to F.E.R.M.E. (Fondation des entreprises en recrutement de main-d'œuvre étrangère), a grower service organization responsible for the administration of TFWP for agricultural workers in Quebec, in 2021 225 workers brought to Quebec as temporary workers abandoned their employment, and most of them tried to cross into the United States. At least 22 of them were intercepted at the border, although the number of those who succeeded in crossing the border is unknown (Dussault, 2021; also see e.g., Bélanger & Candiz, 2021; Blackburn, 2021; Cloutier, 2021; Dussault, 2021).

For Guatemalan workers, it is the lack of alternative employment that forces them to consider becoming undocumented migrants in the U.S. Rogelio

explains: "if we make a mistake or we don't work as fast as the boss wants, we are sent back, and we'll never come back." For Guatemalan workers, according to our study participants, the recruitment companies operating in Guatemala do not permit changes. Rogelio continues:

> The majority of those who go to the U.S. are Guatemalans, because Mexicans have more opportunities here… If things don't work out for Mexicans, they are sent to another farm. If we Guatemalans sometimes make a mistake, we then try to emigrate to the U.S. (Rogelio)

Those who request changes are uncertain if they will secure future contracts. As Cristian comments, "my brother-in-law asked to be switched to another farm, but now he doesn't know if he is going to Canada this year… this is just too risky."

The uncertainty about one's future in the program, combined with the fear of asserting one's rights, forces the workers to seek alternatives elsewhere. Adán tells us:

> There are bad bosses, there are places, that is, houses that are not fit to live in and the workers who suffer from this do not speak, partly for fear that they will no longer be able to return to work. And that makes some escape to the United States. A lot of them have already done it. (Adán)

Unable to obtain a transfer to another farm, some workers choose to attempt their luck on U.S. farms. Adán told us about his friend who was about to be sent home after two months of work because the harvesting season ended earlier than expected. He reflects on his friend's decision to go to the U.S.: "I imagine that it is something that he did not plan, but he had no choice, because he came to work here, but because of what happened he had no choice, he made the decision to leave."

Secondly, some workers escaped *from the program* by obtaining an open work permit. Under the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers program (R207.1-A72), migrant workers on valid employer-specific work permits who are experiencing abuse in their workplace, or who are at risk of workplace abuse, are eligible to receive an open work permit valid for one year and thus escape the violent or abusive situation they experience in their current employment (IRCC, 2021b). A total of 2,481 workers applied for open permits under this program between June 2019, when the program was initiated, and July 2021. The approval rate was less than 60% (Regino, 2022).

To obtain an open permit, workers are required to apply directly to IRCC by filling out an online application in either English or French, including a letter that details the abuse, or risk of abuse, and provide additional evidence. Without the help of grassroots organizations or unions, workers find it virtually impossible to do this. In Quebec, RATTMAQ assisted many workers in applying for open permits. Among them was Melchor, whom we interviewed and who is still awaiting the decision while being housed at a RATTMAQ

shelter. While these two strategies existed prior to the pandemic, we argue that the pandemic created a context for enhanced political awareness that resulted in acts of mobile citizenship. In the section that follows we outline how at the micro-level the pandemic intensified tensions between workers and employers on the farm, and at the meso-level it strengthened the infrastructure that made an escape (as well as other acts of citizenship) possible.

Tensions and Opportunities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Increased Tensions at Work

During the pandemic, migrant farmworkers were recognized as being essential for economic growth in the agricultural sector and the food security of the Canadian population (Vosko et al., 2022). However, this recognition did not translate into structural changes within the program that would result in a reduction of their precarity (Bélanger & Candiz, 2021). If anything, their conditions deteriorated, not the least due to health risks posed by the virus, as evidenced by the high number of outbreaks that have occurred on farms (Champagne, 2021b).

Upon arrival, workers were required to stay in quarantine for 14 days. The federal government required employers to support workers during this period, including paying wages equal to 30 hours of work per week (Haddad, 2020; ESDC, n.d.). Under the Mandatory Isolation Assistance Program for Temporary Foreign Workers, employers received up to 1,500 Canadian dollars per temporary foreign worker to "[mitigate] the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the supply of Canada's food supply, helping the agricultural sectors" (Government of Canada, 2021). For most workers, the support they received from their employers during this period was lower than the amount they might have earned working during this time. Furthermore, some workers had the costs of food deducted from their pay cheques. Isolation, reduced earnings, and fear of infection while in initial quarantine or during outbreaks, generated elevated levels of anxiety among the workers we interviewed.

The Rising Importance of Community Organizations: The Case of RATTMAQ

Responding to the need to protect migrant farmworkers (and local communities) from the spread of the virus, federal and provincial authorities provided funding to community organizations who were to provide information and care for migrant workers. In the province of Quebec, various government departments similarly funded several community organizations to assist migrants. RATTMAQ, for instance, received funds from the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Labour to provide information to the workers about health measures and accompany them to health clinics. Between April 1, 2020,

and March 31, 2021, RATTMAQ welcomed 17,7000 migrant farmworkers at the airport in Montreal. While informing workers about current health measures, RATTMAQ also educated these workers about their rights and distributed RATTMAQ's contact information. During the same period, they received over 3,500 calls requesting information and assistance, and they were able to intervene or take legal action in 50 cases of rights violations by employers (RATTMAQ, 2021).

Guillermo tells us how he sought assistance from RATTMAQ when his company ignored his request for protection, and how this action also helped him realize that migrant farmworkers did not need to fear asserting their rights:

> I needed to have the second dose [of the COVID-19 vaccine], and I asked the company to take an appointment for me. I waited, but they never replied. So, I reached out to RATTMAQ, and they made an appointment and took me to get vaccinated. I didn't see any support from my company… I used to be afraid to talk [to organizations] because all my co-workers used to say that if we talked to them, we would lose a job. But when RATTMAQ explained to us that we had rights, I realized that I don't need to be fearful. (Guillermo)

In addition to greeting workers at the airport, providing information on COVID-19 and workers' rights, assisting workers in applying for open work permits, and providing other forms of help, RATTMAQ has been extending legal advice to migrant workers who have been apprehended by authorities while trying to cross into the U.S. with the help of smugglers, as was the case of Nestor. As Nestor's family was a victim of extortion in Guatemala, RATTMAQ advised him to seek asylum in Canada. Without RATTMAQ's help, Nestor would have been deported back to his country.

Workers are able to stay in touch with this organization through text messages, phone calls, or social media. As Maximiliano explains,

> They [RATTMAQ] gave us a WhatsApp number and we could call it anonymously and ask for help and ask if they could come and see what was happening. I feel that the bosses are going to feel pressured [to improve conditions] because we have someone who defends and also supports us. (Maximiliano)

One of RATTMAQ's most important victories was the recognition by the Administrative Labour Tribunal (TAT) of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma as an occupational injury caused by exposure to pesticides. The case involved Armando Lazzo Bautista, a Mexican worker who was required to spray pesticides on apple trees and blueberry plants without a mask, protective clothing or glasses on a farm located in the Montérégie region in Quebec between 2012 and 2016. RATTMAQ assisted the worker in presenting a claim to the TAT. This case forms an important legal precedent that has the potential to transform work practices in agriculture in Canada (Champagne, 2022; Pilon, 2022) and empower other migrant farmworkers. In sum, it is clear that

RATTMAQ has enabled many migrant farmworkers to assert their rights by seeking information or assistance from this organization.

The Rising Relevance and Visibility of the Bastard Migration Industry

Escape from agricultural farms is facilitated by smugglers who advertise their services through WhatsApp and in-person contacts as well as in public places frequented by workers, such as supermarkets. As Ernesto notes, "they understand our needs and they take advantage of us. They say, 'look, I can take you to the U.S.' But sometimes, they trick us. They vanish and no one ever sees them again." Nestor was one of the migrant farmworkers who was deceived by smugglers. He found the working environment on his farm in Canada intolerable. Furthermore, he was determined to reunite with his daughter, a victim of extortion, who had fled from Guatemala to California. He was initially asked to pay $7,000 to be taken to California, but unable to pay this amount, he agreed to pay $5,000 to get to New York. Once he was smuggled over the border, he was instructed to call a contact person. However, the contact person never showed up, and eventually, Nestor was apprehended by police and returned to Canada, where he was placed in a hotel to await deportation to Guatemala. It is because of this type of deception and abuse that some researchers label this branch of the migration industry "bastard" (Hernández-León, 2013). Similar stories of abandonment surfaced in the Canadian media in 2021and 2022. Although these smuggling networks already existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the additional border control measures adopted in response to the pandemic may have given more prominence to this shady economy. At the same time, many farmworkers whose working and living conditions deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic were easily lured by false promises made by smugglers.

Conclusion

In this article we expanded the notion of acts of citizenship introduced by Isin and Nielsen (2008; Isin, 2009) and applied to many instances of migrants' agency by other scholars (e.g., Nyers, 2015; Rygiel, 2011; Schwiertz, 2021; Squire, 2017) to situate the ways migrant farmworkers in Québec, Canada, claimed rights in particular *time* (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic) *and space* (i.e., the province of Québec). More specifically, we demonstrated that during the COVID-19 pandemic certain developments unfolding in Québec made it possible for migrant farmworkers to engage in particular acts we characterize as instances of rupture (Isin, 2009). Among them are speech acts and attempts to confront unsafe working conditions. We highlighted one form of agency, namely, escape from demeaning, exploitative and unsafe working and living conditions. As we document in this article, some workers abandoned their

farms by trying to escape from the country across the Canada-US border while others sought an open work permit that would allow them to obtain employment on a different farm. We called these strategies acts of mobile citizenship, borrowing this notion from Basok and Candiz (2020).

We situated these acts of mobile citizenship in time and space by analyzing three changes that unravelled during the COVID-19 pandemic in Québec: enhanced tensions in the workplace, new funding provided to community organizations to offer pandemic-related support to farmworkers, and the growth of the migration industry that facilitates unauthorized border crossing. We pointed out that the support offered by community organizations during the pandemic also included action to raise awareness among migrant farmworkers with regard to their rights.

However, even though migrant farmworkers became more aware of their rights during the pandemic, their actions to liberate themselves from precarity and exploitative working conditions were generally individual, and among other responses required escape. Collective forms of right claiming processes to challenge structural conditions that produce abuse and demand fundamental changes that would challenge employers' power and workers' subordination are yet to emerge. Employer-tied work permits and the inability to unionize for most workers severely hampers any hope of collective forms of contestation.

Despite these structural limitations, a few instances of collective protests emerged in Québec over the summer of 2021. In one case, workers contacted the media to unveil very poor and unsafe housing conditions; in another case, they contacted a union (TUAC) to claim their right to financial compensation offered to workers by the federal government during the pandemic (Champagne, 2021a; Lavigne, 2021). This indicates that, in some rare instances, workers may act in solidarity with each other to make claims, despite the risk of being deported. The awareness of being considered essential during the pandemic may have contributed to these courageous and collective acts reported by journalists.

Finally, the pandemic made it obvious to the general public that migrant farmworkers played a crucial role in local food production chains. While pre-pandemic media coverage of migrant farmworkers tended to underscore how the TFWP benefits employers, sending countries, and the workers (the infamous "triple win"), and that cases of migrant workers' abuse were attributable to individual "bad apples" among the employers (Bauder, 2008), new media coverage squarely uncovered the structural role of foreign workers in local, provincial, and national economies, and local food production, as well as the fundamental problems these migrants faced (as discussed by Basok, López Sala & Avallone, 2023). Media discourses adopted during the pandemic made it clear to the general public that their preference to consume locally produced products, a concern exacerbated during the pandemic and the closure of borders, depended on the availability (and the well-being) of the migrant labour force. In the context of sharply increasing food prices and environmental concerns, migrant farmworkers seem to be garnering more support from the

public than ever. More generally, the awareness of the essential contributions migrants make to the Canadian economy may be conducive to facilitating more citizen support for non-residents and non-citizens who have no political power, and to generating more pressure on the federal government to make structural changes to the temporary migration programs. In its turn, the growing support by citizens may embolden migrant farmworkers to claim their rights through various acts of citizenship.

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