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Telling Their Stories Ideology and the Subject of Prairie Agriculture

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It is well established that the Prairie provinces of western Canada have historically been the site of considerable ideological ferment and intensity. This is confirmed by the diverse, disruptive, and innovative political movements, parties, and institutions that have arisen there since the early decades of the twentieth century, as well as those that have made their way into the twenty-first (Melnyk 1992). Often vigorously democratic in spirit (or at least in rhetoric), these various instances of Prairie politics have taken many forms and have adopted multiple, often competing ideological positions and programs (Laycock 1990, 2002). A long tradition of excellent scholarly work has shown that any characterization of the Prairies (or, even worse, “the West”) as a homogeneous ideological space could only be *itself* ideological (Wiseman 2001). It is also true that what might be termed “agricultural subjectivity” remains a crucial point of ideological formation and contestation in the region, and perhaps even beyond it. Just as a particular kind of agricultural political subject was central to the possibilities of the cooperative, agrarian, democratic socialism that was so consequential in the Prairies during the twentieth century, a different kind of agricultural subject has been equally central to the emergence of neoliberalism across significant portions of this same geography in the twenty-first (Epp 2008; Müller 2008).

Our concern in this chapter is to inquire into how such subjects are reproduced ideologically. Political scientists, even those attuned to the category of “political culture,” tend to focus upon the rhetorical artifacts of political

leaders, parties, and governments to discern the contours of ideological reproduction (Wesley 2011). By contrast, in this chapter we will compare the ideological operation of two examples of extra-partisan cultural production that have each sought to hail distinct political subjects in different periods of Prairie political history. The first is *Paper Wheat*, a 1977 musical depicting the period of agricultural settlement in Canada leading to the establishment of the wheat pools and the cooperative movement in the early twentieth century. It was produced by Saskatoon's 25th Street Theatre Company and played to packed audiences in small towns throughout the Prairies in the mid-1970s; it was later recirculated as an influential documentary produced by the National Film Board. The second is *License to Farm*, a 2016 documentary produced by the industry organization SaskCanola, depicting the challenges facing "modern" Prairie farmers in the age of urban environmentalism, and advocating for genetically modified crops and chemical farming in Canada. At the time of this writing, the documentary has been viewed online by over 120,000 people, and likely several thousands more have seen it in organized public and private screenings across the Prairies. These will be compared both as markers of highly distinctive ideological formations in Prairie history and as means for circulating ideological claims and mediating political subjects.

On Ideology

Political subjects are people who are prepared to act in and into the settings in which they find themselves. It is customary for accounts of politics to emphasize action and its qualities: to be a political subject is to act in a range of identifiably political ways, such as voting, joining a party, running for office, or organizing an interest group. By contrast, we turn our attention to the element of political subjectivity that corresponds to preparation. Political subjects do not just act. They are *prepared* to act. Political subjects are prepared to act by the material conditions in which they find themselves, by their histories and relationships, by their experiences, and by what they have come to know and believe about themselves, about the world they inhabit, and about others. In many cases, this preparation takes the form of stories: stories people tell, and stories they hear, about themselves and others.

Ideology prepares people to act under highly overdetermined conditions, comprising one element of the complex process by which people become political subjects. Here, ideology does not name a set of true convictions codified in a political program to which one might wholly subscribe and simply follow. Nor does it denote an entirely false, illusory, or artificial

account of social life that prevents people from understanding and acting upon the real conditions of their existence. In this chapter, we treat ideology as the ongoing, productive work of *being prepared to act*, the work entailed in becoming a political subject. In the cases examined here, the work of ideology arises in the form of stories told about and for the agricultural political subjects of the Canadian Prairies, narratives that call them to see and recognize themselves and thereby prepare them to act as those subjects. In this respect, the account of ideology presented in this chapter corresponds to Louis Althusser's idea of interpellation, wherein we become subjects by recognizing ourselves in the addresses directed towards us.

In Althusser's classic formulation, a policeman calls out, "Hey, you there!" and, in turning around, the person to whom this hail is made becomes a subject. "Why?" Althusser asks. "Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was really him who was hailed' (and not someone else)" (Althusser 2001, 118). Althusser famously describes ideology as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," but immediately clarifies that this does not mean it should be relegated to the status of mere illusion. As he puts it, ideological constructions "need only be 'interpreted' to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world" (Althusser 2001, 110). What is important for our purposes is that ideology is real, ordinary, and voluntary. It is not an exceptional moment of deception enacted by one upon another against the latter's will, but an ongoing subjective process in which subjects participate in producing themselves by turning around when they are called, because they recognize themselves in that call. In ideological moments, we are simultaneously *being prepared* by external conditions and actors and *preparing ourselves* to act in relation to them. As Althusser (2001, 118) observes, "you and I are always already subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition."

In this respect, ideology names a crucial process in the social reproduction of the arrangements of material production. In this chapter, we will compare how agricultural producers in the Prairies have been hailed in the stories told by *Paper Wheat* and *License to Farm*, both of which ask farmers and their families to recognize those stories as their own. Both are concrete instances of the "rituals of ideological recognition" that work to socially reproduce a particular mode of agricultural production, by hailing political subjects who are prepared to act under the specific conditions in which they emerge. *Paper Wheat* hailed and sought to prepare political subjects for the cooperative mode of agricultural production that persisted into the 1970s

(even as it was beginning to show signs of strain). *License to Farm* hails and seeks to prepare political subjects for the competitive, biotechnological mode of agribusiness presently emergent in the Canadian Prairies. Prairie farmers are notoriously complex political subjects, embodying at once the independence of individual proprietors and the solidarity of neighbours acting together under adverse conditions (Müller 2008). As such, they have been, and remain, open to being hailed in both of these ways. As we hope to show in our treatment of these two artifacts, it is precisely under these highly contingent circumstances that ideology does its work.

Setting the Stage

Paper Wheat premiered on March 18, 1977, at the Memorial Hall in Sintaluta, Saskatchewan. The location was intentional. In 1902, a group of farmers from Sintaluta led by Edward A. Partridge successfully brought charges under the Manitoba Grain Act against the Canadian Pacific Railway for manipulating the allocation of rail cars. Three years later, Partridge – who is portrayed in the play – travelled to Manitoba to witness first-hand the speculative dealings of the Winnipeg Grain Exchange. Upon his return, he and his neighbours formed the Grain Growers' Grain Company, western Canada's first cooperative grain producers' organization, in 1906. Two years later, in 1908, the inaugural edition of the *Grain Grower's Guide*, a crucial early voice of the Prairie cooperative movement, was published at Sintaluta (MacPherson 1999, 1766).¹

In the spring and fall of 1977, the musical was remounted for a tour of thirty-three Saskatchewan towns (with a five-day run in Toronto), where it played to packed houses, followed by a national tour of forty-six cities in 1979 (Twenty-Fifth Street Theatre 1982, 37, 97). In 1979, the National Film Board released an adapted documentary film version of the play, directed by Albert Kish as part of the NFB's Challenge for Change (CFC) program (Meir 2010). The film was rebroadcast several times by CBC Television, making *Paper Wheat* "one of the most widely-seen CFC films" (Waugh, Winton, and Baker 2017). An adapted version of the play was also produced in-studio as a "Drama Special" and broadcast by the CBC in 1980.

In 1982, Western Producer Prairie Books published *Paper Wheat: The Book*, which includes a history of the cooperative movement in Saskatchewan, an account of the play's production, itinerary, and distribution, production stills, recollections of its players, a script, and a musical score. In his essay in the book, Don Kerr (1982, 17) sums up the play's remarkable multimedia life cycle as follows:

Paper Wheat was a phenomenal Canadian theatrical success, as successful as almost any play in the country's history. It toured over eighty Canadian communities, played over 200 performances, and was seen by 65,000 people. It was televised by the CBC and its second tour was filmed by the National Film Board. Almost every review of *Paper Wheat* was enthusiastic and almost every audience even more enthusiastic.

Retrospectively, the political orientation of the play seems unambiguous, but in many ways it was also accidental. The players of the 25th Street Theatre had begun to experiment with collective, collaboratively authored productions, and at the end of the 1976 season, the company announced its intention to produce a play about the retail cooperatives familiar in Saskatoon. Kerr (1982, 19) recounts that "the company that went out to create *The Co-op Show* was largely innocent of Saskatchewan history. They didn't know the Wheat Pool from Cargill or even that the Wheat Pool was a cooperative. They didn't know the story was going to be a farmers' story or who the hero might be, or the villain." It was only after the company was exposed to some old pool organizers that its attention turned towards the history of the grain growers' cooperatives and *Paper Wheat* found its politics. Importantly, it found it in the stories, personal histories, and recollections of farmers and townspeople in Saskatchewan whom the players visited in developing successive versions of the script. As suggested by the publicity material supporting the national tour, "audiences in Saskatchewan were the same people from whom they gathered material and who were the subject and substance of the play ... people watching recognized themselves and their neighbors" (quoted in Kaye 2003, 24). The minimal financial support the production received from the institutions of the cooperative movement came only after it had already premiered. Thus, as Kerr (1982, 23) put it, "the play was not a kept play."

The ideological core of *Paper Wheat* lies in its celebration of the formation of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool in 1924, which is presented as a heroic achievement of cooperation across difference, built upon a common experience of the adversity of prairie settlement (Act 1) and resistance to the abuses of the railway companies and private grain trade (Act 2). As Alan Filewod (2000, 82) put it, the play "appeals to a prairie and specifically Saskatchewan sentiment and celebrates the tradition of cooperative socialism." In neither respect can the play be characterized as indexical, comprehensive, or complete in its depiction of the histories it addresses. For example, the play performs a complete erasure of the exterminationist history that cleared the land for the settler-colonial grain economy of the Prairies: "In

treating the pioneers as simple heroes, *Paper Wheat* avoids questions about expropriation of land and the ecological consequences of monocropping. Sinteluta is a Lakota name (Red Tail, as in red-tailed hawk), but the play completely ignored the history of Lakota and other Native people in the area” (Kaye 2003, 235; see Daschuck 2013). A critical review of the first production appearing in the left-wing magazine *Next Year Country* pointed to another silence: “Nowhere in the play is there mention of the sort of businesses the Co-ops and the Wheat Pool have become, or a glimmer of understanding of why this should be ... [it] rings false to anyone who has ever had to work for or dealt with a present day Co-op, credit union or the Wheat Pool” (quoted in Filewod 2000, 98).²

Subsequent versions of the play introduced a note of complexity, with concluding scenes reflecting on the changing character of the Wheat Pool in the context of the growth of agribusiness in the 1970s. As one character, Sis, observes, “Ma, co-ops today are a multi-million dollar operation; they’re no different from any other big business. Well, look at how they treat their employees” (Twenty-Fifth Street Theatre 1982, 37, 97). Nonetheless, the overall theme of celebrating the cooperative ideal and its champions remained intact, as the solution offered to the problem of what the cooperatives had become was a return to what the cooperatives had been. As Kerr (1982, 28) puts it in his essay accompanying the ultimate version of the script: “*Paper Wheat* is a highly selective view of agrarian history. One of its major functions indeed is to distill from history a simple and intense myth by which people today can still live: a myth of cooperation, of people able to alter the world.” The ideology of the play consists in this partiality, and operates by rendering its partial account into a narrative form in which audiences – both in the Prairies and elsewhere – might recognize something of themselves and so be prepared to act as the subjects they become by virtue of that recognition.

Similarly, the ideological character of *License to Farm*, a thirty-minute documentary film, derives from a “highly selective view” of the condition of contemporary agriculture in the Prairies, presented as a story about farming and the imperative for farmers to act in response to the challenges they face. In this case, the primary challenge to farmers’ interests is presented as public misconceptions surrounding genetically modified organisms (GMOs), the environmental effects of chemical inputs used in cultivating GMO crops, and the power of the companies that develop and sell these products. Interestingly, in this case, the imperative to act is expressed specifically in terms of the need for farmers to tell their own stories, to counteract the

misconceptions promoted by a variety of external actors whose opinions threaten the livelihoods of farming families. The film and its accompanying materials are aimed at preparing farmers to act in just this way.

As with *Paper Wheat*, the ideological content of *License to Farm* is marked by the conditions of its production and circulation. The film was financed by a \$150,000 investment by the Saskatchewan Canola Development Commission (SaskCanola), representing three-quarters of the project budget, with an additional \$50,000 contributed by the governments of Saskatchewan and Canada under the Growing Forward 2 agricultural funding framework.³ It premiered in January 2016 at the Western Canadian Crop Production Show – an annual gathering billed as “western Canada’s premier grain industry showcase” – and, as noted above, has since received over 120,000 views online (Grueter 2016).

Whether its origins and financing make *License to Farm* a “kept film” is open to interpretation. Canola is an edible oilseed developed from rapeseed in Canada in the 1970s, using conventional breeding techniques. Grown primarily in south-central Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Manitoba, it is one of the most important crops in Canadian agriculture. A survey of farmers’ seeding intentions for 2017 indicated that projected acreage devoted to canola (22.4 million) would trail that projected for wheat (23.2 million) by only a narrow margin (Statistics Canada 2017). The Canola Council of Canada estimates that canola generates one-quarter of all farm revenues and contributes \$26.7 billion to the Canadian economy annually, making it the country’s “most valuable crop.”

Ninety percent of the canola grown in Canada is exported, largely as oil or meal processed at one of fourteen crushing and refining plants operated in Canada by a short roster of the world’s leading transnational agribusiness firms – Bunge, Viterra, Louis Dreyfus, Archer Daniels Midland, and James Richardson (Canola Council of Canada 2017a). As noted above, canola was originally developed conventionally, but today “about 80 per cent of the canola grown in Canada has been modified using biotechnology to make it tolerant to some herbicides” (Canola Council of Canada 2017b).⁴ In particular, the bulk of canola grown in Canada has been genetically modified to make it resistant to glyphosate, the active ingredient in Monsanto’s popular Roundup series of herbicides, or the glufosinate-ammonium used in Bayer’s LibertyLink product.⁵

It is in this light that the material stakes of *License to Farm*’s hail to farmers, to tell “their” story about the safety of the food they grow, begin to emerge. Persistent concerns in domestic and global consumer markets over

the health and environmental risks of GMO foods and the market dominance of transnational biotechnology firms threaten not only the existing canola industry in Canada (including the companies that sell herbicides and the seeds modified to resist them) but also the prospects for introducing genetic modification into other crops and categories of agricultural production, such as wheat, and the broader field of biotechnology more generally (Peekhaus 2013; Kinchy 2012). A failure to secure consumer confidence – or, alternatively, to establish *lack of confidence* as unfounded – could result in undeveloped product lines, lost markets, and greater levels of regulatory constraint, none of which would be welcomed by agribusiness.

The story of GMO agriculture is therefore the terrain of an ongoing struggle over the meaning of farming, in which industry groups such as SaskCanola and the governments that support them have a vested interest (Eaton 2013).⁶ In a context where the credibility of industrial voices in public debates is routinely questioned, the affective and strategic value of farmers telling their own stories about the food they are growing is potentially great.

License to Farm summons farmers to this cause and, like *Paper Wheat*, it does so by inviting them to recognize themselves in its narrative, and by enlisting their participation in a process we had a chance to witness firsthand. We first became aware of the film in March 2015 while one of us (Katherine Strand) was pursuing ethnographic field work in Swift Current, Saskatchewan. While visiting with a local farmer, she learned that a filmmaker, Garry Berteig, was touring the region and asking for interviews with agricultural producers and researchers. Strand received a call from Berteig, who described his project as a documentary about farm families in the Prairies. He asked for quotes about the “success” of farming in the region as the result of advances in research on synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, and genetically modified seeds. Strand asked for more information about the film, including funding sources, which Berteig declined to answer, so she decided not to participate.

Several months later, Strand attended a potluck dinner hosted by the same farmer, a regular event that included fifteen people representing farms across the spectrum in terms of size and type of operation. The host explained that the filmmaker planned to attend that evening. Berteig introduced himself to the group and described his project as a “film to dispel myths about factory farming.” At one point, a well-known organic farmer from the region approached Berteig, who recognized him as the former president of the National Farmers Union and an outspoken critic of international agribusinesses. Berteig told the organic farmer that he “simply

wanted to show the world that life in rural communities isn't in danger of fading away," as it is often portrayed in the media. The farmer responded by explaining how this very gathering represented the incredible shift in rural life that had occurred in the last fifty years. Most of his neighbours sold or rented their land because they found it impossible to keep up with the rising costs of machinery and chemical inputs. Berteig abruptly ended the conversation and left shortly thereafter.

None of the footage from the potluck appears in the thirty-minute film. Over the course of the film, an unidentified narrator guides the viewer through five chapters in which he describes the twenty-first century farm as both a vast and complex technological enterprise and continuous with the tradition of the family farm. He explains that concerned consumers represent the greatest risk to modern farmers as their unscientific and confused fears pressure the Canadian government to increase on-farm regulations. He highlights genetically modified seeds, pesticides, and factory farming as three main areas of concern for consumers, and explains how their fear of unsafe food is driving an "anti-farm movement." The anti-farm movement organizes activists who pressure the government to ban GMO seeds such as Roundup-ready canola, regulate pesticide use, and give urban consumers the false idea that all family farms have become corporate factories. In each chapter, the narrator highlights these "myths," then uses clips from interviews with farmers, researchers, and experts in public relations to dispel the concerns and encourage other farmers to educate the public by "telling their stories."

The film includes interviews with seven individuals with the designation "farmer" under their names. Five of the seven farmers are current or former members of canola industry producer groups and another, Cheryl Nagel, works in public relations for Farm and Food Care Saskatchewan.⁷ Through this organization, Nagel has hosted workshops for farmers around the province to help them "tell their story" using facts about their industry found in the publication *The Real Dirt on Farming*, which is available for purchase on the organization's website (www.farmfoodcare.org/canada). The film also relies on interview clips from representatives of SaskCanola, Agrimetrix Research and Training (a company specializing in sprayer technology), Saskatchewan Polytechnic, and Ag-West Bio Inc. (Saskatchewan's bioscience industry association). Although the film was financially supported by the government of Saskatchewan and Agriculture Canada, representatives of these governments do not appear in it. The film includes the testimony of Mark Lynas, an environmental activist based in Oxford, England, and

Dr. Joe Schwarcz, the director of McGill University's Office for Science and Society, based in Montreal. A master of science student, Ian Epp, is the only University of Saskatchewan affiliate to appear in the film. In total, *License to Farm* uses interviews with eighteen individuals, including two "concerned consumers" who represent the unscientific fears of "urban foodies." Between interview clips, the film displays footage of agricultural landscapes, on-farm practices, anti-farm protesters, unspecified laboratory and field testing sites, and one of Cherilyn Nagel's training sessions with farmers. It closes with a capitalized exhortation before the final credits: "DON'T LET YOUR SILENCE TAKE AWAY YOUR LICENSE TO FARM."

One Subject or Another

Paper Wheat and *License to Farm* cover remarkably similar ground in their efforts to hail agricultural political subjects who are otherwise remarkably different. Both begin on the farm, with farmers and their families confronting the natural adversaries that have perennially made it difficult for them to eke out a living from the land and the "natural" adversities it presents: soil that is reluctant to yield, weather that defies control, weeds and pests that refuse to give up. In *Paper Wheat*, the solution to these problems is mutual aid. In the signature scene of Act I (Twenty-Fifth Street Theatre 1982, 46–48), the Ukrainian farmer Vasil Havryshyn visits his English neighbour William Postlethwaite, convincing him to accept use of his plow in exchange for help in digging a new well. Thus the seeds of cooperation are sown. In *License to Farm*, the solution to the problems of fertility, weather, and pestilence is "cutting edge technology," including "breakthroughs in genetics, communications and chemistry" that enable farmers to "grow our food more quickly, with less energy, less environmental impact and in greater abundance than ever before" (0:30–0:45). It bears mentioning that there is no indication that any of these technologies are borrowed from or shared with the neighbours: they are all purchased by individual farmers from the corporations that develop and sell them. Here, too, we are presented with the germinal form of the political subjectivity that will be summoned more directly as the story unfolds.

In both *Paper Wheat* and *License to Farm*, farmers are portrayed as vulnerable to external forces that come from beyond the farm gate to threaten their livelihoods. For the farmers in *Paper Wheat*, this threatening force is represented by the Winnipeg Grain Exchange, made up largely of five companies that control the price of grain at local elevators. In the scene "Who Are the Scales Working for Today?" Irish farmer Sean Phelan brings a load

of grain into town to sell at the local elevator, where the agent tries to cajole him into disclosing whether recent rains might have introduced unwanted moisture into his grain (Twenty-Fifth Street Theatre 1982, 53–54). From the moment Sean leaves his farm gate, he is entering a space that is beyond his control and hostile to his interests. Moisture is not the problem. The problem is that he has no choice but to deliver his crop to the local elevator, where he is exposed to the abusive practices of railway and grain companies whose controlling interests are, both spatially and economically, distant from his own.

In *License to Farm*, the malevolent force is not the handful of transnational corporations that control the technologies of genetic modification, dominate the sale of chemical inputs, and control access to grain handling, transportation, and marketing. Instead, it is the growing legion of uninformed consumers and irrational activists whose political influence threatens to undermine markets for farmers' products and to pressure governments into increased regulatory intervention in the agricultural sector. As the narrator explains: "Public fears about food safety are putting pressure on government and decision-makers to restrict the approval of GM Foods, like the oil from the canola grown here, and to ban the use of certain pesticides. Canada's food certification process is already one of the strictest in the world. But will it become so restrictive that farmers will lose their choice about how they manage their crops?" (1:49–2:18).

In both narratives, the insecurity of farmers' livelihoods extends from vulnerability to natural forces inside the farm gate to exposure to political forces beyond it. For the farmers in *Paper Wheat*, these forces are the private grain trade and the railway companies. For the farmers in *License to Farm*, it is the organized movement – largely urban and vaguely foreign – in opposition to GMOs and chemical agriculture. When the president of Agrimetrix describes these political actors as the "anti-farm movement" (3:25), the message is clear: opposition to companies like Monsanto and Syngenta is a direct threat to farmers themselves. Against the backdrop of a montage of scenes from random anti-GMO and food-safety demonstrations in cities around the world, a voice-over declares, "Canadian farmers have never before faced a challenge of this magnitude" (1:49–2:25).

There are, of course, many ways to farm, including viable options at the scale of commodity grain production (Stevenson 2015). As framed by *License to Farm*, the threat posed by environmentalists, food security activists, and critics of companies such as Monsanto is that they will deprive farmers of the right to choose to grow genetically modified crops using

chemical inputs. The film thus appeals directly to the value of independence typically attributed to farmers and their families. The issue of freedom of choice is also prominent in *Paper Wheat*. When Sean Phelan arrives at the local private elevator to find that his grain has been graded and weighed differently from the previous week, he has no choice but to accept it because his options are limited by the oligopolistic organization of the grain industry (Twenty-Fifth Street Theatre 1982, 55). As the cast sings in “The Grain Exchange Rag”: “There’s five companies trading and betting / Hiking and charging, and gorging and getting / Wheat’s the thing; money’s the game / But win or lose, it’s all the same” (ibid.).

This experience of constrained choice prompts action by the farmers, the success of which relies heavily on state intervention in the form of regulation of the abusive practices of the grain and railroad companies and the provision of statutory support for producer-managed alternatives. By contrast, in *License to Farm*, it is not the “five companies” who control the intellectual property in GMOs and dominate the retail inputs and grain-handling sectors, or the contractual obligations through which they bind their customers, that threaten farmers’ freedom of choice. Instead, the threat is that governments might respond to public concerns over the environment and food safety by increasing regulatory intervention in the biotechnology and agribusiness sectors.

As PR consultant Megan Madden warns: “Farmers are going to see increased legislations [sic] that aren’t coming from a place of agronomy, they’re not coming from a place of agriculture. They’re going to be coming from politics and farmers like my dad will be forced to change how they grow food” (4:03–4:15). Cherilyn Nagel adds: “Europe would be a perfect example. They don’t have the option to grow genetically-modified seeds” (4:16–4:21). Here, regulatory oversight of biotechnology and agribusiness firms, practices, and products are presented as a violation of individual farmers’ right to choose to grow GMOs and use chemical inputs, as a threat to their licence to farm as they please. While the integrity of the regulatory apparatus is invoked at other points in the film as guaranteeing the safety of biotechnologically produced food, the prevailing message is that farmers must rise to protect their freedom of choice by advocating for regulatory forbearance in relation to an industrial complex designed to limit their options in other ways.

The problem of information looms large in both *License to Farm* and *Paper Wheat*. In the latter, the fulcrum of the narrative is price, which is information about the value of a commodity. Price, and its manipulation, is

the material expression of farmers' abusive relationship with the grain and railway companies. A major element in the play's dramatic arc is the farmers' pursuit of information about how, where, and by whom prices are set, as lack of access to this information leaves them vulnerable to the depredations of those who have it. The opening of Act 2 finds Ed Partridge waiting for a train at the railway station in Sintaluta. "One thing we'd love to know," he says, "is just how that Grain Exchange works. We figure the best way to find out is to send someone there ... We'd also like to know why prices fluctuate so much, and who is responsible. Well, frankly, we don't know. But, as sure as I'm sitting on this hard railway bench, I'm going to find out" (Twenty-Fifth Street Theatre 1982, 55). Upon his return, Partridge shares the information he has gathered about price setting in the grain industry: "There are twenty-odd companies that deal in grain on the exchange. Five of these companies are so big that they have a monopoly on marketing. They determine how high and how low prices will be. I believe they are in league to undermine the farmer and exploit us in every way possible" (*ibid.*, 58).

In *License to Farm*, the problem is not the small number of highly integrated agricultural biotechnology firms that control information about their products via intellectual property regimes, or the price of inputs and technologies whose costs contribute to farmers' continuous and escalating debt (Reuters 2016). Instead, the problem is that the general public is being intentionally misled about the safety of GMOs and the reality of contemporary farming. At one point, agribusiness executive Tom Wolfe says: "There is money in the anti-farm movement. Someone is making money off it. They're making money off it. They're selling an alternative, and farmers are *paying the price*" (3:24–3:31). In this formulation, price – the most important piece of information in a farmer's operation – is mobilized rhetorically in a way that drains it of its meaning in the context of actual farming, and directs attention away from, rather than towards, the source of the prices that farmers actually pay.

To address misunderstandings about food safety, the film uses the image of farmers who care deeply about their soil and the food they grow, bolstered by testimony from experts whose relationship to the science of GMOs and agronomy is mostly oblique but who nevertheless speak with authority about the scientific consensus concerning the safety and environmental benefits of these products, and cast opposition to GMOs as misleading, harmful, and anti-scientific (3:34–3:52). To correct public misperceptions concerning the nature of contemporary farming, the film adopts a contradictory posture. On the one hand, today's farm is presented as a sophisticated,

technologically intensive, and abundantly productive operation, in contrast to the romantic ideal of pastoral agriculture to which anti-GMO activists would condemn contemporary farmers. On the other hand, responding to concerns about corporate agriculture, later segments of the film assert that these large-scale operations nevertheless remain “family farms.” The modern farm is presented as simultaneously the site of past family traditions and a forward-looking, technological future. In this light, the claims of those concerned about the role of GMOs in intensifying corporate dominance in agriculture are presented as wholly regressive and unfounded.

Both *Paper Wheat* and *License to Farm* culminate in accounts of farmers acting in response to the challenges they diagnose. In *Paper Wheat*, the problem of price manipulation by an oligopolistic grain industry requires a strategy of collective action that takes the material form of alternative, farmer-owned and operated institutions for grain handling and marketing such that farmers might participate in the grain economy as price-makers rather than price-takers. Tellingly, the notion occurs first to a pair of farm women who have just received notice of a meeting to organize an association of territorial grain growers. Anna’s husband is reluctant to join but, as she tells her friend Elizabeth, she forces him to “go and talk ... Find out why we’re getting such bad prices.” She describes how she has also told him to avoid the elevator company altogether by ordering his own rail cars from the CPR to load and ship his grain directly.⁸ When Elizabeth replies that her husband doesn’t produce enough grain to fill a car on his own, Anna responds with a big idea: “Well, why don’t we get together. Put all our grain together and ship it away. We’d get better prices than we’re getting now” (Twenty-Fifth Street Theatre 1982, 53).

During his report to the Territorial Grain Growers Association of Sinaluta about his trip to the grain exchange, Ed Partridge says he did “a little arithmetic” on the train that added up to “five million bushels of ... bargaining power.” This prompts him to make a proposal: “Why don’t we form a company, why don’t we form a grain company in which all the shareholders are farmers – those that grow the grain. Why don’t we buy a seat on the Winnipeg Grain Exchange ... and why don’t we market our own grain? ... I move that here and now, at this meeting, we accept in principle the idea of a cooperative grain marketing company, in which all the profit goes right back to the farmer” (Twenty-Fifth Street Theatre 1982, 58–59). The motion carries. Three decades later, at a gathering to celebrate the opening of a cooperative coal shed during the depths of the Depression, Louise Lucas reflects on the story of the Wheat Pool and implores, “Let’s not stop here.

Let's include all the things we need for daily life in a program of cooperative buying ... Let's have more cooperative enterprises, such as a farm implement manufacturers' co-op. And why not co-operative health care, and our own money co-ops?" (ibid., 70).⁹ In response to the material problem of price, and the ability of private corporations to manipulate it in their own interests, the farmers depicted in *Paper Wheat* are prepared to step beyond the farm gate to enact a decidedly material collective response.

Likewise, the action recommended by *License to Farm* corresponds to its diagnosis of the challenge facing farmers in their current circumstances. This challenge is not the material organization of the status quo of industrial agriculture in the Prairies, which would call for collective action to structurally alter the present situation – indeed, the imperative implied by *License to Farm* is to continue and even intensify the existing order of things. Instead, the challenge facing farmers is a discursive one: the potential that public opinion about GMOs and chemical agriculture might be swayed against the interests of the global biotechnology industry with whom farmers are called by the film to identify. The danger is that a general public convinced by misinformation that GMOs are unsafe or environmentally harmful, or that biotechnology companies are too powerful and abusive, might be reluctant to consume GMO foods and could lead governments to withhold product approvals or to impose additional regulatory burdens on the industry. The problem of public opinion calls for a discursive response, a strategy in which farmers have an important role to play.

In a context where dissemination of scientific information does not automatically translate into public knowledge, and where the credibility of industry-driven public relations is low, the discursive value of farmers narrating their personal experience is potentially great, especially given popular perceptions of hardworking, honest, trustworthy farmers. Thus, the film calls upon farmers to “rise to the occasion and start telling their own stories and proactively sharing information about their farms, about their production practices, about their values” (3:52–4:03). Especially important is that farmers learn “how [they] can talk to the public about food safety,” specifically in relation to “three areas of public concern: genetically-modified foods, agriculture’s use of chemicals and the idea that the small farm of yesteryear is gone and that food production has been taken over by mega-corporations.” To do this, farmers must learn how to “speak directly to the public about their farming practices, explain why they use certain technologies and re-assure the public that their food is safe” (5:17–5:51). As Janice Tranberg, executive director of SaskCanola observes, “they need to stand

up. They need to get out there and tell their stories ... if you don't tell the story, someone else is going to" (25:30–25:44).

The question is to what extent the story farmers are being summoned to tell in *License to Farm* is really their own or, instead, the story that biotechnology companies and large-scale agribusiness need farmers to tell on their behalf. As depicted in *Paper Wheat*, the material project of cooperative organization required farmers to assemble and communicate with each other, in meetings where an alternative infrastructure could be built and collectively enacted. In an interview at the premiere of *License to Farm*, the film's director, Alexei Berteig, promoted a very different dynamic. "We have this shift in the culture of agricultural communities," he said, "from farmers talking to each other to farmers really becoming interested in speaking to the public" (Guenther 2016). When farmers talk to each other, they know what to say and they say it in their own words. Speaking to the public requires a different vocabulary, and this is exactly what *License to Farm* and its related apparatus seeks to provide. According to Berteig, "the hope of this film is that farmers will look at the arguments that are made in this film and take inspiration from them and maybe have a little more language about something to explain next time they receive opposition from neighbours, or from cousins or from family members that are questioning them and their farming practices" (ibid.). In this sense, *License to Farm* is not just a film, it is also a script.

Conclusion: Hey, You There!

In some respects, the agricultural political subjects hailed by *Paper Wheat* and *License to Farm* are quite similar. Both arise from experiences grounded in farmers' ongoing struggles to eke out a productive livelihood from a resistant landscape whose conditions are mostly beyond their control. In both works, farmers are portrayed as independent producers performing the good work of growing food but subject to larger economic systems, market logics, and political forces to which they must respond and adapt in order to prosper. Both involve action beyond the farm gate and engagement with a broader world of actors and powerful institutions whose interests are at odds with farmers' own. In both cases, these subjects are as often women as they are men. And they are subjects who are untroubled by the history of violence against Indigenous peoples and species that cleared (and clears) the way for their existence. It is because they refer to real material conditions and concrete experience that both *Paper Wheat* and *License to Farm* have the potential to interpellate Prairie farmers as political subjects.

However, as vectors of interpellation, the play and the film also hail agricultural political subjects that are marked by their differences. *Paper Wheat* looks to a past of collective action that, at the time, was passing – or being designed – out of existence. *License to Farm* evokes a technologically enabled future of competitive striving that is still unfolding. The farmers of *Paper Wheat* have corporate enemies, while those of *License to Farm* have only corporate friends. *Paper Wheat* hails the subject of cooperation, who works collectively into the future with other producers to build material infrastructures that can support their freedom, equality, and well-being in the face of industrial configurations that bear in the opposite direction. *License to Farm* hails the subject of competition, who adapts to prevailing market, industrial, and technological conditions and is prepared to defend the status quo against those who might question it. One of these works is a threat to the organization of industrial agriculture along capitalist lines, the other is not.

Ideological operations are not innocent. As we have shown, they seek to interpellate particular subjects to suit particular interests and, in the process, they both reveal and conceal various elements of the material relations to which they refer. There is always a gap between subjective recognition and the objective conditions that any given ideological hail mediates. On this basis, we could ask which of the two, *Paper Wheat* or *License to Farm*, prompts subjective recognition of the “real conditions” of Prairie farmers’ existence and which prompts misrecognition. We certainly have views about this, but our more limited critical aim in this chapter has been to show that each of these artifacts operates ideologically by preparing subjects to act politically in distinctive ways. The task has not been to determine which work tells the “true” story but instead to explore how each hails a different political subject of Prairie agriculture. The critical question prompted by our analysis is whether subjects recognize themselves in these hails, turn around, and go about the everyday activity of preparing themselves to be those sorts of subjects.

In this respect, it is an empirical question, and difficult to know, whether *Paper Wheat* or *License to Farm* has been more successful. In the mid-1970s, dynamics were just beginning that ended in the privatization of the wheat pools, the dismantling of collective grain marketing, the dismantling of the country elevator and railway branch line systems, and the increasing consolidation of both farms and global agribusiness. It would be difficult to say that many responded other than nostalgically in the 1970s to the hail of *Paper Wheat*. By the same token, at a time when the struggle over GMOs

and industrial agribusiness is just getting started, the fate of *License to Farm* and the subjects it tries to recruit remains uncertain. It is rare that a subject ever responds to the hail of ideology by turning around completely. Being prepared to act is not a state; it is an uneven process that is always underway. Sometimes those who are hailed turn around. Sometimes they turn away.

Notes

- 1 The *Grain Grower's Guide* (1908–28) notably provided a platform for women's issues and was an important vehicle of the early women's movement in Canada (see Freeman 2011, 67–92). Similarly, *The Western Producer*, founded in 1923 as *The Progressive* and renamed in 1924, promoted cooperation among western farmers. It was purchased in the 1930s by the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool and remained an important advocate of cooperation until sold to a private newspaper company in 2002.
- 2 By contrast, *No. 1 Hard*, a play sponsored by the militant National Farmers Union that was performed in 1978, presented the achievement of the wheat pools without sentimentality as part of, rather than apart from, the overall capitalist and class structure of the grain industry (Filewod 2000, 85–89).
- 3 Growing Forward 2 was an initiative of the Harper government supporting “innovation, competitiveness and market development” in the agribusiness and agri-food sectors. Its mandate spanned the years 2013–18. See Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada 2018.
- 4 This is a conservative estimate provided by the industry council. The Canadian Biotechnology Action Network (2015) estimates that 95 percent of canola grown in Canada is genetically modified.
- 5 In September 2016, Monsanto and Bayer announced a merger deal valued at US\$66 billion. Similar mergers are planned between Dow and DuPont, and between Syngenta and ChemChina (Harwell 2016).
- 6 In 2015, Premier Brad Wall of Saskatchewan sent a letter urging the three main federal parties to signal their support for “fact-based” policy in the development of GMOs in Canada (CBC News 2015). In 2011, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper (joined by Michael Ignatieff's Liberals) defeated Bill C-474, a Private Member's Bill that would have placed additional regulatory constraints on the introduction of new GMO crops in Canada.
- 7 The film includes clips from farmer interviews with Stan Jeeves (former president of the Saskatchewan Canola Growers Association), Doyle Wiebe (chair of the SaskCanola board of directors), Val Wiebe (Doyle Wiebe's wife), Brett Halstead (former president of the Canadian Canola Growers Association), Dale Leftwich (former chair of the Saskatchewan Canola Development Commission), and Terry Youzwa (former board chair of SaskCanola).

Farm and Food Care Saskatchewan (farmfoodcaresk.org) is the provincial division of Farm and Food Care Canada. The organization's 2015 Donor Investment Report (<http://www.farmfoodcare.org>) lists the Alberta Canola Producers Commission, the Canadian Canola Growers Association, and SaskCanola as “Champion” donors of \$100,000 or more.

- 8 On the history of producer cars, see Barney 2011, 15–18.
- 9 Louise Lucas was known as the “Mother of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF)” and was one of the earliest leaders of the Saskatchewan farmers’ movement (see Wright 1965).

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