From Dismal Swamp to Smiling Farms

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CONCLUSION

W(h)ither the Marsh?

On January 23, 2015, Avia Eek, a long-time Holland Marsh farmer and councillor for Ward Six in King Township, tweeted about a recent trip to the grocery store with her husband, Bill: “Bill & I did some grocery shopping tonight. 3# of #Canada #onions $1.99. Our #Farmers are getting $3.00 for 50# #disgusted.” Records from the Toronto Daily Star confirm that farmers were getting essentially the same price (between $2.85 and $3.25) for fifty pounds of cooking onions now as they did in the spring of 1958 – almost sixty years previous to Eek’s tweet. I found the Toronto Daily Star produce-market column a few months earlier, and when I saw Eek’s tweet, I sent a reply highlighting the similarities in price: “@eekfarms, Toronto Star, March 1958. 50lb cooking, $2.85–3.25, crate of Spanish, $4.00–4.25. Almost 60 years ago.” I also included a digital reproduction of the original newspaper column. The exchange between Eek and I received a number of responses from other Twitter users commenting on the low onion prices, with thoughts and opinions on everything from the increased cost of production to the greed of the oil and gas industry undermining other key sectors of the Canadian economy. It was a quintessentially twenty-first-century discussion about some very old issues. The onion, an enduring agricultural product of the Holland Marsh since the very beginning, had gone digital.

The reasons for low onion prices in 2015 reflect a socionatural amalgam of persistent and emergent issues. On the one hand, 2014 was a bumper year for Holland Marsh onions, exceeding even the strong yields many in the area consider a standard. The local market was flooded with high-quality onions even before the problem was exacerbated by reemerging Cold War geopolitics. Responding to growing tensions with the European Union, the Russian government established a variety of trade embargoes, including the importation of onions. The drop in demand this created significantly impacted major producing markets in Europe, including the Netherlands, costing the sector there tens of millions of euros. This complicated geopolitical impasse effectively created a glut of onions
on the global market. Excess European supply spilled out around the world, including to the Caribbean, a key destination for Marsh produce. A bumper crop locally and an excess supply in the global market combined to drive down prices, leaving farmers in the Marsh with a significant surplus of onions that they had great difficulty finding a market for.

Holland Marsh farmers of 2015 were thus confronted with a very similar problem as that of their forebears of the 1930s. When the Marsh was first brought into agricultural production in the early 1930s, supply far outstripped the demand of the local market, causing many to simply plough their crops back into the muck. In 2015, cold-storage, transportation, and advanced seed-germplasm-manipulation technologies were such that the crises of glut and price could be forestalled, though not indefinitely. By the late spring of 2015, the 2014 vintage onions in cold storage were approaching the end of their shelf life, which forced farmers to dump the crop for whatever price they could get, wherever they could get it – cutting their losses while figuratively ploughing the 2014 harvest back into the field. This vignette, unfortunate though it was for the Marsh farmers who, once again, were bearing the brunt of a disjuncture between supply and demand, encapsulates the dynamics I have attempted to highlight and articulate throughout this book.

Chronicling the histories of our areas of local agricultural production is important. While there are many rich community-produced histories of agriculture across Canada (including several on the Holland Marsh), there are far too few scholarly accounts of local and regional agriculture in Ontario, or even around Canada for that matter. The profound effects agriculture has had on the fabric of Ontario has been captured to some extent through macro and national perspectives refracted largely through the staples-thesis lens. Yet these accounts cannot capture the local particularisms, stories, and cultures of the sundry agricultural regions across the province. Muck-crop farming, as a handy example, is scarcely mentioned in any of the canonical contributions of Ontario’s agricultural history. Capturing the history of the Holland Marsh is crucially important to adding texture to our understanding of Canada’s agricultural past, present, and future. It can help us move beyond thinking about agriculture (in the singular) and instead refocus on exploring the agricultures (in plural) that exist across the province and across the country. Local food systems will be increasingly more important in the months and years ahead, and it behooves us to know something about them.

One of the key issues the story of the Holland Marsh raises is the limit of the liberal state to stabilize small-scale domestic production. While the Marsh is a
fierce economic driver, it sits in a relatively small car. The federal state is far more likely to intervene in matters related to canola, corn, or soybeans than they are to carrots or onions. Ontario has fewer levers to pull in terms of farmer-income stabilization, and the relevant municipalities scarcely have the resources to maintain the drainage system, let alone bail out Marsh farmers in times of intense downward pressures on price or (socio)natural catastrophe.

The liberal-state apparatus has undoubtedly supported the Holland Marsh – from enabling the initial drainage to developing the specialty crop designation, though this support has almost exclusively been within the domestic realm. Since the mid-1980s, there has been less state support in the form of agricultural income-stabilization programs as international trade agreements have emerged. The tools available to municipal, provincial, and federal governments to support domestic agriculture are being dulled by international neoliberal trade policy. The 2014 crisis notwithstanding, the Marsh has largely been insulated – at least as it relates to prices – from the effects of global agricultural instability. It seems likely, however, that as emerging international trade developments continue to supersede and frustrate national and subnational policy, global politics will play a larger role in the Marsh in the years to come.

International developments in agro-technologies have had, arguably, a much more profound influence on the Holland Marsh than international politics thus far. From the adoption of ice-packing facilities, pallet boxes, and food-grade plastic wrap in the 1950s to the introduction of novel chemicals and seed varieties, the Marsh has relied on technologies developed internationally to enable and stabilize production. Even the dredger that cut the original canal system was a US import.

In some instances, individual farmers and investors (like the Latchman brothers) have introduced technologies into the Holland Marsh. In other cases, institutions have played a key role in the integration of agro-technologies. The Muck Crops Research Station, with its cultivar trials and minor-use testing of agrochemicals, has been instrumental in translating and adapting essential agricultural inputs developed within the broader political-economic milieu of global agriculture to the specific context of the Marsh.

The station has played a crucial role in the ongoing productivity and stability of the area. Its annual reports, as an example, provide farmers with important insight into the performance of seed, developed elsewhere, in the Holland Marsh. Similarly, the minor-use tests provide growers there (and muck-crop farmers elsewhere) a rigorous assessment of the efficacy and safety of agrochemicals developed for other contexts and purposes. But it may also be the case that translating
these technologies to the context of the Marsh will lead to future instabilities. The ecological contradictions and consequences of chemical-dependent, monoculture farming are a continual, and destabilizing, spectre of contemporary capitalist agriculture.

These contradictions are partly driven by how “nature” is understood. Shifting perceptions of nature – an ever-evolving imaginary – has been a driving force of landscape change in the Holland Marsh. The cultural resonance of biophysical nature – what it means within a given time and place – is directly related with how it is conscripted into use. The same dismal swamp that was written off by a generation of colonial explorers was understood just years later as an opportunity to produce a landscape in the image of the liberal-state ideal of orderly, smiling farms. How the Marsh has been (mis)understood has had a profound influence on how it has been used and the shape it has taken.8

Of course, the materiality of the Holland Marsh’s biophysical nature has played an equally decisive role in the history of the area. Running water, subsiding soil, crumbling dirt canal walls, rain, snow, and sundry other examples demonstrate that biophysical nature is not so easily ordered into smiling farms. The novel administrative bodies that have emerged to corral discrete aspects of material nature – the station for seeds, the Holland Marsh Growers’ Association for the plants and fields, and the Holland Marsh Drainage Commission for the canal system – combine with these biophysical characteristics in the continual reproduction of its socionatural landscape.

It is also important to recall how liberal-state policy has served to shape agriculture and socionatures in the Holland Marsh. At times, the state has appeared to operate as a monolithically capitalistic force within the Marsh, supporting the initial destruction of the wetland and the contamination of the surrounding area for economic development and profit. From the early twentieth century to roughly the late 1950s, the state was (on the whole) supportive of whatever initiatives industry proposed for the area, from its initial drainage through to the chemical recklessness of the green revolution. Despite the apparent one-sidedness of its actions during this period, it is clear that the state was not a coherent, monolithic force. The dynamics James O’Connor anticipates in terms of the second contradiction of capitalism were implicit in the state’s support of agriculture in the Marsh. While not evident initially, by the 1980s, the ecological externalities of intensive industrial agriculture in the area were manifesting in ecological catastrophe. Responses to these ecological contradictions and limits were imported into the very fabric of the state through various protective polices and production regulations. In other words, even when appearing to act as a
unified, coherent force, the state’s actions have been far more ambivalent and contradictory when looked at in a historical trajectory.

Over time, and in response to public outcries about the condition of the ecological health of the Holland Marsh and surrounding area, the state’s presence there has become a much more obviously activist force. Any farmer is happy to share multiple ways in which the state regulates, impinges on, and restricts the conditions of production – from monitoring water taking and banning chemicals to food safety and traceability protocol, the state has erected multiple policies that change the way growers do their work.

The historicity of the Marsh demonstrates that ongoing socionatural change is fundamental to shaping its future context. The drainage of a wetland on the scale of the Holland Marsh for any purpose in contemporary Ontario is very unlikely. But in 1920s Ontario, it was heralded as an exemplary land-improvement project. The intervening century consists of a trajectory – by no means inevitable – of contingent historical moments. As the landscape has changed over the years, the institutional matrix of the state – its branches, ministries, and policies – implemented in the Marsh shifted in response. Similarly, what “nature” meant to various figures and populations throughout the past hundred years has been a dynamic and decisive force in how nature has been produced in the Marsh.

Indeed, in some respects, the history of the Holland Marsh pivots on the changeable character of its natural imaginary. The earliest colonial settlers to the area – John Simcoe and John Galt – imagined the marsh as a wasteland, “a mere ditch swarming with mosquitoes, flies, bullfrogs and water snakes.” Many years later, W.D. Watson would look out onto the same wetland and imagine fields teeming with crops and, in 1911, wrote evocatively to William Day about his “pride at the immense possibilities which lies in the scheme.”

The history of the Holland Marsh resists the imposition of either a declensionist or progressive narrative structure. It does not suggest that the ongoing imagining of the Marsh has resulted in the creation of either a vaunted pastoral sanctum or a devastated septic wasteland. The truth is rather messier than either of these edifices permits.

Still, there have been severe material effects – declensionist, even catastrophic in character – as a result of the production of particular kinds of nature in the Holland Marsh. The health of humans and nonhumans alike has suffered in and around the Marsh as a direct result of agricultural activity. The remaining ambiguities about its role in elevated levels of birth anomalies in the 1960s will likely never be conclusively resolved. But given that many of the chemicals used at the time have since been banned – precisely because they have proven to be
detrimental to human and nonhuman health – it seems clear that farming in the Marsh did play some role. Neither birth anomalies nor vast algal blooms fit neatly into the smiling farms narrative, yet they are material truths to confront about the kinds of nature we produce through agriculture.

This ambivalence signals an ongoing tension in the Holland Marsh – at least since the popularization of environmentalist sentiment in about the 1960s – between “the environment” and farming. Most farmers would likely insist that they are stewards of the land because their livelihoods depend on the health of the land. Yet this clearly does not make every farmer an unmitigated environmentalist. Maintaining the land in a state amenable to agricultural production, in practice, usually diverges significantly from what many environmentalists would consider stewardship. Even a hypothetical agro-ecological variety of farming, within the context of the delicate muck soil, would be too destructive to be considered ecologically sound. Yet at the same time, growing vegetables does intuitively seem to be “environmentally friendly” in some respects. But how can this be reconciled within the context of the Specialty Crop Area (SCA) designation that remains substantively silent on the one thing most important to Marsh farming, the muck soil?

Part of the problem of evaluating the ecological consequences of the production of nature in the Holland Marsh is that, in order to do so, an arbitrary baseline of sorts has to be established – an imaginary time when the ecology of the area was ostensibly “better” than it is now. One approach is to assume that the Marsh’s pristine apogee was at some point in its pre-agriculture existence, and every intervention since then has been tantamount to pulling another petal off of the rose. This, of course, is a far too linear conceptualization, one that disregards the subtler aspects of the production of nature revealed throughout these chapters. Yes, there has been ecological contamination of the human and nonhuman environment, however, it is also the case that harmful chemicals have been banned and discontinued, phosphorus levels have been moderated, and safer, healthier farming techniques have continued to emerge. In other words, protective social limits have been placed on the production of nature in the Marsh. If the basis of comparison is pathogenic or bacterial, one could make the argument that the area is actually cleaner now than it was previous to the introduction of agriculture, given that the risk of contracting cholera there now is virtually nonexistent.

This is not to let farming off the hook completely. As many have pointed out, the compulsion of capitalist, productivist agriculture is to seek profit above all else, which tends to be socially and ecologically unsustainable. There is a paradox here, framed in theoretical terms by O’Connor and others: capital needs nature
to reproduce, but in reproducing, capital destroys the very nature it requires. The “negative externalities” of farming there (and elsewhere) continually lurk throughout the production process. In the case of the Holland Marsh, the contradiction is literally grounded: The more intensively the soil is farmed, the more quickly it subsides.

Farmers have been experimenting with growing lower-value mineral-soil crops as well as building more greenhouses on the edges of the Marsh, where the muck soil has all but disappeared. It is difficult to say how long it will be until all of the muck in the Marsh is gone, but that it will one day be gone, and that the process is occurring in earnest, are irrefutable facts. What then will become of the Holland Marsh? It seems likely that the deterioration of the muck soil will happen slowly enough to allow growers in the area ample time to adjust to the changes, should they want to, and to continue farming mineral-soil or greenhouse crops. But it also seems clear that the Marsh will be a very different place in the absence of that formidable biophysical, cultural, and economic substance that set it apart from the start.

Here again, appreciating the specific socionatural history of the area makes clear the limits of farmland-protection policies within the context of the Holland Marsh. The state’s intervention in the form of the Greenbelt Plan legislation and its associated SCA designation seems, in this case, to be inadequate to the task of preserving the muck-crop farmland. The mineral soil beneath may last for generations, but it is not at all clear that the per-hectare returns from farming it would be enough to insulate the area against suburban development.

In 1961, popular historian Pierre Berton mused about the forthcoming half century in a Toronto Daily Star column. He envisioned a dystopian future of overpopulation and food shortages. By 1989, he envisioned the mayor of Toronto announcing that the city had 5 million inhabitants:

This huge consumer market, he said, ensured the prosperity of the Queen City which had out-stripped the rosiest predictions of the demographers. A few people complained about the price of bread, that had risen to $5 a loaf because of the wheat scarcity, and there was some nostalgia, too, about the good old days of green vegetables. But it was generally agreed that the draining of the Holland Marsh and its conversion into a popular midtown apartment district had been a magnificent engineering feat. As the mayor said in his statement: “You just can’t stop progress.”

Fifty years on from Berton’s perfervid imaginings, urban development is rapidly filling the space around the Holland Marsh. As the muck soil subsides, it
may be the case that the provisions afforded to the area under the SCA designa-
tion will also erode – there is nothing particularly distinctive about mineral soil, after all. Minimally, the end of the muck soil would have to result in an end – or at least rerationalization – of the SCA designation. Similarly, the subsidence of the muck will also erode the value of the land in the Marsh. According to a 2013 report, land there was valued at between $20,000 and $25,000 per acre (roughly between $50,000 and $60,000 per hectare). To put this into perspective, farm-
land in southcentral Ontario can be had for as little as $9,500 an acre ($23,000 per hectare). At the same time, former agricultural land rezoned for residential and commercial development in the area around the Marsh fetches as much as $54,000 an acre ($130,000 per hectare). As regional populations grow, land becomes scarcer, and the distinctiveness of the Marsh erodes, Berton’s predictions may still come to pass.

As the Holland Marsh faces the dawning of another geologic era – the Anthro-
procene – amidst the roiling chaos of climate change and COVID-19, its function as a node of local food production has never been more important. A broad consensus among food-systems scholars and advocates suggests that solu-
tions to food-system challenges can be found in place-based efforts focused on strengthening existing links – and forging new ones – between eaters and grow-
ers. Terry Marsden, a key scholar of the subject argues for an “eco-economy paradigm which replaces’, and indeed relocates, agriculture and its polices into the heart of regional and local systems of ecological, economic and community development.” The director general of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations recently noted that relocalizing food systems is “critical to achieving the goal of eradicating hunger and malnutrition, guaranteeing more sustainable food systems which are also more resilient to the effects of climate change, and ensuring a healthy and nutritious diet for all.” In Ontario, the provincial government has recently encouraged communities to develop regional agro-food strategies to support long-term economic prosperity and community development.

These are all positive developments and might signal that liberal-state policy may be moving beyond its productivist predilection. Confronting the past short-
comings of these approaches to agricultural production and farmland protection specifically, and the “management” of socionature more generally, are increas-
ingly urgent projects. We need to think beyond such past ways to understand what effective farmland-preservation and food-systems policy consists of. While no answers are offered here, it does seem clear that solutions will not be found in either techno-centric or eco-centric approaches. Observing that all nature is
produced is a far-different argument than suggesting that all nature is controllable, as techno-centrists believe. The folly in assuming that nature has been fully tamed has been revealed at many times throughout the history of the Holland Marsh. Given the fundamental need for food, reflooding it in an attempt to return the area to its pre-agricultural state, as eco-centric perspectives might suggest, is a similarly untenable solution.

Agro-ecological and regenerative agricultural practices are charting courses that seek to balance the pursuit of a robust yield against a broad concern for people and the environment. These approaches demonstrate that there need not be a trade-off between production, ecological health, and social well-being. A central motivation of the original Marsh boosters – to provide fresh produce to local markets – well aligns with agro-ecology. Provisioning local markets in a socioecologically regenerative way, aimed at girding the local food system against the destabilizing effects of climate change, global pandemics, and other unforeseen crises, however, will require us to reexamine our relationship to, and governance of, the landscape. As we approach the one hundredth anniversary of the transformation of the dismal swamp, perhaps it is time to once again reimagine the smiling fields of the Holland Marsh.