As science lengthens, the radius of ignorance proportionally increases.

– Wendell Berry

The field that you are standing before appears to have the same proportions as your own life.

– John Berger
A Minor Theory of the Transit of Materiality into Discourse, via Campesina

by

Aaron Franks

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Abstract

In this thesis I explore how the material properties of plant seed enter the political discourses of the international peasant coalition the Via Campesina and coalition member the National Farmers Union of Canada (NFU), querying how this process might be employed as a resource for a transformative eco-social politics. I employ several post-structural theoretical constructs, configuring them together as a “minor theory”.

This minor theory provides the basis for a “minor” reading of three sets of Via Campesina and NFU texts. The aim of these readings is to track the movement of seed from a local agricultural concern to a transitive political one, across both the material and discursive registers. In surfacing the presence of the seed’s physical properties in the three texts, I highlight the distinctions between the constraining seed of corporate industrial agriculture, and the social and agroecological opportunities resulting from what I call a “Seed Event”.
Preface

This thesis is a theoretical exploration of how material properties and contingencies enter political discourses, and how acknowledging this process might be a resource for a transformative eco-social politics. The central material figure is seed, and the specific process I examine is the transit of the seed into the discourses of the international peasant group the Via Campesina, as well as the Via Campesina member group the National Farmers Union of Canada.

The impetus for choosing this particular thesis topic stems from a personal frustration with the disconnection between a traditional (yet somehow still historically recent) politics of social debate and the “new” politics of the environment. The former has as yet proven incapable of including non-human concerns, and the latter seems hoist on two petards—“How do we save the planet?” sitting some distance away from “How do we continue to maintain progress?” Further frustration stems from the fact that non-human concerns are so obviously also human ones, and that notions of progress seem so inadequately addressed by prevailing, as well as many minority, views on the subject. As I was intending to explore an activist group intimately concerned with agriculture, I also quickly realized that environmental politics was anything but new. But how then to make a politics that includes the non-human (the environment) into something other than the “green” politics that now lines up alongside neo-liberalism, social democracy, and state socialism as just another artifact of the social contract?

I still wanted to examine how such a sprawling network as the Via Campesina could effectively share and disseminate texts and discourses. And to that end,
examining the move from material agricultural practice to textual discourse—particularly those shared over the internet—had always been important to the thesis as originally conceived. I realized, however, that I would need to make that material-discourse move the foundational concern that provided traction for any other moves. In other words, before asking “how does the Via Campesina work as a network”, I needed to ask “how does the Via Campesina work at all, farmers talking about farming as a keystone in human-human and human–non-human relations?” That is farming and politics, inseparable. Eco-polis. Agro-polis. What started as a sort of mapping of material and discursive influences among Via Campesina member groups quickly evolved into a theory-based examination of the relationship between the heart of the Via Campesina’s material concerns (seed) and the way in which that practical concern was discussed.

Some original intentions slid away to the back burner in this transformation. An exploration that employed theories of social movement creation and operation gave way to an exploration of the material properties and resultant possibilities of social movement discourse. A border-line institutional ethnography of the Via Campesina stepped aside to make way for very particular concerns about that institution’s material practices. A sweeping examination of the Via Campesina’s trade and land reform struggles became subordinate to a more limited but in-depth examination of the role of seed and seed discourses in those and other struggles.

What emerged when these original intentions were organically replaced by new ones is, I believe, more complex and far-reaching. I believe that in a modest and incomplete way, this “new” emergent thesis may say more about the productive links between discourse and practice, between theory and practice, and between academia and activism than my project as originally conceived might have. But with this
territory comes the risk of over-reaching, of accidental obfuscation and coming adrift from the anchors of politics, agriculture, and ecology. To counter this possibility, at least in part, I have employed a couple of strategies. One is to measure my research question “How do the material, particular, and localized knowledges and practices of peasant and small farmers make their way into the politic of the global social movement la Via Campesina?” against the prerogatives of my accompanying “problem quest”:

\[
to \text{ earthbind transformative progressive politics without denying social agency, but rather by expanding the parameters and web of actors that frame and generate agency; to assert limits over capitalist productivism by critiquing the under-materialized and as yet underexamined politics around that most basic and necessary product, food.}
\]

This is done in order to maintain a praxical slant for my theoretical positions, pausing throughout the thesis to check in with the pragmatic goals of the Via Campesina and how my academic intervention might support them. The other tactic is to conceive of my theorizations as being in the minor key— not definitive, hermetic, or complete, but in process, exploratory, and expansive. An analytical device to lever further truths with, rather than a device to negate existing ones.

In this process of theorizing in a minor key, I employ several often interrelated (and established) theoretical constructs, configuring them together as a partial and incomplete “minor theory” in a manner inspired by the work of geographer Cindi Katz. The theoretical constructs are 1) environmental perception and affordances, 2) two branches of post-structuralism in Deleuzoguattarian geophilosophy and Actor Network Theory, and 3) two branches of material
semiotics, one being a component of Deleuze and Guattari's work and the other based on the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce. I devote considerable attention to each of them throughout, and particularly in Chapter IV—Theory in accord. But as important is the way (and the spirit) in which they are "chorded" together. For this reason I have also used considerable space, in Chapter II—A Minor theory, to elaborate how my minor theory is chorded and what the implications are.

One of these implications is the way a minor theory can admit the enormous variety of subjectivities the Via Campesina claims to represent into the remit of this thesis. The Via Campesina concept of food sovereignty calls for remarkable and far-reaching social and political change that penetrates the borders of the bounded subject—eater and producer, Global Northerner and Global Southerner, rural and urban dweller, even human and non-human. It is, in part, the Via Campesina's way of expanding their political position to place peasants, small farmers, herders, and small-scale fishers on the same plane as those whose voices have generally been more privileged and acknowledged, e.g., the urban, the institutionally educated, professionals and their allies and emissaries. Just as food sovereignty is the Via Campesina's "binding agent", so too is minor theory my device of inclusion. With it I strive to include 1) academia (specifically my own position as an academic) in the co-production of Via Campesina discourses; 2) the aforementioned theory sets chorded together as minor theory; 3) a materialized semiotic along with more conventional ways of sense-making and reading for meaning; 4) very geographically and temporally distant events and subjects together on one ontological plane.

In generating minor theory, many paths are opened. Many, most in fact, I am unable to fully pursue here. One door that opened under the remit of this thesis was an understanding of the research process itself, and how that particular production
could positively interact with the Via Campesina’s textual and discursive productions. For the most part, my nameless minor theory is used to generate a minor key reading of three sets of Via Campesina and National Farmers Union texts. The aim of this reading is to simultaneously track the movement of seed from being a local agricultural concern to a transitive political one. This also involves an abstracted tracing of the seed’s transit across the material and discursive registers.

In surfacing the presence of the seed’s physical properties in the three texts, I attempt to highlight the distinction between the socially and biologically limited seed of corporate industrial agriculture and the myriad social and agroecological opportunities that result from what I call a “Seed Event”. I posit that in surfacing these meanings in competing textual discourses, i.e., those of the Via Campesina and those of the dominant agribusiness and trade regime bodies, we might find a resource for resisting ecologically destructive and socially debilitating constructions of the function of seed in agriculture, and by extension, life itself. Admittedly, this thesis focuses almost exclusively on Via Campesina (and NFU) discourses, but my minoritarian analysis could just as easily be undertaken on the texts of Monsanto or the World Bank.

I am sure farmers have been making statements along the lines of “seed is life” since the first land was broken along the banks of the Tigris, Ganges, Nile, and Yangtze rivers thousands of years ago. This thesis is in some ways an exploration of just what that statement means in a contemporary world where grain is fed to cars and cattle before people, and green beans and arugula are exported from Africa to Europe while some Africans rely on genetically modified maize shipped as aid from the petrochemically fertilized monocultures of the US Midwest. “Seed is life” is a statement too important to remain unexamined, stuck as a quaint homily or cultural
artifact of a romanticized peasantry. As a piece of rhetoric, it comes with many cultural and social provisos. In this thesis I seek to underpin the material contingencies of what some of these provisos are. I hope that this thesis, in its particular way, reminds us that it might be a statement still worth practicing.
Acknowledgements

Writing a thesis can be a very solitary activity. Along the way I was fortunate enough to have experienced the insight and intellectual and personal generosity of my supervisor Dr. David Butz, and my second reader Dr. Mary-Beth Raddon.

I can’t thank my wife Rebecca Benson enough for her love, patience, and encouragement. The same goes for my parents Sandra and Doug and to my whole extended family, who instilled me with the desire to learn and supported my decision to return to school.

I also want to thank the National Farmers Union of Canada for allowing me to attend their 38th National Convention as a guest, and Drs. Tim Cresswell (University of London, Royal Holloway) and Andrea Nightingale (University of Edinburgh) for their correspondence that led to some expanded reading and thinking. And of course, many warm thanks to Brock classmate Jody Toetenel and to Dr. Dennis Soron for their friendship, and occasional spare rooms.
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Chapter I- Setting Out

A public airing on behalf of the "voiceless"

_They have made worms meat of me_

– Mercutio, Romeo and Juliet, Act III, Sc. i

This thesis deals in complex social theory that identifies itself only in academia, but its creation was motivated by some very public "lay" debates on "what to do about the environment". While writing my proposal, that question sounded loud and clear through the speakers of the computer on which it was composed, in the form of a panel discussion on CBC Radio One’s "Sounds Like Canada".

Responding to an earlier interview with eco-naval warrior and Sea Shepard captain Paul Watson, the panelists engaged in a raucous sparring match, their three positions playing out roughly as follows: my dog has feelings, provides companionship, is loyal and trusting (save the animals); the Earth can survive without people but not without worms (save the Earth/worms); worms are not more important than people (the last fellow, isolated and overpowered, was unable to expound on this position).

It is evident in both the "lay" discourses I heard pleaded on the CBC and academic and theoretical discourses alike that contemporary concerns about anthropogenic effects to the environment are playing out along deeply divided philosophical positions. Broadly speaking the "save the animals"– particularly the large vertebrates and mammals” and the “save the Earth/worms” positions fall respectively into the “ethical extensionism” and “holistic perspective” camps as articulated by environmental political scientist Neil Carter (2001). Both positions are essentially humanist, and neither promises to break free anytime soon from the Cartesian episteme (Desmarais, 2007 page 43) that has generated the Western subject as a disembodied “mind in a vat” (Latour, 1999, page 4, quoted in Whatmore, 2002, page 148), cleaving consciousness and “being” apart from more material and sensory engagements. The proponents of the holistic perspective, such as Arne Naess and

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1 The show was broadcast on CBC Radio One June 14, 2007; the panel consisted of Carolina Echeverria, Randy Boyagoda, and Brian O’Dea and was hosted by Kevin Sylvester. Information for that program- broadcast time and date, etc.- can be found at http://www.cbc.ca/radioshows/SOUNDS_LIKE_CANADA/20070614.shtml
Warwick Fox (Carter, 2001), while positioning their stance as more fully realized and transformative than the piecemeal extension of rights to sentient beings advocated by the ethical extensionists, have themselves been criticized for subsuming the “ethical considerability of the non-human world... into the compass of human being, even as they strive to construct an inter-subjective conception of ethical agency” (Whatmore, 2002, page 157). Hence the two panelists’ denunciation of the “worms are not more important than people” statement comes off as unwitting hypocrisy, as neither the ethical extensionist nor the holist are able to escape the anthropocentric and rationalist constructions from whence ethical considerations might be generated.

Philosophy aside, that the man who indicated his reverence for people over worms is in the democratic majority would be (contrary to the composition of the CBC radio panel) a fair bet. For all of the importance of nematodes in the production and maintenance of the organic substrate required to sustain life on Earth, if the fictive Reckoning arrived when we as a species were called to choose between our own survival and that of the earthworms, familial and affective ties would surely tip us toward the Pyrrhic victory of self-preservation, sans worms. Anthropenctricism may not be easily shed. As I lay out the terms and goals of this project, a certain hyper-abstracted rationality will instead emerge as my target. It may be that the terms and conditions of the “anthro” need to be changed, and less energy expended on a psycho-ethical concern with the “centricism”.

I invoke the radio debate to indicate the extent to which deep-seated and well-founded fears for the future inhabitability of the planet have entered the public sphere (literally in the case of the CBC as the nation’s public broadcaster), and also to illustrate how inadequate many of the referents and premises underlying this conversation have been. With due respect to Sounds Like Canada’s guests, the terms of the debate on ensuring the future inhabitability of the planet must not rest on either an affective argument that extends rights to those creatures that please us, or an argument that sublimes human aspirations for dignity, liberation, and quality of life to a mechanist (however “organic”) appeal to the ongoing production of humus.

Social matters, civil society and praxical theory

In my thesis I take up the work of theorists seeking to move forward from the rancourous dualism that pits humanity’s interests against what are supposed to be
those of “Nature”. But while theorizations that seek to imbricate and unify the material and social will be core resources for my project, my subject per se requires engaging with ongoing work “in the field” as it were, the work of the peasants’ movement the Via Campesina. The Via Campesina is an international organization representing peasants and small farmers from around the world who have very specific and transformative ideas as to “what to do about the environment”. The political and ecological work of this movement, in this moment in time, carries with it a demand for praxis that will help to steer this thesis away from what might threaten to become a “dematerialized’ and ‘desocialized’ geograph[y]”, the sort of “abstract, un-'earthed’ enquiry” (Ryan, 2000, page 11) which many practitioners of the alchemical drive to mind/matter holism have themselves sought to avoid while inadvertently succumbing to the same (Ivakhiv, 2002). Conversely, recognizing the very real ramifications for survival presented by the temporal urgency and material particularities of the group’s practices need not be an excuse for a lack of critique of those same practices and discourses.

In asking the question “How do the material, particular, and localized knowledges and practices of peasant and small farmers make their way into the politic of the global social movement la Via Campesina?” which will be the heart of my thesis, I hope to provide a means of understanding relational forces that might enhance the efficacy of the movement’s myriad political maneuvers for its members and sympathetic observers and allies alike. This understanding begins with the movement’s own stated aims and follows the traces made by a variety of “actants”– a term “borrowed from semiotics and denoting anything that could be said to fulfill the function of acting” (Ivakhiv, 2002, page 394)– to and from these discursive positions. This then is my research question, and the subject of my enquiry, with the Via Campesina and its constituents being but one portion of a larger assemblage, a sub-subject as it were. My subject is a “how” rather than a “what”, but the “how” is in this instance a product of the interaction of many “whats”– “things” and “events” (Harvey, 1996) which are inherently material, social, and discursive to varying degrees.

I want to here light briefly on David Harvey’s explication of dialectics in Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference (1996), for although there are divergences between Hegelian/Marxian dialectics and some of the theories of
materiality and relationality that this thesis employs (Miller, p.12, 2005), Harvey’s interpretation and application of Alfred North Whitehead’s thought sets out some foundations for my study— an allusion to a manner of being, or a worldview, that powers this journey. Whitehead, a metaphysical theorist, a philosopher of natural science, and a speculative philosopher (Christian, p. 1, 1959), and “always preferring the word ‘event’ to thing because it captures the dynamism involved” (Harvey, page 52, 1996), states: “The event is what it is, by reason of the unification in itself of a multiplicity of relationships” (Whitehead, page 155, 1985, in Harvey, page 52, 1996). 

The central Event in this thesis, and an Event in itself, is the Seed, in all of (or many of) its biophysical, social, cultural, and cosmological guises and roles, the organizing mechanism and the point of departure and return for “the material, particular and localized knowledges and practices of peasant and small farmers”. Whitehead’s work figures prominently in the processual approach of many of the theorists I muster here, and the idea that “the ‘principle of process’ is that ‘being is constituted by becoming’” (Whitehead, page 28, 1969, in Harvey, page 54, 1996) is a shared and foundational one. “Morphological description [here of objects, sites, and subjects] is replaced by description of dynamic processes [introduced below…]” (Whitehead, page 7, 1978, in Thrift, page 85, 2004).

Seed, Event, and routes to the material-social

The Seed is the central Event of analysis, and a multi-layered approach that traces its transit as a thoroughly and consistently material actant into textual discourse will be employed in engaging my central research question. This involves framing two routes that trace the Seeds’ transit, which will often overlap and gird one another. The first is Seed as an object that plays both socio-political and ecological roles and is a lodestone for local cultural, spiritual, cosmological, and sustainable agriculture traditions as well as for global capital and its penetration into agricultural and food

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2 I have chosen to capitalize “Seed” and “Event” in some instances. “Event” is capitalized when I am employing it in the manner of Whitehead’s object that is a temporary and contingent set of relations in the spirit of monism, and, as will be discussed, in Deleuzian geophilosophy, ANT, and other poststructural conceptualizations of the object/Event that I employ. “Seed” is capitalized when what is being spoken of, the vernacular seed as nodule of germplasm and hull, is made most available for ecological and social sustainability. Un-capitalized “seed” refers in different contexts to the vernacular seed that appears liberally in quoted texts, or to seed that is limited in its latent capacities for production and reproduction. In several instances in Chapter V the choice is a judgment call taken from an expressly normative or politicized position.
systems. For contemporary capital (colloquially known in an agricultural context as “Big” or “Global” Agribusiness), the genetically modified seed represents the zenith of accumulation and commoditization in agriculture, whereby its latent reproductive potential is captured and reduced to an input that must be purchased annually by farmers and sustained by other external inputs (Kloppenberg, 1988). The second route posits that the Seed Event is materially constituted and yet, and perhaps even because of this, maintains a palpable presence, with biophysical effects, in textual discourses; that the matter of the Seed is not only a surface that textual meanings are imprinted on, but that it carries with it properties and “affordances” (Ingold, 1992, Ivakhiv, 2002) that precede textual overlays.

These prehensions of the Seed provide the motive power and inspiration for a parallel brace of missions. The first is to track the path of the Seed from the local to the transitive or global— a scale change if you will. The second, and perhaps more theoretically dexterous, is to trace the path of the Seed from the material to the discursive (in particular textual) – a phase change of sorts. The difference between “tracing” and “tracking” the path is a subtle one that blurs in the enacting; perhaps tracing could be best described as drawing with a finger in the sand, creating an image that is less insistent than a map, while tracking is the more motile of the two and involves following the movement of material and ideas through the theorized traces. As has been stated more eloquently by others, perhaps “[t]he world is more excessive than we can theorise” (Dewsbury, p. 437, 2002); yet if theory could be understood as an enactable and livable summoning of ideas and intuitions, then even a modest and chimerical tracing may provide an attractive path(s).

In the following I will offer a brief overview of the Via Campesina and one of its constituent members, the National Farmers Union of Canada (NFU) as seen through the framework necessary for my project.

The Via Campesina— [It Has] Never Been Modern (Latour 1993)

The Via Campesina is a network of autonomous organizations that together constitute a field of activity, being at the same time a site, a generator, and a conduit of (or for) activities. “La via campesina” translates into “the peasants’ way”; as such the movement articulates itself as being in motion, a state implied by the root meaning of “movement” but often forgotten in the frequent conceptualization of
bodies, corporeal or social or otherwise, as blocs rather than motions. I believe it is most productive to examine the Via Campesina’s functionings in this manner, as an entirety that is not a static monad (Harvey, 1996), but a turbulent composite (i.e., simultaneously a site, generator, and conduit). It might be considered a “plateau”, or plane of activity where intensive networking takes place and acts as a conditionally semi-unitary body for other extensive encounters (Chesters and Welsh, p. 192, 2005).

It has been described as the “most important transnational social movement in the contemporary world” (Desmarais, 2007, inside jacket notes), and includes 149 small farmer, peasant, indigenous, migrant workers, fisherfolk, rural women and youth, and artisans’ organizations from 56 countries (page 8). Originally founded as a grassroots transnational response to the proliferation of trade agreements in the 1990s such as the GATT Uruguay round and the formation of the WTO and its subsequent Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), agreements designed to open regional and national agricultures to a single global market, the Via Campesina has since developed the paradigm of “food sovereignty” as the aegis for its work.

The pursuit of food sovereignty, the “right of peoples to define their agricultural and food policy” (Desmarais, 2007, page 34), entails an elaborate mass of social, political, economic, cultural, and ecological goals: resistance to the concentration of agricultural production and distribution into the hands of a small number of TNCs, with a particular resistance to GMOs and other specialized and costly inputs; resistance to capture by homogenizing global governance organizations which promulgate neoliberal capitalist hegemony, such as the WTO, the G8, and the OECD; agitation for agrarian and land reform in a variety of culturally and historically particular forms (particularly but not exclusively in Latin America [Desmarais, 2007]); and more generally, fostering of conditions of both cultural and ecological diversity as precepts for rural human development and a safeguard for agroecological sustainability. In my thesis I am enquiring after the cogeneration of material practice and discourse via the interpenetration of materiality into food politics (Goodman, 2001), following the myriad pathways and manifestations of Seed and genetics. By employing the rubric of food sovereignty I hope to maintain a sense of praxis. The breadth of food sovereignty makes it a foundational discourse in uniting farmers and consumers (or “eaters” in the activist parlance of the NFU), rural and urban populations, and producers and environmentalists, as indeed the Via
Campesina seeks to do. I will focus on the Via Campesina’s position as simultaneously a socio-economic lobby, a political movement, and an ecological steward. The multiplicity of these roles is in itself a source of great creative energy. I shall argue, however, that the full transformative potential of this energy cannot be reached without due regard for the “materialization” of politics that I advocate here.

The National Farmers Union

Formed in 1969 from the merger of the Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and B.C farmer unions, the NFU is “the only voluntary, direct-membership national farm organization in Canada. It is also the only farm organization incorporated through an Act of Parliament (June 11, 1970)” (NFU website, 2007b). It is a founding member of the Via Campesina, and past NFU presidents Wayne Easter and Nettie Wiebe were instrumental in establishing the network (NFU website 2007b). Representatives of the NFU were also active participants at the second congress of the Union Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos held in Managua, Nicaragua in May 1992 and signatories to the Managua Declaration, a germinal event that led to further international cooperation, finally formalized in the formal constitution of the Via Campesina in Mons, Belgium, in 1993 (Desmarais, 2007).

Many of the NFU’s current active campaigns fall within the broad cast of food sovereignty, pursued from the position of embeddedness in Canada’s modern “postindustrial” economy that sees small farmers achieving record productivity levels while at the same time losing income and the means for livelihoods (affordable land base and capital stock, common or publicly held seed stock, autonomy in decision making) at a devastating pace (NFU 2007a; Laplante, 2007; Ross, 2007). In keeping with my research question, tracing the materialization and transference of practices in to and out of discourses along the journey of the Seed, I have chosen to examine the NFU’s participation in the Via Campesina via seed-related practices, material engagements, and discourses as a partial exemplar of regional and national participation in the Via Campesina from the Global North.

An introduction to chapters to come

Having established my thesis question “How do the material, particular, and localized knowledges and practices of peasant and small farmers make their way into
the politic of the global social movement la Via Campesina?”, laid some parameters and goals for the project, and introduced briefly two of the narrative’s chief protagonists in the Via Campesina and the NFU, I will here sketch out the chapters to follow.

In Chapter II, “A Minor theory”, I hope to have laid out a four fold program that sets the foundation for my intentions, methods, my manner of theorization, and my relationship, debts, and allegiances to the subject. I will describe how this paper embraces a “minortarian” stance of sorts, a product of the analytically marginal position of peasant and small farmers around the world and the classification of many of the theories and theorists leveraged in this thesis as “minortarian” (Katz, 1995). It will seek to address, at least in part, the important question as to why this largely theoretical project might have practical traction for agriculturalists and socio-ecological activists alike, and illuminate how a researcher in the rarified and privileged position that I am in might work in solidarity with those “in the field”.

Chapter III is devoted to “methodology” and lays out my ontological and epistemological prehensions about the matters and Events at hand and how I will engage with them in relation to the tasks of tracing and tracking the transits of Seed into the discourse of the Via Campesina and its constituents. It will provide an explanation of the analytical centrality of the effects of material-in-text, and order the analyses in this fashion, rather than directly pursuing issues of representation, voice, and authorship in social movement construction. The research question is thus framed as a matter of combinant forces and material contingencies that manifest as political discourses and texts. I will also address the manner in which the particular Via Campesina texts were chosen and why documents accessed on the internet, so apparently distant and uprooted from the Via Campesina’s agroecological and corporeal concerns, might be of particular interest. In some respects my methodology bears a resemblance to ethnographic “thick description” (Ivakhiv A, 2002, pages 391 and 394, Pels D, Hetherington K., Vandenberghe F, 2002, page 6), in this instance a description of the materiality present in a set of textual discourses rather than a description of a social unit (e.g. family, community). I seek to move outside of postmodern or deconstructionist language-centricism, to a re-cognition of materiality as a constituter (and disrupter) of the sign-signified-signifier relationship (Dewsbury, 2002, Keane, 2005).
Chapter IV is an exposition of the main theoretical perspectives that create the space for centering material contingencies, interactions, and properties in the formation and dissemination of discourses on the Seed in the Via Campesina and NFU’s web-based texts. These range from the technically sophisticated Actor (or Actant) Network Theory most closely associated with Bruno Latour and other practitioners of Science and Technology Studies, to the no less sophisticated but more philosophically oriented poststructuralist geophilosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Bonta and Protevi, 2004), with its processual connectivities and bonds that are composed and dissipate in a more originary, unitary fashion—the primacy of “becoming” over “being”.

These two positionings are both directly employed as theoretical resources for this thesis, and are also resources for other bodies of work, many of them feminist or feminist-allied, that concern themselves with the presence of the material in the social, the co-presence of the two, or indeed the dissolution of any epistemological boundary between the two at all. While not a central theoretical focus of this thesis, I draw from a broad cast of theorists who focus extensively on matters of corporeality and of the “environment” as an inter-subjective and multi/mutually constituted plane (see Whatmore, 1997, 2002). Feminist researchers and activists have also provided me with a pragmatic range of analytical and theoretical tools for examining the material contingencies of agroecological practice and their connections to socio-cultural and political discourses (Hawthorne, 2004, Shiva 2005a, 2005b, and generally). Feminist approaches also manifest prominently in this thesis in my exploration of minor theory, where questions of subjectivity, power, and the co-constitution of researcher, research, and researched is considered (Katz 1995, 1996, Rose 1997). The shared task of these theories here is to bring the theoretical lens in line with agroecological practice for both normative and analytical purposes, a theorized imbrication of the material and social that matches that of the extant practices of the peasant farmers of Via Campesina.

Bringing these manyfold positions to bear on the Seed and associated practices are the concepts of affordances (Ingold, 1992, Ivakhiv, 2002) and material semiotics (Keane, 2005, Peirce, 1955, 1958, 1992, Serres, 1995). These conceptualizations of how knowledge is generated and transferred, through direct perception and kinetic and sensory engagement, provide a connection between the
abstracted tracing of paths that traverse the social and material binary, and actual effects that leave traces. These are the experiential marks that Peirce deems products of "the Outward Clash...[that] direct consciousness of hitting and getting hit [that] enters into all cognition and serves to make it mean something real" (Keane, p. 186, 2005).

Chapter V brings to bear both method and theory (major and minor) on a selection of web-based documents by the Via Campesina and the NFU. Working iteratively back and forth with Chapters II, III and IV, I illuminate how the Seed might maintain a presence in the textual discourses around food sovereignty, bio- and cultural diversity, genetics, and the socio-ecological activism of the peasant and small farmer. I maintain that a continuation of the more liberatory, socially available, and ecologically just affordances and properties of the Seed into textual discourse is possible, via a reading and understanding of these texts through the lenses of material semiotics, environmental perception (Ingold, 1992, Ivakhiv, 2002, Michael and Still, 1992), and other aforementioned theories that imbricate the material, sense-making, and the social. A flat ontology of spatiality, and the temporal dimension attached to the production of both food and texts are examined. Issues of authorship, the circulation of discourses, the presence of professionalized voices, and the vagaries of internet documentation are engaged with but are not privileged as dominant determining factors in how material local practices and engagements with Seed manifest in the Via Campesina and NFU documents.

I conclude with Chapter VI, an exposition of the potential efficacies for transformative transnational socio-ecological activism in my "materialized readings" of these texts. In addition I splay out some of the broader questions raised by the specters of anthropocentrism and a social-nature binary evoked at the beginning of this chapter, and speculate on the challenges and opportunities my position on the Via Campesina and NFU texts poses in the larger project of creating transnational solidarity networks seeking socio-ecological justice (see Santos, 2002, 2005, among others, on transnational activism; see also Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004).

My research question sits restlessly within a larger project (one that stretches far beyond the parameters of this paper), the project that tackles the problem of bringing affect/effect to abstract ideals, and in that act thus finding a way to make practice generate these ideals from the positions of the people who will live by them.
and their consequences. I propose the following “problem quest” to act as a gauge as to whether I am pursuing the answer to my thesis question purposefully and in a manner that strengthens the potential for political practice: to earthbind transformative progressive politics without denying social agency, but rather by expanding the parameters and web of actors that frame and generate agency; to assert limits over capitalist productivism by critiquing the under-materialized and as yet underexamined politics around that most basic and necessary product, food.
Chapter II- A Minor Theory

Our way of being reflexive will be to render our texts unfit for the deadly proof race of who is right. The paradox is that we shall always look for weak explanations rather than general stronger ones. Every time we deal with a new topic, with a new field, with a new object, the explanation should be wholly different.


**Minor theory introduced**

It is not my purpose to reveal a new theory of materiality and relationality. However Cindi Katz’ work on the production and practice of “minor theory” (1995, 1996) provides useful insight into how a certain way of theorization may, “by consciously refusing “mastery” in both the academy and its research practices” (1996, page 487), “tear…at the confines of major theory; pushing its limits to provoke ‘a line of escape’, a rupture– a tension out of which something else might happen” (page 489). Her work in developing a position on minor theory emerged, in her own telling, through her reading of Deleuze and Guattari on “minor literatures” (page 489, passim), as well as her reading and subsequent scholarly review of Derek Gregory’s 1994 text *Geographical Imaginations* (Katz, 1995). Her interpretations of these two works correlate to her perception of the “minor” as minor key in the musical sense in the first instance, and to the contested notion of minor as “lesser than”, or marginalized by, a majority or a majoritarian position in the latter. My own interest lies mainly with Katz’ development of a minor theorization through the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of the work of Franz Kafka serves as a touchstone for their theorizations of minor language and subjectivity:

By virtue of his position or identity and his tools, they [Deleuze and Guattari] argued, Kafka wrote a “minor literature”. A Czech Jew living in Prague in the first years of the 20th century, Kafka wrote in German, a major language in which he was an outsider. Because German was neither his mother tongue nor the language of his community, Kafka worked with a language in which he was doubly displaced. Deleuze and Guattari argue that Kafka, like Samuel Beckett [an Irish writer writing in French], pushed his displacements to their limits in order to create ‘lines of escape’. This political strategy is at the heart of...minor literature: to write a ‘minor literature’ is to use a major language in ways that subvert it from within.

–Katz, page 489, 1996, emphasis mine
...
For Katz, as well as Deleuze and Guattari, she notes, it is critical that “minor” is not necessarily conflated with “marginal, or unimportant” (page 489). Indeed, writers like Beckett and Kafka are canonical in the 20th century and hardly of minor importance in European literature. As she puts it, “[t]he minor is not a theory [or a literature] of the margins, but a different way of working with the material” (ibid). In Deleuze and Guattari’s “grotesque phraseology...[m]inor literature...is ‘affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization [more on this term in Chapter IV]’. It is about the conscious use of displacement” (ibid).

Here, Katz’ engagement with Gregory’s Geographical Imaginations is salient. In a footnote to her paper “Towards minor theory” (Katz, 1996), Katz notes that her “minor key” reading of Gregory’s work resulted in a rebuttal in which, according to Katz, Gregory “misconstrue[d] the minor’ as a fixed social position to which a ‘Big Boy’ like himself can never have access” (page 491, footnote five). Rather than reflecting a fixed and implicitly subordinate “social position”, for Katz “minor theory expresses a particular and undermining relationship to mastery” (ibid). The implication is that Gregory was defending himself against a charge of neglecting the subaltern and marginal; Katz returns that he need not have protected himself, as a minortarian reading such as she engaged in was available to Gregory also.

Katz states that “although Deleuze and Guattari themselves seem more interested in ‘their excellent adventure’, it is important to note that the journey is not the whole project” (Katz, 1996, page 496). I agree that the risk of producing a self-referential scholarship that plays for its own sake lurks in some poststructuralist thought. It is necessary here to clarify Katz’ usage of “journey” and “project”. It seems Katz is assigning the free flow of Deleuzian theorization to “the journey”, while its application to normative political ends is “the whole project”. In so doing I believe she is cautioning against making the journey for its own sake. The whole project might also be conceived, as I do, as “a” journey, and one with specific normative goals. For if “the project” is not at least “a journey”, it reads to me as though Katz could see “the project” as an endpoint arrived at after a cessation of movement, internal or external, a position that denies to a degree the necessary commitment to transformation that working through/to minor theory implies. Clarifying my interpretation of Katz’ use of these terms, I see the minor key of theory and language contributing to this journey in four differing and overlapping ways.
The minoritarian approach inflects 1) my approach to and use of language; 2) theory as praxis-oriented knowledge generation; 3) my position as a researcher making some claim of solidarity with the Via Campesina’s work and aims, and 4) the historical and geographical subjectivity of peasants and small farmers. While each category is distinct enough to deal with individually, the minoritarian approach to language and theory is also accounted for throughout my exploration of researcher and peasant positionality and subjectivity. Thus the latter two explorations are more developed, particularly the fourth. Taken together these four facets of minor theory, in both its development and application to my research question and “problem quest”, form the organizational basis for this chapter. Before describing the four operational facets of the minor here, I want to mark some of the tactical limits and precautions necessary for realizing this theory as practical.

**Minor theory of interests and normative aims**

A minor theory aspires to the *impossible*, scratched out from within the terrain of the major (or majoritarian, or meta) in the sense of *making sense* with a set of impossibilities—seemingly disjunctive and “impossible” life conditions. In Kafka’s instance this meant “mark[ing] the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turn[ing] their literature into something impossible— the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise” (Deleuze and Guattari, page 16, 1986, in Katz, ibid).

Reflecting on Kafka, Deleuze is able to work through the seemingly dead-end position of *being* “impossible” by giving the “constant negotiation” a “form and direction that would rework and keep in flux” seemingly antagonistic subject positions and identities (page 490). Given that the multifold possibilities of this reworking and fluxing might result in the disappearance or sublimation of minoritarian positions altogether (pages 492-494), this work-through-impossibility also demands a “theory of interests” (page 490). An ethical responsibility inheres to championing a motile and mutable construction of emergent subjectivities. It requires a commitment to the particular nature of those “becoming” identities if the positive effects of such theorizations are to be realized. As explored in the third aspect of using this minor theory, that of solidarity and trans-subjectivity among
researcher and researched, it also requires a reflection on one’s own position and responsibilities in the textual co-generation of these identities.

This exhortation to a “theory of interests” applies to any work that allies itself with the stated aims of the Via Campesina and seeks to engage with the complex weaving of (and hailing to) subjectivities and identities that the Via Campesina performs. In moving away from a monolithic and essentialized peasant identity that has been ossifying, yet is, to some degree, politically efficacious within a limited view of “class ecology”, the door is open to the dissolution of peasant identity altogether, and the final sublimation of small farmers and peasants to the neo-liberal project of driving them from the land and incorporating the remnant into industrialized and export driven monocultures. So there are risks in this strategy of de-centering identity and speaking in a minor key, which employs “a yeasty notion of theory making—lively and playful—full of possibilities…” (Katz, page 490, 1996). These risks are noted and explored in the four sections to come.

1. Minor theory/minor language

When Katz extrapolates from a minor literature to minor theory, language itself remains central to both formulations. In hoping to convey the connections between agroecological practice and agroecological discursive activism, I employ a minor literary strategy in service of the minor theory task. The minor language that I proffer is a materialized reading of the Via Campesina’s texts that might bear throughout the properties of the seed that are most valuable to a democratic, and socially and ecologically just, political and agricultural practice. In this light it must be reiterated that “the major and minor are not so much different languages as different uses or treatments of the same language” (Katz, page 490, 1996).

I do not contest that many of the Via Campesina’s texts often appear technocratic or, alternatively, typically manifesto-like in their tone, syntax, and construction. The website is a vast plateau of reportage, policy papers, proceedings from local and regional forums and meetings, press releases, and transcribed speeches. They vary in affective impact from incendiary and inspiring—“land, sea, and territory to affirm our dignity. Now!” (Via Campesina, 2006a)—to bereft of most inflection and thus all the more exposed to the readers’ sensibilities for their lack of obvious declamation and appeal to emotion. These documents are obviously not
catalogued by intention or effect, and their effectiveness as statements is predicated on many factors that are particular to each “type” (i.e., conference declaration, policy paper, a single paragraph describing a meeting). Rather than rewriting these texts, or advocating that and thus hubristically reassigning them a different origin and intent, I am re-viewing them, as they stand in the major tongue, through the minor lens of material semiotics and inter-subjectivity. To see if another function can be wrung from them, while allowing the texts to continue to address global governance networks and organizations in the major key of the language of trade, quotas, food safety, genetic engineering, land tenure, surplus, and agricultural inputs. Intentionally emotive and political appeals based on the defense of tradition and culture are also in the major key. To quote Katz extensively again:

The appeal of Deleuze and Guattari’s...construction of minor literature is its rupturing effects. Minor “utilizations” of language, they suggest, can “carry you away” or “send major language racing”. The minor is so much a part of the major that its deployment completely reworks the major from within. One cannot ‘translate’ it into the major, so to speak, “without destroying it”. Neither is the relationship between major and minor one of size or importance in some general sense. The two are intertwined in an exquisite and mobile tension. There is no ‘last instance’ here, but rather a relationship of constant becoming and change. (Katz, 1996, page 491)

2. Minor theory in relation to theory “proper”

For Katz, as I read her, the journey to minor theory was very much bound together with her struggle to reconcile her commitment to feminist research “within a discursive formation— and practical politics— that was Marxist. Within this specific and perhaps small mud puddle [her university department in the 1970s], Marxist theory was ‘major theory’” (Katz, 1996, page 490). There are of course many contexts where Marxism is not ‘major’, particularly “in the world of...a reactionary globalization by and for capital” (ibid), and it is easily possible to envision an academic or social milieu where feminism is major. Minor/major are not fixed positions but are so in relation to one another, in time, social space, and place: a theory “is major because it is dominant in a particular historical geography, not the reverse” (Katz, 1996, page 490). Inspired to reflect on her own feminism and Marxism by Gayatari Spivak’s insistence that hers is a “marxism squeezed through
the pores of feminism” (page 489), Katz states that “[m]inor theory is at once multiply porous and a way to squeeze; it opens possibilities as it distills new kinds of knowledge” (ibid). Her construction of a minor theory, a way to theorize in a minor key, is part of a complex struggle. The goal is not necessarily to overturn the primacy of a major theory (in her case Marxism) in favour of a valourized and downtrodden minor. Instead, minor theory is “interstitial”, working through major languages (and keys) from a minoritarian position and producing new possibilities and pathways for knowledge production without placing itself in dualistic opposition to “major theory”.

It is minor theories’ “porousness” and capacity for filtering multiple conceptualizations and positions that provides traction for my own work. Ontological approaches have until recently been absent from food and food systems studies (Goodman, 2001). Complexity theory and poststructuralist accounts of organization and action through and across systems have had only a slightly longer pedigree in application to global social movements (itself a relatively recent field of study) (Chesters and Welsh, 2005). JJ Gibson’s concept of environmental perception and “affordances”, while appearing in a wide range of research contexts (Michael and Still, 1992, Ingold, 1992, 2000, Ivakhiv, 2002), is still arguably a marginal one in social theory. Imbricating the creation and interpretation of discourses and texts with material contingencies and constitutive agents amounts to another theoretical position in its own right, one explored in varying ways in strains of philosophy (see Peirce and Serres), cultural anthropology (see Keane and others), and poststructuralist critical theory (see Bonta and Protevi, 2004, re: Deleuze and Guattari’s geophilosophy).

Theory and practice

The path from theory to practice is never a direct one. It is unproductive to think of the route between the two as being a clear path that once negotiated, can be re-trod at will. I am wary of Thrift’s injunction against “the bizarre calls for applying particular theories to politics” (Thrift, 2000, page 5); I am aware of the difference between enjoining persons to “act” in the manner of a particular theory and inviting those persons to reflect on the presuppositions their politics are founded on and if they find them wanting, alter them. In practicing theory, the possibility exists to recover that which is already extant in material practice by encouraging its interrogation, and thereby its lived and experienced resonances, with a shifted way of
opening oneself to what seemed at one time so commonsensical and apparent. Theory cannot be a blueprint; tracings through theory are not strict cartographies, though the cartographic metaphor has been usefully employed to imply tracings that are not bound to the well-trod surfaces of major texts and discourses, as per Katz’ subheader “Renegade cartographies” (Katz, 1996) and Whatmore’s 1997 article “Dissecting the autonomous self: hybrid cartographies for a relational ethics”. I liken these declarations to “drawing with a finger in the sand, creating an image that is less insistent than a map”. Less insistent in claims to mastery or finality, but no less modest in their normative aims, through their function in making both bridges and ruptures, unapologetic for the liberatory potential in both motions.

Dewsbury states that “[r]ather than attempt to lay out a prescription for encounters, perhaps it is better to offer some tactical suggestions”, tactical suggestions for “finding a way of going-on, a way of getting somewhere” (Dewsbury, 2002); this “finding a way”, to me, is the function that tracing through theory and theorizing along traces holds. One of these suggestions to consider is that “[t]heory is always already practical” (page 439, italics mine). Theory as tracing— in this instance tracing the routes and effects of the Seed’s properties and affordances into web texts—provides not an entire practice in itself but rather the motive power and conceptual resources for re-ordering the role the material might maintain in the discursive. Or alternatively, the minor theory employed here could indeed be categorized as a practice, but it would not move very far, for to revisit Katz “the journey [would become] the whole project” (1996, page 496). I hope I have already established that I am interested here in a particular journey with transformative political potential, and not in the over-arching journey of a perpetual theory machine. “Project is motion” does not equal “motion is project”. What is practical (e.g. theory) is only one constituent of a greater practice.

3. Minors, masters, narration, texts, and positionality

In Katz’ context, feminism felt minor while she experienced Marxism as the major of her milieu. For myself, a social science student with a fine arts background in theatre, it is more a matter of “reaching out to” than “pushing away from” particular academic discourses. What is useful to me about minor theorizations is born not from an oppositional stance of experiencing the oppressions of a major
theory in my academic practice (which is nascent and as yet relatively “unmarked”),
but from the potential for generating opposition to universalizing forces, be they
ideologically of the right (neo-liberalism) or left (state Marxism), that minor theory
generates “not by dismantling ‘major theory’, but by situating minor theory in its
midst” (Katz, 1996, page 498).

Still, self-location, a kind of echo-location by testing out the waters in this
littoral zone of theory and practice and seeing what comes back, can be a guide of
sorts. A warning and reward system: having trained as an actor and studied dramatic
literature, is this theory I am now reading a bolt out of the blue for me, or have I seen
this story before in a different form? Are these new forms—social theory, food
systems studies, social movement studies—helping my task, or am I just flushed with
the novelty of the new? If I have seen this story before, what can my existing
knowledge of it bring to this new question—“How do the material, particular, and
localized knowledges and practices of peasant and small farmers make their way into
the politic of the global social movement la Via Campesina?”, in service of the
broader task: to earthbind transformative progressive politics without denying social
agency, but rather by expanding the parameters and web of actors that frame and
generate agency; to assert limits over capitalist productivism by critiquing the under-
materialized and as yet underexamined politics around that most basic and necessary
product, food.

Reflexivity and trans-subjectivity among researcher and researched
Sharing critical fluency and entering Via Campesina space as a researcher

A certain kind of reflexivity embraces and nuances these capacious and
unstable aspects of minor-ness. If “the personal ‘is at odds with the hierarchies of the
positional—working more like a relay between positions to create critical fluency”
(Miller N, page 25, 1991, original emphasis, in Katz, page 498 footnote, 1996), then
being in the “between” and traversing the relay (like an alternating current rather than
passing a baton between stages) can be a merit, both for the researcher and Via

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3 I understand “critical fluency” as a facility for finding a way of going-on, a way of reading and
interpreting texts and other signs that bridges theoretical positions without eschewing their
foundational syntaxes and grammars, much as minor theory/language performs a different
treatment of the major without performing a direct assault on it.
Campesina activists, in itself. Such a reflexivity also reconceptualizes the relationship between researcher, research (including texts), and the researched as something active and co-constitutive. Gillian Rose (1997) catalogues and critiques a range of positions and claims regarding researcher positionality and reflexivity. Rather than seeing the spaces between researchers and their subjects as one defined by distance (page 312), Rose calls on us to register the field around the researcher and subject as one where identities, positional certainties, and power-as-distributable-mass are soluble and productively in motion.

Rose is thus critical of a vein of reflexivity that employs a visualized spatial construct to “situate” or “position” the researcher and the researched (page 308) in a topography of power that “turn[s] extraordinarily complex power relations into a visible and clearly ordered space that can be surveyed by the researcher” (page 310). Within this visible topography of power, Rose argues that researchers then often tactically order the “landscape”, by reifying the power that comprises this topography, making “power into a question of distribution across a social terrain, and keep[ing] power in some sense distinct from the researcher” (ibid). In this reckoning, which Rose and I depart from, power is a thing that can be held, or relinquished as an act of empowering the research subject, as external (and presumably knowable) as an object or a terrain; “[the researcher] is positioned in power rather than constituted by it; power becomes her ‘context’, which she can survey at a distance, with ‘some level of detachment’ in order to ‘admit to the power we bring to bear as multiply-positioned authors of research projects” (Nast, 1994, page 59, in Rose, 1996, page 310).

**Difference not distance**

Rose’s critique meshes productively with my own prehensions of spatiality and trans-subjectivity. In the understanding of spaces and interstices that I enlist, distance is reconfigured and re-emerges as an effect rather than a causal force. Difference need not imply distance, a spatialized state of separation. When levering Deleuze and ANT in Chapters III-V, even *distance* need not mean separation. This applies to the identities of both researcher or researched, as identity is situated “not...in isolation but only through mutually constitutive social relations” (Rose, page 314). It also applies to the entire littoral zone in which academic research is conducted, “a much more fragmented space” than the simple image of distances can...
contain, "webbed across gaps in understandings, saturated with power, but also, paradoxically, with uncertainty: a fragile and fluid net of connections and gulfs" (page 317, emphasis mine). The net of relations and precepts that compose a research field is comprised equally of both "connections and gulfs". Gulfs, or "gaps in understandings", can be positive zones or assemblages, even perhaps Events in their own right, and not merely tabula rasa to be projected upon from what is seen as the more stable shore, or leapt over without looking down, or written around as unmentionable for the unease and epistemological distress they cause.

Co-presence of researcher, researched and the material

Latour’s negotiation of these webs of gulf and connection, characterized by infra-reflexivity, demands that we as researchers “spend some time and energy ‘on the side of the known’” (Bingham, 2003, page 158). Latour eschews what he terms the “meta-reflexivity” of deconstructionism, whose practitioners “spend too much [time and energy] on the side of the ‘knowing’”. He also rejects the “simply out there and easily knowable…world of conventional realism” (ibid). In their places, he enjoins us to a reflexivity that enlivens its texts by attending to a world—even via text—in “which all of the steps, transformations, and especially non-humans that are deleted [by deconstructionism and conventional realism] have been added back” (ibid).

I read “the known” in this context as a materialized world of effects and affect that sits thriving and squirming outside of texts that remain self-referential and self-reflexive and thus function as intrinsic rather than extrinsic interventions. He marks “the known” as substance, at odds with the systemic and codified ways of knowing that are abstracted out of all proportion to their task, the task negating its own function, and performing a new function that Latour finds pointless. Criticizing Derrida, Latour writes “[he] believes that a text can escape from the fate of presence” (Latour, 1988, page 168, in Bingham, 2003, page 158). What emerges productively from this critique is the principle that a text cannot escape either its origins, its reception, or the presence of “the steps, transformations, and…non-humans” that it might seek to shed in assuming discursive (cursive in particular) form—transferability does not mean the message arrives as naked neural signal, pure meaning, pure consciousness. A materialized semiotics bears traces and contains effects that authorship cannot account for, and traces of the matter of Seed as germplasm, food,
or Buddhist offering (Rice and Food Sovereignty in Asia Pacific, Via Campesina, 2006b) might in fact make themselves present to the receptor—the reader, the sense-making organs and faculties of that reader—in ways that imbricate biophysical effects, affective understanding, and social-technical interventions in agroecological practices.

Both Rose and Latour deny the possibility and desirability of a transparent reflexivity; it seems we ourselves, as well as our texts, are unable to escape the fate of presence. In my position as a non-peasant, not a small farmer, nomadic herder, landless agricultural labourer, or even sympathetic agronomist or global trade regime activist researcher, my best hope and the place where I must start from, is one I register as difference, not distance. The research field is “constitutive (if not completely so), both of the researcher and of the other involved in the research process” (Rose, 1997, page 315). In JK Graham-Gibson’s words, “I understand my discursive interventions as constitutive rather than reflective” (1994, page 220, in Rose, 1997, page 315). My liminal subjectivity as artist and scientist is no more or less “impossible” than the vast assemblage of subjectivities and identity positions the Via Campesina represents under its mandate, no more or less “impossible” than the minoritarian and transgressive aegis of food sovereignty, with its impossible demands that threaten to turn the regime of allotting negative rights (e.g. the right not to be killed, summarily subjected to detention, etc.) into an engine of positive rights (e.g. the right to autonomous food policy and ecologically sustainable social relations). Neither lamenting the minoritarian as marginal, nor valourizing a state of actual or metaphorical “homelessness” (Katz, 1996, page 497), working infra-reflexively in a minor key places all of the constitutive elements of this discursive intervention on the same plane of analysis, and the same plane of “impossibility”.

**Texts and trans-subjectivity**

The generation of texts bears particular importance in inhabiting this plane of analysis. Throughout her work on situated knowledges, Rose is careful to register the centrality of texts in the research process. Texts form part of our relations with the researched, with our readers, and with other researchers, for while “academic performances” are laden with “material and discursive power” (Rose, 1997, page 317), this power is incomplete, “part of a web of discursive interpretations where it may invite and be given a range of diverse meanings. ‘Webbed connections’ are not
made by the researcher alone” (ibid). In this light, texts generated and read by
various Via Campesina members (e.g., the NFU of Canada) add to the Via
Campesina’s own trans-subjectivity of “webbed connections”.

Textual practices can also be fruitfully characterized as translation processes,
particularly the translation between “local” to “academic” knowledges (Smith, 1996,
in Rose, 1997, page 317). Academic authority can be disrupted, and “gulfs” or “gaps
in [academic] understanding” revealed not as failures but as opportunities. Smith
proposes “that it is such uncertainties— and not the revelations of transparent
reflexivity— that should be written into research... ‘as a writing strategy it demands
that differences, tensions and conflicts are explored, not as problems, but as spaces of
conceptual and indeed political opportunities and negotiations” (1996, page 165, in
Rose, 1997, page 315). Local material practice translated into global political
discourse, translated again by a researcher into a materialized reading wherein the
Seed’s properties (marked as affordances, Peircian indexicality or iconicity, and
Deleuzian trigger-signs [Ch.V]) are productively born forward for transformative
political purposes. And in the act of translation-translocation, knowledges immodest
in aims but unabashedly bearing the burden of uncertainty are made, taking their
place in the “nexus of production” (Yappa, 1996) of both materials and concepts that
conjoin academic (this present node), ecological, political, cultural, social, and
technical modalities (see diagram, Yappa, 1996, page 709).

Narratives of research— constituting audience and performer

Coming to grips with “gaps in understanding” was made possible for me by
my own echo-location in this research process. Disciplines have a way of detaining
narratives at their borders, proclaiming to have no narratives of their own and
wanting to maintain a quarantine. In his set of principles on working intra-
reflexively, Latour provocatively advocates “replacing methodology by style”
(Bingham, 2003, page 159). All texts produced by social scientists are essentially
stories, complex, simultaneously rarified and quotidian, and “...since no amount of
[transparent] reflexivity, methodology, deconstruction, seriousness, or statistics will
turn our stories into non-stories, there is no reason for our field to imitate those few
genres that have gained hegemony in recent time” (Latour, 1988, pages 172-173, in
Bingham, 2003, page 159). This is not to toss aside all quantifications or taxonomies,
but serves to enable another of Latour’s infra-reflexivity principles, that of the “throw
away explanation”, where investigations are partial, by their nature incomplete, and in Dewsbury’s terms “[t]he definition of the problem is something that remains problematic” (Dewsbury, 2002, page 439).

As a theatre actor the contingencies and relational nature of any sort of narrative are simply an accepted part of the process of interpreting and performing. Understanding the text can be assisted to some degree by a director, but ultimately one is left entirely alone with one’s body and voice as the only factors one has a semblance of control over (technique), one part of an iterative relationship with the elements of design (set, costume, lighting, music and sound), other performers, and the audience. And, as in performance, “there is no prior reality or unified identity to again access to or be created by research” (Gibson-Graham, 1994, page 220, in Rose, 1997, page 315) – even one’s body and voice are constituted through one’s relations with others intersubjectively. For the theatre actor perhaps more than most, “I do not have experiences– they are not mine. Experience is trans-subjective” (Dewsbury, 2002, page 439). In this research of solidarity that has rhizomatically connected the Via Campesina and me, our trans-subjective relationship is both allowed and mediated by texts, mine and “theirs”. In light of the Via Campesina’s expansive and “impossible” subjectivity under the aegis of food sovereignty, there is little traction to be gained by interposing an inside/outside account of our respective positions. In the words of Elizabeth Grosz, “it is not as if the outside or the exterior must remain eternally counterposed to an interiority that it contains; rather, the outside is the transmutability of the inside” (2001, page 66, in Marston, Jones, and Woodward, 2005, page 426).

As with identities, so with narratives: “what audiences may do with a piece of research [or performance] is unknowable...This impossibility does not absolve researchers from the obligation to work in an ethical manner. It does suggest, however, that the researcher is not the only authority on academic knowledge and its effects” (Rose, 1997, page 317). I conceive of this intersubjective and text-based relationship as a triad between myself, La Via Campesina and other readers of my work; I cannot know before hand what interpretations will be extracted, or what resonances will be achieved. This is a quality inherent to the performative creation of texts both material and discursive, both the nominally artistic and scientific. Narratives are as inescapable as the fate of presence, or co-presence, in the research
The discussion centered on the impact of...
process and the resultant relationships. An understanding of explanation (Latour’s “throw away explanations”) as narrative points to the contingency and particularity of the claims I make, but also enriches the potential for resonant translations that not only imbricate academic and non-academic knowledges as per Smith (see above), but might also translate across “different realms of reality” (Bingham, 1996, page 651). Akin to a material semiotics, narrative translation across category boundaries of the discursive and the material, the social and the Object World of Nature opens us to dis-embed Events out of bound(arie)s. In the case of the Seed and our practical and discursive relations with it, “The newly visible relationships drawn from these materials result in a shift in conceptualization, a reformulation of the structure of what you are looking at” (Latour, 1995, page 99, in Bingham, 1996, page 651, italics mine).

Method, theory, and biography meet here as I work to translate across both academic/non-academic modalities and “different realms of reality”, narrating all the while in a minorititarian key. A commonly circulated adage in theatre holds that there is plot and then there is story, and you could represent them something like this (see Figure 2.1):

![Figure 2.1 Relationship between story and plot](image)

This sort of pictogram could easily appear in a theatre theory text; in fact I'm not certain that one hasn’t. But it would be largely understood by most actors in the western theatre tradition whether they had seen such a text or not. The simple point is that the certainties of plot are achievements, the result of affective and psychological processes that are themselves the result of embodied Events of body, breath, and corporeal relationship. Composing research texts—“doing research”—employs a similarly accretive process of gathering resonances that appear as linked
points or proofs, instances where the journey seems suspended for a moment as we are guided to settle on a momentarily stable argument (see Figure 2.2):

![Diagram of de Certeau's graphic representation of narrativity in "doing research"](Voyages)

Figure 2.2 de Certeau’s graphic representation of narrativity in “doing research”


According to de Certeau, “the text is not producing solid proof, piling arguments and evidence, but is...a ‘piling up of insufficiencies’, putting together things that do not in themselves offer conclusive proof— or, we might say, stringing together a series of gaps or holes” (Crang, 2003, page 140), the gaps being positive fields in their own right as per Rose (see above). For my purposes, narrativity here is a technical term that knits together style, the contingencies and limits of method, a non-transparent reflexivity, and the properties and effective cadences of the material Event and its discursive translation. This thesis is, I will claim, a minor narrative.

4. A minor majority subjectivity
A becoming-subjectivity

The Via Campesina, under the heading “Who is La Via Campesina?” (Via Campesina, 2007a), declare

We are the international movement of peasants, small- and medium- sized producers, landless, rural women, indigenous people, rural youth and agricultural workers. We defend the values and the basic interests of our members. We are an autonomous, pluralist and multicultural movement, independent of any political, economic or other type of affiliation.

This is the declaration of a vast agglomeration of identities, subjectivities, aspirations, and values. It seems “impossible” that an over-arching common ground
for action could be found for such disparate constituencies, an aching impossibility that one civil society organization could represent the voices of a Mayan peasant in Quintana Roo, Mexico, a soy farmer in Ontario, Canada (using hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of machinery, albeit mortgaged, borrowed, lien-ed against), and a migrant fruit picker from the Dominican Republic working in Georgia, USA. And what of the millions (billions) of rural youth and women, and landless dispossessed, for whom they fly this banner of representation? As with the Deleuzian reading of Kafka’s position, we have to account for, and prehend, the seemingly impossible overextension of this subject umbrella through “[t]he escape from signification” (Katz, page 492, 1996) that “becoming-minor” affords the subject, and that a minor theory affords the allied researcher. The escape from an externally imposed signification is central to the Via Campesina’s aims, and in fact the sheer momentousness (monstrousness?), the “impossibility”, of their aspirations is a tactical advantage, part of a “transgressive movement through...the limits and internal tensions of available forms”, maintaining a sort of creative meniscus, a tension-based cohesion between disparate groups as “‘becoming minor’ insinuates mutuality as well as mutability” (page 492).

**Food sovereignty, a becoming-discourse**

Food systems and social movement analyst Rajeev Patel also notes the Via Campesina’s approach as transgressive—and I would argue “in a minor key”—in claiming that their mandate of achieving Food Sovereignty is “a transgressive use of the discourse of rights” (Patel, page 91, 2007). The transgression is in the liberating, perhaps “impossible” possibilities for radical democracy and self-determination that Food Sovereignty, in its implementation, suggests:

> It is systematically vague about the bodies responsible for guaranteeing these rights. This vagueness is precisely the point...Food Sovereignty...is a call for a right to a right. It is a multi-layered challenge to the existing business of human rights implementation, taking direct aim at the neoliberal agencies that structure the selective application of rights in support of capital...by leaving the venues of sub-national engagement open and by invoking social formations with contradictory internal demands (no ‘peoples’ have a single and unifying perspective on food policy, after all), la Via Campesina calls for new political spaces to be filled with argument...This is, in other words, a call for a mass re-politicization of food politics...In this mass engagement, a rights-driven food-system policy is one outcome (ibid, emphasis mine).
In orienting conventional rights discourse of the sort enshrined in United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 “not toward the institutions that enshrine, enforce, and police rights, but toward the people that hold them” (Patel, page 92, 2007), the Via Campesina is subverting a majoritarian discourse via a minor key, by instantiating “two possible treatments of the same language” (Deleuze and Guattari, page 103 and passim, 1987, in Katz, page 497, 1996). To arrive at this minor treatment, we are exhorted “to oppose the oppressed quality of this language [here the discourse of rights] to its oppressive quality, to find points of...underdevelopment...by which language can escape” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, page 27, in Katz, 1996, page 496): escape over-signification for the subject(s), escape hegemonic readings of what a right entails and its essential “possibility” and enactability.

The peasantry as an “impossible” class

The enormous breadth of the Via Campesina’s representational claims makes it difficult to employ the term “class” when discussing their constituents. Historically the peasantry has been treated as a class unto itself in both capitalist (“bourgeois”) and Marxist analyses (Bello, 2007, page 3, Berger, 1992, xv). However, the Via Campesina itself has consciously employed the term “campesina” as an aegis for small farmers from all cultures after intense debate over the varying cultural and linguistic understandings of the term (Desmarais, 2007, pages 195-196). According to Desmarais, “Reclaiming the meaning of peasant is perhaps one of the Via Campesina’s most important accomplishments. Whether you are a peasant, paysan, paysanne, campesino, campesina, small farmer, agricultor, productor, rural worker, or indigenous peasant- all have embraced and been embraced by the Via Campesina. Those involved in the Via Campesina do not necessarily distinguish among these terms” (page 196). I employ peasant here as a shorthand, acknowledging the significance of the political achievement but wary of simplifying the emerging (or perhaps always present but now sensible) connectivities between subsistence farmer, small market farmer, and indigenous agriculturalist into one undifferentiated subjectivity.

Novelist, essayist, and art critic John Berger’s description and analysis of peasant life in Into Their Labours (1992) shares strong resonances with the
minoritarian concept of an “impossibility”, in both the peasant world view/subjectivity as he describes it, and their position in whatever economic order they have found themselves. He focuses his perspective on peasant experience of time and change.

By contrast [to industrialized urban dwellers] the peasant is unprotected. Each day a peasant experiences more change more closely than any other class. Some of these changes, like those of the seasons or like the process of aging and failing energy, are foreseeable; many—like the weather from one day to the next, like a cow choking to death on a potato, like lightning, like rains which come too early or too late, like fog that kills the blossom, like the continually evolving demands of those who extract the surplus, like an epidemic, like locusts— are unpredictable.

In fact the peasant’s experience of change is more intense than any list, however long and comprehensive, could ever suggest...

Peasants live with change hourly, daily, yearly, from generation to generation. There is scarcely a constant given to their lives except the constant necessity to work. Around this work and its seasons they themselves create rituals, routines and habits in order to wrest some meaning and continuity from a cycle of remorseless change: a cycle which is in part natural and in part the result of the ceaseless turning of the millstone of the economy within which they live...

The repetition, however, is essentially and only formal...Each time a peasant does the same job there are elements in it which have changed. The peasant is continually improvising. His faithfulness to tradition is never more than approximate. The traditional routine determines the ritual of the job; its content, like everything else he knows, is subject to change.

- Berger, 1992, pages xxiii-xxiv

By virtue of peasants’ material practices and only lightly mediated relationship with ecological processes, and their vulnerability to the confiscation of their surpluses by either capitalist or socialist classes (Bello, 2007, page 3), Berger posits that contrary to the common perception of modernity’s consumers and “urban intellectuals” (ibid), peasant life is one of constant and profound change. Peasant life is in fact “a state of continual flux” (Berger, 1992, page xxiv). This flux has seemingly been operating under the nose of the “modernist tragedy masquerading as progress” (Bello, 2007, page 3), or, alternatively and more colourfully, beneath Donna Haraway’s “brilliant space platforms of the powerful” (Marston et al, 2005, page 422). Already predisposed to change and improvisation, Berger observes that “[b]ecause their work involves intervening in or aiding an organic process most of
their actions are future-oriented...[e]verything they do is anticipatory— and therefore never finished” (Berger, 1992, page xix). Within Katz’s construction, this condition of flux and openness to change would qualify the peasantry, particularly one as broadly and impossibly constituted as the Via Campesina’s coalition, as a minoritarian “becoming-peasant” (Katz, 1996)— an interstitial state of transformation open to, and transforming into, a new field of socio-political constituent agents intimately alloyed with agro-ecological processes. That this “becoming” is a state fraught with dangers as well as positive transformative possibility (Marston et al, 2005, page 424) is, I would suggest, not lost on the Via Campesina. But it appears to be the impossible task they have chosen for themselves, the “peasants, small- and medium- sized producers, landless, rural women, indigenous people, rural youth and agricultural workers” from 149 organizations, from fifty-six countries (Desmarais, 2007, page 7).

The narratives they co-produce, specifically the texts they generate, are critical in this process of translation across regions, cultures, practices, times, and domains of knowledge. According to Patel, “the experiences that seem to have been central to the experience of people working in agriculture under neoliberal transformation are: concentration, dumping, inequality, consolidation, deskilling, dispossession, and amnesia [he later adds to this list ‘demobilization’]” (2006, page 75). He goes on to add that “Via Campesina’s socioeconomic policy response to this hegemony involves an adaptation and deepening of existing tropes of social justice, democracy, and rights. Via Campesina, however, complicates this space of civil society...by demanding that we differentiate and qualify the kinds of organization, and organizational projects, that can create effective counter-hegemonies” (page 81, emphasis mine). This sophisticated, particular, and globally contemporaneous web of counter-hegemonic projects— this plateau— is made possible in large part by the relatively recent availability to rural peoples of the technologies of communication and textual literacy. In both the “face work and co-presence” (Chesters and Welsh, 2005, page 193) afforded to organizations like the Via Campesina through travel, and the “dynamically interconnected and co-extensive...digital commons that underpins computer-mediated interaction and communications” (ibid, emphasis in original), the creation, distribution and reception of texts is a bridging and constitutive feature. The relationships forged within the Via Campesina and between it and the public, are
conveyed in no small part via texts, allowing campaigns and moments of resistance to be differentiated and qualified to meet local conditions while remaining constitutive of the Via Campesina plateau.

**Summation**

I have tried to use the concept of the minor, in theory, in subject formation, and in language, to trace the dimensions of the analytical, and ontological, littoral zone the Via Campesina’s and the NFU’s texts inhabit here. In doing so I have sought to make apparent, though not transparent, the resonances between academic theory, social movement constitution, discursive and material practices, and the relationship between myself as researcher, this task, and the research subject. The task of tracing the Seed into political discourse, and registering its transformative effects, is a stuttering one, an accretive one that adds rather than excludes, adds to sociality and discursivity rather than denying them. And it is while carrying this minoritarian recognition of impossibility that I will follow the proceeding practical and theoretical constructs, following to the extent of their tractability for a “minor theory” melding of conceptualization and practice. There is for all that still much that needs accounting for, in my approaches to discourse and language, in the gleaning through the many hundreds of texts available on the Via Campesina and NFU websites. It is still called “methodology”.

Chapter III—Designating “methodology”

Overview of the theory in the method

This thesis is largely theoretical and not a case study or traditional empirical analysis; rather it is an in-depth consideration of how materiality and discourse interpenetrate in a matrix that is both nominally global and nominally local. This chapter will highlight the precepts and methods used to pursue my two routes cum missions—of seed as object that plays socio-political and ecological roles for both global agribusiness and the oppositional force of the Via Campesina, and of object as an actual Seed Event that can maintain a materiality in its discursive deployment, revealing entry points for a transformative socio-ecological politics.

I am exploring the texts produced by the Via Campesina that centre on their concern with the penetration of corporately controlled seed stock, particularly Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), Genetic Use Restriction Technologies (GURTs), and hybrids, into agricultures and food systems around the world. This necessarily includes documents that contextualize the agricultural, cultural, biophysical, and cultural functions of seed for Via Campesina members. Similarly, I examine the texts of the National Farmers Union (NFU) of Canada, treating that group as both an autonomous body within the Via Campesina and a network in its own right, one that contributes to, is in turn molded by, and co-constitutes the Via Campesina network. So in acknowledging that the journeys of the material into discursive sociality are traversed by Events that are in turn generated by the journey, I have named an Event that circulates between and accumulates within the socio-political beasts “Via Campesina” and “NFU”—Seed, and its derivatives GMO, GURTs, and hybrids. Examining this matrix of journeys requires the handling of certain cohesive forms (if only contingently and temporarily) if any traction for praxis is to be generated. In naming the assemblages upon which my considerations bear, I run the risk of freezing that which must necessarily remain mobile and motile. By naming the Via Campesina, the NFU, Seed generally and GURTs, GMOs and hybrids in particular as “objects” of enquiry within the subject that is my research question, I flirt with what poststructuralist geographer Marcus Doel terms “pointillism”:

Everywhere one looks, geography and geographers are hung up on points: sites, places, nodes...identities, differences, the self, the same,
the other...Lines are run between points. Surfaces are extended from lines. Volumes are unfolded from surfaces. And then there is the networking...In sum, spatial scientists have suspended themselves between all manner of points, and that is their undoing.

Doel, 2000, page 120

I discuss my theoretical framework more completely forthwith, but I introduce the discussion of this potential conundrum here, in my “Methods” section, to point to the fact that this theoretical framework necessarily streams through and feeds my methodology; they are in fact not separable. The same is true of the textual analysis (largely Chapter V) itself. I must maintain a critical eye, in the vein of Doel’s cautionary to geographers on the tendency to fixate on the “fixed”, toward my own interdisciplinary examination of the interplay of the discursive and material. The objects that are the Via Campesina, the NFU, seeds, and GMOs must be placed on the same fluid surface that the subject, the transit of the material into the discursive, occupies.

So as close attention must be paid to my own use of language, minorititarian as it may be, as I intend to pay to the language employed by the Via Campesina, the NFU, and others who have framed the discourses around seed and GMOs. If I am to avoid the same destructive reification of abstractions (Miller, 2005) which has dematerialized political discourses and uncoupled food practices from their material compositions and properties, I must speak of the sites (points?) of my enquiry in terms that reflect both their permeability and transmutability.

Texts

What constitutes “text” for my purposes? What constitutes “discourses”? Let me begin with the texts to be examined. Rather than remaining neuter conveyances for authorial meanings, my analysis of the texts of the Via Campesina and the NFU holds them as affective and laden with effects beyond purveying data.

What I seek to deploy is an understanding of texts as both energized, discursive efforts and indeterminate manifold Events that combine with other non-textual processes, streaming into generative and constitutive effects. The texts at hand are composites, emergent and temporal concrescences that are the discursive result of interactions and relations between the social prerogatives of their authors
and the material properties (or “affordances” [Ivakhiv, 2002]) and resonances of their seed source matter. I say “source matter” to evoke an active and cogenerative/cogenerated subject, not a passive subject to be inscribed upon.

Texts can utilize a variety of languages—scriptural, gestural, visual. Postmodernism, poststructuralism, and the tools of semiotics among other conceptualizations have opened the field as to what can be considered “texts” to encompass all phenomena as a relation of sign-signifier-signified (Bryman and Teevan, 2005, page 338). I am defining texts here as cursive, written bodies that are active, contingent, and require engagement with a reader to realize their functions (Smith, 2005).

It would be legitimate to consider an object/Event like the seed as text, bearing an expansive web of bio-physical, cultural, economic, and cosmological meanings. As a gestural and affective politics, member groups of the Via Campesina and other agrarian organizations employ a variety of symbols that have inescapable corporeal and material functions and effects—the throwing of pig shit at U.S. government offices in Taiwan by Taiwanese farmers (Desmarais, 2007, page 115) and the sharing and exchange of local foods at various conferences and fora (Via Campesina 2007b) are examples from very different ends of the spectrum, alimentarily and figuratively. For the purposes of this particular work I limit myself to written texts; in fact the goal is to bring the Material to the specifically cursive/discursive. It is the impact of materiality on the written texts that circulate through the Via Campesina and the NFU, born via the material semiotic in the Seed Event through a flat ontology of scale and surface, that is the object of the quest.

I’ll now discuss the forms these texts take, in order to eventually point toward the “stuffness” they refer to (and are cogenerated from) and the effects these texts themselves have in the world. I’ll begin with the Via Campesina.

**Farm implements: a typology of Via Campesina documents on the web**

The website of the Via Campesina, www.viacampesina.org, is a vast storehouse of documents, some of which are created explicitly for the website and some of which are transcripts or copies of documents of other origins. As a researcher, they are equally accessible to me, and the two scriptural modes are mixed in with one another, organized by theme rather than by method of manufacture. Their
website is then particularly useful in that one can be reasonably confident that it contains a wide, though of course still partial, cross-section of Via Campesina texts that are meant for public viewing—meant to act out into the world. I treat these documents as “peers” on the shared space of the internet, and all of interest when examining discourses around Seed and food sovereignty.

The Via Campesina has organized the documents on its website by categories based on themes and issues, and specific actions and events.Thematically, the categorizations are expressed most clearly in the following sub-headings, found under “Main Issues” on the Via Campesina website homepage. They are: Agrarian Reform, Biotechnology and Genetic Resources, Trade and Food Sovereignty, Women, Human Rights, Migrations and Rural Workers, and Sustainable Peasants’ Agriculture.

For the purposes of this thesis, I have taken these headings as representative of the Via Campesina’s discrete but overlapping concerns. It is also useful to categorize these documents by form or “type” rather than content alone. The following typify the several categories of Via Campesina documents available at www.viacampesina.org and constitute the pool of original source documentation from which my Via Campesina texts were chosen.

1) Position and policy papers

As of February 25, 2008, there were six extensive booklets or brochures available as pdf documents under the “Publications” banner on the Via Campesina homepage. They are: “Seed Heritage of the People for the Good of Humanity” (produced by the Women Seed Forum [sic] in South Korea), “Land and Rural Development Policies of the World Bank”, “Campaign Against Green Deserts”, “Rice and Food Sovereignty in Asia Pacific”, “Violations of Peasants’ Human Rights”, and “Impact of The WTO on Peasants in South East Asia and East Asia”.

2) Manifestos and calls to action

Often marked by a “call for” or a “demand that”, many of the hundreds of brief documents accessible from the Via Campesina homepage take the form of manifestos and calls to action targeted at specific governance organizations and/or

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4 Each of these documents is available for reading and downloading under the “Publications” section of the Via Campesina homepage at http://www.viacampesina.org/main_en/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=8&Itemid=30
national and regional governments. In reproducing these on the internet the gesture is made public along with the information contained therein.

These manifestos generally cluster around a particular transnational event such as the June 2007 G8 summit in Rostock, Germany, or the “Pre-conference of civil society and non-governmental organisations on Sustainable Rural Development” that occurred days later in Berlin, prior to the EU Forum on Sustainable Rural Development. Bearing clarion titles like “WTO spreads hunger, Do not let G4 decide for the world!” (Via Campesina 2007c) and “Farmers demand food sovereignty and agrarian reform!” (Via Campesina 2007d), they are often uncredited to any one author.

3) Press releases, media advisories, public responses

Again, these documents tend to cluster around transnational or trans-regional events where global governance actors gather. They may appear as mini-research papers, complete with references as in “A response to the Global Food Prices Crisis: Sustainable family farming can feed the world” (Via Campesina 2008a) generated during the February 2008 Convention on Biodiversity’s (CBD) “Thirteenth meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice” at the Food and Agricultural Organization in Rome, or as single paragraph statements drawing attention to a particular Event (“La Via Campesina receives a prize for its seed campaign” [Via Campesina 2006c]) 5. Unlike “manifestos and calls to action”, they are often attributed to one or more authors or information contacts within the Via Campesina.

4) Transcribed speeches by Via Campesina members and representatives

These speeches are generally addressed to either gatherings of government and governance organizations, as in Mozambican farm leader Diamantino Nhampossa’s speech at the EU Forum on Sustainable Rural Development (Via Campesina, 2007e), or to meetings and rallies of the Via Campesina and allies like “Speach of Ingeborg Tangeraas, Rostock, 2007-06-08” (Via Campesina 2007f). Many of the speakers referenced on the Via Campesina website are leaders of

5 The latter was a cheekily defiant press release marking the awards handed out by the Coalition Against Biopiracy (e.g. “The multinational corporation Syngenta Seeds was among those awarded the Captain Hook prize, since it is accused of planting transgenic seed illegally in Brazil and using the Terminator patent, which prevents the birth of seeds”).
national or regional Via Campesina organizations and/or are prominent and recurring spokespeople for the network, at times given specific responsibilities to be the group’s public face on certain issues (e.g., Guy Kastler “From Confédération Paysanne and the Biodiveristy [sic] committee of Via Campesina” [Via Campesina 2008b]).

**Home page/closer to home: the NFU texts**

The National Farmers Union of Canada hosts a website (www.nfu.ca) with information on the group’s mandate and policies, activities and campaigns (e.g., Save the CWB [Canadian Wheat Board]), foundation and history. They have posted their archived documents (organized chronologically rather than thematically) under the headings “Briefs”. These are often formal submissions to government bodies and panels, such as the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), and “Press Releases”. Like the Via Campesina, they have placed an emphasis on giving their women and youth constituents a prominent voice, with special links to documents on issues concerning rural and farm women and a separate website for “NFU Youth”. There is also a direct link to the Via Campesina webpage, indicative of the high priority the NFU places on its Via Campesina membership and informing the public of that.

The website also reflects the much smaller operational scale of the NFU relative to the Via Campesina. Their link to “Find NFU Local Food”, for example, contains a single entry providing information on a farm in Lavigne, Ontario (NFU 2008a), and the link “Take Action” guides the reader to just two campaigns, the international Ban Terminator campaign/coalition against GURTs and the NFU’s own Seed Saver Campaign (NFU 2008b). There is also more of an authorial homogeneity at work, perhaps indicative of the generation of the NFU’s primary public texts by a single office or cohort of senior members and researchers. In this way the NFU website appears less as a clearing house or platform for the dissemination of a variety of local, regional, and national views and news, as per Via Campesina, and more of a centralized and homogenous producer of a “unified front” against corporate and
government policies identified as harmful to small farmers, their rural communities, and "eaters" (Kneen, 2007).  

Criteria and limits in text selection

There are several hundred documents accessible from the Via Campesina website, dating from 1996 with the total constantly being updated. I first entered this textual plateau with a word search using the combined terms "seeds+campaign". This resulted in a list of over 50 documents from across the Via Campesina's self-defined home page categories of "Home, Organization, Actions and Events, Main Issues (containing the thematic sub-headings referred to above), News from the Regions, and Publications" (the six booklet length publications posted as PDFs). Each category might contain documents of any type, focusing on any of the themes. From that basic word search I concluded that I had to make some critical decisions about how to proceed. I have selected several documents that cannot begin to be fully representative of the vast store of texts present on the Via Campesina website. They do, however, create a cross-section that cuts through both categories of "type" and theme, as well as being geographically, culturally, and socio-economically diverse if not exhaustive. While I have made a conscious attempt at a meaningful and mutually supporting diversity in my selection of texts, there is much of de Certeau's account of the research process and the assembly of narratives at play here. One of the most definitive criteria for text selection was ultimately time and deciding what allocation of energies was most suited for each task. What follows is a brief synopsis of my three documents (or document sets) for analysis and the reasons they were chosen; this includes two tables (Tables 3.1 and 3.2) highlighting the various selection criteria and which criteria each document or document set fulfills.

The Convention on Biodiversity, Curitiba, Brazil

As mentioned, documents often appear in clusters around events. These events are generally centered around particular fora or conferences focusing on a specific issue; the forum or conference is either initiated by the Via Campesina itself (almost always in concert with other civil society organizations either affiliated

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6 The term "eaters" is employed by certain more activist elements within the NFU as a corrective to the "radical basic disconnect" between food, farmers, and those who eat that is engendered by the term "consumers" (Kneen, 2007).
geographically with the forum/conference site or with the issue as a whole) or as a counter-forum or response to an event staged by a governance organization. Such is my first documentary source, the texts originating from the Via Campesina intervention at the Conference of Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) held at Curitiba, Brazil, March 13-17, 2006. I chose to work with these documents because of the temporal and geographical proximity of several source events. The set of texts as a whole, derived from events that had a “first order” focus on agriculture and biodiversity and addressed in the “second order” questions of land reform and territorial autonomy, arrived at their critique of GMO seed and neo-liberal corporate agribusiness in distinct yet complimentary ways. The CBD event at Curitiba is situated within much larger and ongoing processes carried out through global governance actors- the Convention on Biological Diversity was first signed at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992 under UN auspices. Investigations of documents sought out for their geographical provenance in Curitiba led to productive extensions of the web-based document plateau to other events, conferences, and at times occasions of local social struggle and violence.

Seed Heritage of the People for the Good of Humanity

The second document has a different character, drawn from a broader geographical area but strongly linked thematically to food sovereignty, seed (rice in particular), and destructive national and international trade policies. “Seed Heritage of the People for the Good of Humanity”, along with “Rice and Food Sovereignty in Asia Pacific” and “Impact of The WTO on Peasants in South East Asia and East Asia”, is a full-length Via Campesina publication, and like the other two, is a compilation of locally or nationally based Via Campesina members’ reports on the state of peasant agriculture in East and South East Asia. The reports offer principles for local strategic and long term transformative opposition in response. I chose to work with “Seed Heritage of the People for the Good of Humanity” primarily because it provides a critique that focuses on the social and economic roles of women in rural societies as the stewards of the means of production and reproduction—Seed.

The NFU and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency

Lastly, I turn to the NFU of Canada, chosen in part because of its position in a “post-industrial” Global North, and partly because it represents a single organization’s national voice within the Via Campesina network. I have primarily
focused on the NFU’s ongoing resistance to the Seed Sector Review, an “ambitious, industry-led initiative to restructure Canada’s seed and grain quality assurance systems” (NFU, 2004), and its successor the National Forum on Seed (NFU, 2006). Both of these groups serve as consultative bodies to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). Part of this resistance was to the potential creation of a seed breeding “variety treadmill”. While I will save further discussion of the variety treadmill for my analysis of the NFU texts, the term is the NFU’s designation, and defines a regulatory and legal climate where seed varieties could be rapidly registered and deregistered, greatly impinging on farmers’ ability to save seed, judge its performance, and recover their costs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria for Via Campesina and NFU web-based document selection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Themes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Agrarian Reform</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Biotechnology and Genetic Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Trade and Food Sovereignty</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Human Rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Migrations and Rural Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sustainable Peasants’ Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Typology:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- position and policy papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- manifestos and calls to action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- press releases, media advisories, public responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- transcribed speeches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Geographic area:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Asia/Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- North America</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Latin America</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Europe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Criteria for Via Campesina and NFU web-based document selection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected documents</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>Geographic Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reportage and calls for action on the CBD, Curitiba, Brazil, March 13-17, 2006</td>
<td>- Human rights</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Biotech. and Genetic Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Trade and Food Sovereignty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Agrarian Reform</td>
<td>- manifestos and calls to action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- press releases, media advisories, public responses</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Seed Heritage of the People for the Good of Humanity” booklet</td>
<td>- Women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sustainable Peasants’ Agriculture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Biotech. and Genetic Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Trade and Food Sovereignty</td>
<td>- position and policy papers</td>
<td>Pacific Asia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFU public responses to the CFIA and the “variety treadmill”</td>
<td>- Biotech. and Genetic Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Trade and Food Sovereignty</td>
<td>- press releases, media advisories, public responses</td>
<td>Western Canada</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 Characteristics of chosen documents
Discourse(s)

Discourses, textual discursivity, and materiality

When I pose the question "how do the material, particular, and localized knowledges and practices around food systems make their way into the politics of the global social movement the Via Campesina?", I am focusing on politics as an assemblage of discourses that foster and discursively organize the resultant institutional, technical, or activist programs. It is of course an inescapably iterative process, as the resultant mechanisms impact on the social and material relations that simultaneously contribute to politicized discourses. It is important to clarify the exact ways I am using the term "discourses", and what terms may be admitted as roughly synonymous (under certain conditions) in this effort. Opening up "Discourse" into specific usages of discourses means paring away certain usages of the word as well.

Discourse, as the conceptualization of a site of analysis, has been most closely associated with Michel Foucault. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault writes that he has used "discourse" to refer to "the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements" (Mills, page 53, 2003). We have listed here: a "general domain" (a field of objects/utterances), an "individualizable group" ("groups of statements which deal with the same topic and which seem to produce a similar effect" [page 64]), and a "regulated practice" ("unwritten rules and structures which produce particular utterances and statements" [page 53]). All three usages refer to "statements", a term Mills goes on to distill from Foucault's writings as "an authorized proposition or action through speech" (page 65), and not limited to speech (here taken to mean both verbal and cursive speech acts), as "a map or an image could be taken for a statement" (ibid). From this list derived from Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* I want to focus on two organizing principles that mark my use of "discourse/s" for this exploration of the transmigration of ecological practice into transformative political discourse.

Meso-discourse

First, my utilization of "discourses" as a term of reference relates most closely to discourses as an "individualizable group"—a collection of talk and discursive tokens (statements) (Cooren, Matte, Taylor, Vasquez, 2007) with an evident consistency (even if not always evidently consistent). My use of discourse
will be similarly “sized”: neither the micro-discursive field of all statements and utterances, nor the macro plane of grand rules and regulating frameworks, but rather referring to the emerging discourse of food sovereignty\footnote{Food sovereignty, which I have already discussed, will appear in greater detail during my reading of the Via Campesina’s and the NFU’s texts. I believe the package of ideas, principles, and statements that comprise a “food sovereignty” position meets the working definition here of a discourse as an “individualizable group” of statements attributed to the Via Campesina and subsequently employed by many other CSOs, NGOs, BINGOs, the UN and the FAO in particular. There may also be an element here of food sovereignty as a “regulated practice”, where the regulations and regulators are still emergent and fluid.}, and the already well-established set of discourses around seeds and technology. In this application of the term “discourse”, a word which has “no agreed-upon definition, and confusingly many uses” (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000, page 1127), I intend to broadly follow what Alvesson and Karreman refer to as the “meso-discourse approach—being relatively sensitive to language use in context but interested in finding broader patterns and going beyond the details of the text and generalizing to similar local discourses” (page 1133). A “meso” discourse is said to lie between the “micro” (perhaps parallel to Foucault’s “general domain”) and “Grand” (analogous to Foucault’s “regulated practice”) versions of discourse, referring more to their character than hierarchical notions of size or reach.

The choice of working with “meso” discourses reflects both pragmatic and theoretical concerns. Pragmatically, as the discourses concerned are consistent bodies that appear as “groups of statements which deal with the same topic and which seem to produce a similar effect”. The topics these discourses address themselves to are the roles seed plays in agroecological practice, GM, GURTs, and hybrid seed, and the socio-practical corpus of food sovereignty. Theoretically, conceptualizing discourses as having this “shape” opens them to relations with material practice in a manner that is potentially more expansive than an examination of micro-discourse (talk, all statements), allowing the opportunity to see where the material at hand (seeds) and the actions employing it (agroecological practice, including trade and markets) engage with purely discursive utterances (see Figure 3.3). It falls “below” (again, the tendency to hierarchalize...) the regulatory function of Grand discourses, allowing for material intervention to disrupt or reconstitute the regulatory regime. As will be seen when discussing the notions of affordances and material semiotics, this is an iterative and fluid process. Practical resources and interactions
enabled by discursivity impact on our material condition and environs (hence the block arrows leading from discursive orders to the material plane).

Figure 3.3 Entries of materiality into orders of discourse

**Major and minor (materialized) inflections of “discourse”**

The “method” employed in this paper to examine the processes by which material practice, matter itself even, enters discursive politics is a minor key reading of the texts produced by Via Campesina and the NFU, one that surfaces the meso-discourses therein and “squeezes” through a minor theory the processual levers that brought the Seed Event (or constituent part such as its “GMO-ness”) to that discursive place in the actant network, a network that aspires to “be”, or enable, a progressive, transformative politics. However, attention to discourses, meso or otherwise, does not mean a strict fidelity to the Foucauldian social science uses of “discourse”, at least as it has commonly been parsed. So I am setting boundaries, but permeable ones, ones susceptible to crossings perhaps. As texts go, “talk”—conversation, discussion, verbalizations at all— are eliminated here as objects of analysis. The question of orality in the production of discourse is a fascinating one; the oral, whether speech or other forms of aspirated communication, has its own domain of discursive, affective, and bio-physical effects and properties. A
fascinating question, but one outside the mandate of my project. Undoubtedly a study based on listening to the members of Via Campesina and the NFU, at work or at the table, would yield other insights into how their material practice and the substances they work with enter their discursive politics.

So “discourses” are necessarily limited here in their meaning, and, perhaps, coincidentally even in their efficacy as organizing principles for an exploration of materiality. The use of “discourse”, so strongly associated with the language turn of postmodernism, is quickly problematized. Much of the theoretical leverage for engaging the “how” of the transit of material practice and materiality into politics via words and statements—discourses—refutes the notion that language, even the “social” as often understood in the social sciences, is the medium through which all sense is made and all meanings are enabled.

Consider:

Language is the central focus of all poststructuralism [the abode of discourse studies]. In the broadest terms, language defines the possibilities of meaningful existence at the same time as it limits them. Through language, our sense of ourselves as distinct subjectivities is constituted. Subjectivity is constituted through a myriad of what poststructuralists term ‘discursive practices’: practices of talk, text, writing, cognition, argumentation, and representation generally. (Clegg, page 151, 1989, in Alvesson and Karreman, page 1131, 2000)

And then:

Through exclusively social contracts, we have abandoned the bond that connects us to the world...What language do the things of the world speak that we might come to an understanding of them contractually?...In fact, the earth speaks to us in terms of forces, bonds and interactions...each of the partners in the symbiosis thus owes...life to the other, on pain of death. (Michel Serres, 1995, page 39)

Answering the question “what language do the things of the world speak?” lies within my problem quest but perhaps beyond the question at hand. Nowhere is it

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8 I say “coincidentally” advisedly. It may be argued that as the term discourse is so malleable I could therefore render a meaning that was broad and acephalous enough to sustain any type of analysis of grouped or sifted texts; however, I think it is more useful to attach some sort of accepted meanings and usages to the term, and push off from there. I say “coincidentally” to indicate that for these intents and purposes, any use of the term “discourses” has a limited efficacy as an organizing principle— it won’t matter what meaning and antecedent usages I attach to it.
desirable to excise language as a powerful conduit of cognition, experience, and socialization; it is imperative however to recognize humans as "beings thoroughly entwined with an extralinguistic world...[and that] to deny this entwinement is to bind ourselves to a quest for an empty and abstract sovereignty that destroys the world and is self-defeating" (Coles, page 231, 1993, in Whatmore, page 157, 2002, italics mine). So although my primary concern is with the interpenetrations of the discursive and the material, or language and the "extralinguistic", discourse still has its uses as a descriptor of the sites of analysis. These sites are the largely web-based resource material generated by the Via Campesina and the NFU (given context and supplemented by scholarly texts and the texts produced by supporting and collaborating organizations). “Although”, because although discourse was shown in the above passage by Clegg to be associated with speech acts and the constitution of subjectivity through language-based discursive practices, I hope to move off of this speech-centric base to engage written discourses as more permeable to the material than is admissible in Clegg’s formulation.

Organizational discourse analysts Potter and Wetherell posit a discourse analysis where “language is viewed as a medium for interaction, rather than as a system of differences (as in structuralism), or a set of rules for transforming statements (as in Foucauldian genealogies). Analysis of discourse becomes analysis of what people do with language...” (Potter, page 146, 1997, in Alvesson and Karreman, page 1127, 2000, italics mine). The point here is not to deny that differences in language uses exist or that there are not social prescriptions around what people say and the meanings attached to their statements. Rather, what is being proposed is that meanings, and by implication whatever causal force they might have, become open to active interventions by the material properties and contingencies of other actants, in both the constitution and interpretation of discourses. It is the former that concerns my research question in the main. An opportunity for new meanings presents itself, perhaps reached from beyond those that circulate and are recirculated in rarefied textual forms alone. Meanings, in this instance, become subordinate to functions, what things, be they words or seeds, in fact actually do.

...what we are interested in is how something works, functions-finding the machine. But the signifier is still stuck in the question “What does it mean?”—indeed it is this very question in a blocked form. But for us, the unconscious doesn’t mean anything, nor does
language...The only question is how anything works, with its intensities, flows, processes, partial objects—none of which mean anything. (Guattari, in Deleuze, 1995, page 22, in Thrift, 2004, page 92)

This may seem like an approach that is more ambivalent to power than Foucault’s, or that lacks a normative dimension, but rather it pulls power relations into view from a different, perhaps extra-human direction, and calls on sources other than the purely social and discursive for its normative judgments. Attention to the material properties of seed and the material imperatives of agroecological practice introduces materiality into the “medium for interaction” (language) as a prospective, reconstituted medium for subjectivity and inter-subjective ethical considerations. Language as “a medium for interaction” can be neither unadulterated (pure) nor sterile (free from the growth of other living things).

Behind method with material semiotics

“Methodology” refers not simply to techniques for data collection and analysis, but to a set of assumptions; processes for building a framework as to what is admissible into the littoral zone of causal and impactful relations. Wrestling with the organizational demands of my research question and problem quest necessitates that I express here, in “Methodology”, only so much of these assumptions as is necessary to support my technique, leaving a deeper query of my theoretical locomotors for Chapter IV. Theoretically, in terms of work being done on the ontology of representation and presence, this is manifest in accounts of material semiotics.

The idea of a material semiotic is critical from a methodological perspective, laying the basis for what is admissible to the littoral zone of seed, text, and social movements. As “advocated by Bruno Latour, John Law, and Michel Serres...[it] ‘flattens’ the ontological universe and treats language as just one of several sensible means by which humans relate to nature” (Whatmore, 1999, in Castree, page 180, 2003). Tightly allied with the aforementioned theorists, this epistemological/ontological hybridity “redirect[s] our attention to the affective relations between heterogenous bodies in terms of their specific enunciative consistencies within a material-semiotic register of mutual prehensions and sensibilities that exceeds the signal monopoly of the word” (Hansen, page 13, 2000a, in Whatmore, page 166, 2002). In other words, the displacement of the word points
us to a relational sense-scape that includes cursive textual practices as one of several actants. These practices are subject to the same affective and material contingencies as agroecological or activist practices and other acts of being and moving in the world. The burden here is to examine the “specific enunciative consistencies” of seeds and other Events of farming and how they harmonize, to employ a musical metaphor resonant with a minor theory, into texts—using only textual discursive means.

The wholly human subject as...subject is then thrown into doubt, at least as the “discourse” approach as defined by Clegg, and attributed below to Foucault, might treat this subject:

A well known and often copied take on discourse is usually attributed to Foucault. It is typically described to advance from the assumption that discourse, or sets of statements, constitute objects and subjects. *Language, put together as discourses, arranges and naturalizes the social world in a specific way and thus informs social practices. These practices constitute particular forms of subjectivity in which human subjects are managed and given a certain form, viewed as self-evident and rational. (Alvesson and Karreman, page 1128, 2000, italics mine)*

What I interpret Whatmore and others to mean in relation to this language-centricism is that in admitting the “specific enunciative consistencies” of heterogenous bodies like seed-soil-water-human-practice into our discourses, we might admit more than language into meaning-making and the experience of function in the Guattarian sense. To language we might admit more of Serres’ “bond that connects us to the world”.

Any further introduction to material semiotics— a concept which will unfold throughout my textual analysis—must include the geophilosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. While others, like the aforementioned Serres and CS Peirce, also employ a materialized semiotics, Deleuze and Guattari provide a systemized view of semiotics as functional sense-making that posits that matter and material interactions are at the centre of sense-making and sense-sharing, not passive surfaces to be imprinted on with socially constructed meanings and symbol loads (Pels, Hetherington, Vandenberghe, 2002). As interpreted by Bonta and Protevi (2004),

Deleuze and Guattari’s historically and politically informed engagement with complexity theory helps us break free of the
postmodernist trap by rethinking sense and reference, and in so doing shatter the postmodernist equations of signs with signifiers, of meaning with position in a signifying chain, and of reference of signifiers to each other. [They] accomplish this by reminding us of the findings of complexity theory, which show that at critical thresholds some physical and biological systems can be said to ‘sense’ the differences in their environment that trigger self-organizing processes. In this way, signs thresholds sensed by systems are not only conceptualized as occurring beyond the register of the human and even the organic, but also are understood as triggers of material processes. The problematic of the external reference of the signifier...is thus bypassed. Signs are no longer limited to linguistic entities that must somehow make contact with the natural world, and sense or meaning need no longer be seen as the reference of signifiers to each other. Rather, the ‘meaning’ of a sign is a measure of the probability of triggering a particular material process. (page 4)

In many respects the discursive work of the Via Campesina reads to me, in the light of material semiotics, as an engagement with the materiality of their condition, the centrality of the affordances of Seed to that materiality, in order to realize, to their advantage, an agroecological process that has been in progress for millennia but that has been altered as never before by the introduction of genetic engineering to the productive/reproductive nexus. The peasant prehension of the ‘meaning’ of Seed is precisely as a “measure of the probability of triggering a particular material process”.

Summation

In this Chapter I have introduced my objects of study— the Via Campesina, the NFU, the Seed and its GM/hybrid derivatives— as fluid and in flux. Similarly, the pool of textual resources at hand through the Via Campesina and the NFU’s websites was also found to be in need of momentary “fixing”, and I hope that the criteria employed in selecting the texts I explore are up to that task. I have also presented my method of reading and presenting these texts in the context of my minor theoretical construct, emphasizing my particular use of “discourses” in a manner that allows them to be “held” and read while opening them to their material constitution. It is now time to explore more deeply this minorititarian “theory set”.
Chapter IV- Theories in accord

Introducing from what to how

Q: Why ask “How do the material, particular, and localized knowledges and practices around food systems make their way into the politics of the global social movement the Via Campesina?”

A: In order to earthbind transformative progressive politics without denying social agency, rather by expanding the parameters and web of actors that frame and generate agency; to assert limits over capitalist productivism by critiquing the under-materialized and as yet underexamined politics around that most basic and necessary product, food.

Reflecting on my research question, the crux of my project is an examination of the how of the iteration between discourse and practice, as opposed to only cataloguing whats. An exclusive focus on whats might be prematurely reduced to the analysis of policy (discourse) and the transport of agricultural “objects”.

Regarding the latter there is a burgeoning “follow the thing” literature which, while it has proven very useful in revealing commodity chains and patterns of consumption, takes a different focus than this project (for an extensive cataloguing of such papers see Cook et al, 2006).

Practice as the condition of interaction and relationship is treated here as a how. The how in fact is emanating from the what(s)...a practice cum process in the form of Seed, a soil condition, a technique, an exchange system, a water relationship, a trade barrier, a cultural taboo, a cosmology. A reading of how means including the properties and dispositions of the matter involved, as well as social and political matters, in the material-discursive cogeneration of the Via Campesina and its members’ food sovereignty position.

I have identified certain “whats”, such as the social groups the Via Campesina and the NFU, materials like seeds and GURTs, and practices such as seed variety registration. Moving to how these “whats” become implicated in an expansive and socially and ecologically just politics requires a minor theory activation of several conceptualizations (see Table 4.1). These are summoned as both organizational fundamentals and an entry way to a normative position.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affordances/ Direct perception</th>
<th>Actor-Network Theory</th>
<th>Geophilosophy</th>
<th>Material Semiotics-Peirce/Keane</th>
<th>Material semiotics-DG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posits that objects in an entity's environment have latent physical properties that are engaged with by subjects as affordances. The skills and prehensions the subject uses in this engagement are effectivities. Knowledge is gained through direct physical interaction with the environment, as object affordances and subject effectivities co-activate.</td>
<td>Proposes the ontological symmetry of human and non-human actors, operating agentially in assemblages that cross human and non-human, artefactual and &quot;natural&quot; lines. The &quot;social&quot; is an assemblage of material, historical, and discursive forces, not a discrete or solid &quot;ingredient&quot; in itself.</td>
<td>Uses complexity theory that examines how material systems (across organic, inorganic, and social registers) attain both a high level of internal complexity and a &quot;focused&quot; behaviour. Posits that systems in an apparent stable state are subject to crisis, enabling both &quot;lines of flight&quot; toward new subjectivities, and stratification into spaces of hierarchy and control.</td>
<td>Views semiotics as a system or logos that relies on concrete circumstances and the contingencies of material consequences to impart signs with meaning. Material properties can be abstracted from objects and discursively shared as intuitions rather than rules.</td>
<td>Deleuze and Guattari view the meaning of signs as their ability to trigger material processes, and meaning is effectively replaced by an object or Event's function in a system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character</strong></td>
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<td>Bio-physical, focuses on practice as knowledge</td>
<td>Infra-reflexive, focuses on opening the social sciences to materiality</td>
<td>Philosophical; monist; focuses on process and creativity</td>
<td>Socio-linguistic; anthropological</td>
<td>Functionalist; anti-deconstructionist; materialist</td>
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<td><strong>Minoritised function</strong></td>
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<td>A means of connecting meaning to physical function and use-value without denying that language is an effectivity-like tool in the iterative composition of subject-object-environment. Posits that sociality and shared experience can be extra-discursive.</td>
<td>A means of tracing various actors operating in spatialized and temporal networks; argues for the contingent and unfixed nature of objects, subjects, and their assemblages.</td>
<td>Enables the conceptualization of objects as Events, a priori contingent and mutable; permits diffuse and rhizomatic linkages between social bodies, between material bodies, and between both differing types, as they are not seen as functionally different. Demands an ethical enactment of systems change.</td>
<td>Provides a materialist link, via Marxian use-value and Peircean indexicality, between what an object is and what it does as a source of meaning and signification. Ties the abstraction of material qualities back to the objects they are embedded in.</td>
<td>Places semiotic and material objects on the same plane ontologically, as both produce effects that influence systems.</td>
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Table 4.1  Theory sets in the move to minor theory
They are 1) "affordance" and environmental perception, 2) two variants of material semiotics, and 3) two variants of poststructuralist philosophy that mend the bifurcated material and social realms—Actor (or Actant) Network Theory and Deleuzian geophilosophy. Each of these has been referred to, at times at length, in preceding chapters. My task here is to define them more specifically, and operationalize them in a combinative minor key, for my readings of the Via Campesina texts. If this minor theorization is itself a littoral zone, then the first two concepts, affordances and material semiotics, occupy positions in the theoretical engine room; the third, ANT and geophilosophy, function as both navigation mechanism and the medium for (or through) travel—tiller and water.

**Environmental perception and affordances**

Perhaps the most controversial theoretical cog employed is the concept of "affordances", or as I modify it at times, "properties". A key component in the ecological psychology of James Gibson, affordances refer to the properties latent within an object that are activated upon interaction with a subject, human or otherwise. All of the objects within the scope or environment of a subject contain varying affordances for that subject, irrespective of the symbolism or cultural meanings assigned to that object. Affordances "exist as inherent potentials of the objects themselves, quite independently of their being put to use or realized by a subject" (Ingold, 1992, page 42, emphasis mine). They are inherent to the object but also inherently relational as a product of use or interaction— the affordances a pebble has for a person will be different from those afforded to a penguin, say for nest making, or an insect for shelter. The affordance exists within the object irrespective of whether the person throws the stone at a window to make a sound, or the sowbug crawls under it during a rainfall. It is potential based on its own pre-existing physical properties, inherent but not static either spatially, temporally, or, as we shall see in my proceeding discussion of process and creativity, intensively (internally).

Moreover, each subject in an interactive field or environment will perceive different affordances according to its "effectivities":

Affordances are properties of the real environment as directly perceived by an agent in a context of practical action. The reciprocal term *effectivity* denotes the action capabilities of the agent—what he or she is practically equipped to do (Cutting, 1982). Thus the range
of affordances of an object will be constrained by the effectivities of the subject, and conversely, the effectivities of the subject will be constrained by the affordances of the objects encountered. One corollary is that tools, since they enlarge the effectivities of their users, can radically transform the perception of the environment (Ingold, 1992, page 45).

For Gibson and those theorists who employ him (in this paper see Ingold, Ivakhiv, and Michael and Still), the primary and originary means of sense-making is direct perception, which is a product of a subject’s total kinesthetic and sensory engagement with their environment. Usurping the Cartesian model of the subject as a static receiver of sparse and jumbled sensory data, which then employs the separate device of a contained and rational mind to order the chaotic data into something useable (rationally comprehensible because it is then thought) (Michael and Still, 1992, page 869), Gibson proposes that perception through the senses is a direct process of knowledge acquisition based on the interplay between the subject’s sensory array and its position in relation to the field of objects around it (Ingold, 2000, page 166). Much of the literature, in an effort to counter Descartes’ image of the static and passive viewer, focuses on the sense of sight, though Gibson himself credits the importance of the “looking, listening, touching and sniffing that goes on when perceptual systems are at work” (Gibson, 1976, pages 397-398, in Ingold, 2000, page 166). The employment of the all of the primary senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—is critical for the active agroecological practice of the peasant farmer.

There are several critical points that the concept of affordance and direct perception raise. First, that perception is inherently active: “This process of perception is also a process of action: we perceive the world as, and because, we act in it” (Ingold, 1992, page 45) and “if perception is a mode of action, then what we perceive must be a direct function of how we act” (Ingold, 2000, page 166). Second, “[d]epending on the kind of activity in which we are engaged, we will be attuned to picking up particular kinds of information. The knowledge obtained through direct perception is thus practical, it is knowledge about what an environment offers for the pursuance of the action in which the perceiver is currently engaged” (ibid, emphasis mine).
Lastly, and stemming from the previous two, the theory of direct environmental perception and affordances challenges the primacy of the linguistic and discursive. According to Ingold, the hegemonic position in the social sciences has supposed the existence of an *a priori* natural world that humans encounter, and then attach meaning to through the symbolic rubrics of culture(s): “Cultures, it is supposed, are systems of symbols. As meaning-making animals, humans impose their symbolically constituted designs upon the external world” (Ingold, 1992, page 39). Culture is seen as the pre-eminent “human mode of adaption” (ibid), by which we as persons adapt to a pre-existing natural (or built) habitat. Gibson’s theory of affordance instead “shows how it is possible for persons to acquire *direct* knowledge of their environment in the course of their practical activities” (page 40). This has many provocative implications, two of which are particularly salient to the political practice and discourse of the peasantry and small farmers in the Via Campesina and its constituent groups.

First, it is possible for people to gain knowledge of their material world without first processing it through a regime of symbolic mediation. Rather, “[l]anguage and symbolic thought are not necessary for us to *know* the world, but are needed to make such knowledge explicit. Their role, as Reed argues, ‘is not to *create* knowledge out of merely potentially meaningful input [but] to *make others aware*...to share knowledge” (1987b, page 154, in Ingold, 1992, page 52). Here hinges a dramatic plot point in this minor key narrative, a potentially transgressive and transformative turn in the story. Knowledge is created by practical engagements, and discursive practices, vital as they are for the human subject, are a communicative tool. Insofar as *language* tools might expand persons’ effectivities, it stands that discursive practices then shape our engagements with affordances, but do not overdetermine them. Perhaps it is then possible, in this *impossible* collection of subjectivities that comprise the Via Campesina, that similar material practice in similarly intimate proximal relations, with Seed and other materials necessary for peasant agriculture, binds discursive practices both *at* the source and *to* their source. Here is where a theory of material semiotics might help to reinforce this Word-World connection.

Second, collective action and solidarity is not limited to discursive interventions that must cross great linguistic and cultural axes. Sociality is generated
not only through language and symbolic regimens. According to Ingold, “the communion of experience that lies at the heart of sociality does not depend upon the organization of sensory data, initially private to the perceiver, in terms of an objective system of collective representations. Rather, sociality is given from the start, prior to the objectification of experience in cultural categories, in the direct perceptual involvement of fellow participants in a shared environment’ (2000, page 167). This direct perception theorization of sociality complements the poststructural concepts of the plateaux of action and knowledge-sharing (Chesters and Walsh, 2005) referred to in my introduction. “The communion of experience that lies at the heart of sociality” might not only be shared by peasant activists at the local level, a product of shared effectivities and affordances, but might be extended across planes of representation and governance in the Via Campesina organizational structure, as representatives moving “up” to more diffuse geopolitical planes from the local, to the regional, the national, and the international, maintain sinews of common cause across both the material and discursive fields.

The concept of affordance is useful in tracing the transit of the seed from the local to the transitive, and the material to the discursive. It creates the opening for discursively employing “seeds” and related terminologies (GMOs, “Terminator seed”, etc.) as inseparable from the material interactions through which we know or make sense with (not of but with) the object/Event of Seed. “Seed words” might then be a means by which we can communicate this material and relational sense-making to normatively engage with affordances the Seed provides, highlighting the potential for capture and reconfiguring of the Seed’s affordances through genetic modification and concentrated commodification. For contemporary genetic science has provided those who have the technical expertise, access to public and private institutions of decision making, equipment, capital, and financing with new effectivities, or agentic “action capabilities”. This commodification requires the fetishization of the seed in a Marxian sense (another way of navigating the material-social binary), at the expense of the liberatory, emergent, and sustaining affordances of the Seed that peasant and indigenous cultures have sought to engage through centuries of direct perception and use-practice. A minor theory that chords in affordances opens the possibility of knowledge as direct perception of the environment, and takes us a step (of sorts, as
this process is hardly neatly incremental) closer to being able to connect theoretically and actionably the Word and the World, as it were.

**ANT: On Ontology of Materio-Discursive Translations/migrations**

"The very notion of culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off. Cultures—different or universal—do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures." (Latour, 1993, page 104)

ANT and Deleuzian poststructuralist geophilosophy are both the most broadly applicable and most "connective" of the theories engaged. Their precepts regarding "becoming" rather than "being" (Deleuze), ontological symmetry (ANT), and the general and inseparable relationality of the constitution of all "things" social, natural, and in between (both), are both the medium within which Via Campesina’s web-based texts are examined and the instruments employed to do so. ANT has come into vogue in the past twenty years, and has thus been riven into several approaches that privilege different concepts differently, particularly where the density of the ontology, or admissible number and quality of actants (how distinctly object-like do they remain in their constitutive relationality?) in a network are concerned.

Associated with “anthropologists and sociologists of science Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, John Law, and a growing alliance of others” (Ivakhiih, 2002, page 391), ANT “sets out to clear the slate of nature-culture dualism and instead to treat all entities symmetrically so that their interactive network relations can be better appreciated” (ibid, italics mine). Bruno Latour is most closely linked with ANT, and his work is considered an actionable, programmatic theoretical development of the philosophy of Michel Serres (among others) (Bingham and Thrift, 2000). ANT proposes the ontological symmetry of human and non-human actors, who operate agentically in assemblages that cross human and non-human, organic and inorganic, artefactual and "natural" lines. "Networks" refer to skeins of porous and mutable trails which actants both generate and move along—imagine the trail of a snail made possible by the very slime the snail lays down, visible, standing alone as its own thing, but acting as a conduit for the traveler (and generator). When the explosion of computer-based communications technologies such as the internet popularized the term “network” to mean an unimpeded and point-to-point series of links, it became
problematic within the ANT vocabulary, a lexicon which intended networks to be anything but frictionless beams that transport their travelers intact, on time, and recognizable (Latour, 1999, page 15).

As my use earlier in this thesis of terms such as “actants” and “assemblages” might suggest, ANT is a major theoretical resource for examining the “how” of moving between lived material practices and the discourses that circulate in, through, and between the network/movement/body Via Campesina and the “smaller” more regionally delimited network/movement/body the NFU. ANT’s particular usefulness is in its capacity for “repopulat[ing] space and time with all of the figures that have been stripped away by an idea of abstract division, by concentrating instead on movement, on process, on the constant hum of the world as the different elements of it are brought into relation with one another, often in new styles and unconsidered combinations” (Bingham and Thrift, 2000, page 281). In following the flows and turbulences of Seed in all of its dimensions, I ally myself with the project of “confus[ing] the traditional distinction between what the world is actually like (the ontological question), and what can actually be known about that world (the epistemological question)” (Bingham and Thrift, 2000, page 290). In the words of Latour, “ANT keeps adding things to the world and its selection principle is no longer whether there is a fit between account and reality—this dual illusion has been dissolved away—*but whether or not one travels*” (1997, page 8, quoted in Bingham and Thrift, 2000, page 291, italics mine). As the material of Seed travels it acquires or sheds agentic properties contingent on its interactions with its fellow travelers: bio-agricultural systems, political discourses, a globalized market to name a few. Its capacity to become a set of, or a gathering point for, discourses and discursive political interventions is as potent as its latent biophysical properties, and, most importantly, _are placed on the same plane of analysis_. This is the move from seed-as-object to Seed Event, as affordances are revealed by the subject’s effectivities across both material and social fields. ANT and other poststructural conceptualizations eschew categorizations by morphological description in favour of an analysis by _effects_, pursuing the resonances of _functions_ (in the Guattarian sense) in particular but dynamic and flow-based relations.

Travelers, human and particularly perhaps non-human, may also “object to their social enrollments” (Latour, 2000, quoted in Whatmore, 2002, page 5), resisting
integration into abstracted schema or hierarchies. This potential for resistance by the "traveler" that is the Seed must be respected and negotiated with carefully. This involves a normative praxical turn against the possible *de*-abstraction of discourses on food sovereignty by imbricating them to the fullest degree possible with extant and proposed agro-ecological practices that place the material (in this instance seed) as a central participant. A valuable framework for conceptualizing this politically-motivated imperative to materialize discourse around food and food politics is Daniel Miller's work on what he has dubbed *virtualism* (1998, 2000).

**Virtualism, abstraction and materiality**

Approaching modern political economy, which he argues has been reduced to the "science" of Economics, Miller states that Economics, despite its name, seems to have flourished when it ceased to observe different types of economy, and instead turned itself into an abstracted modeling process based on logical relationships between entities it defines as economic forms...The irony is that the more economics has eschewed direct observation of the world, the more it has grown pretensions to [a] scientific epistemology. *Politics is thereby reduced to the means by which economic models can be realized in the world*. (2000, page 197, emphasis mine)

Miller posits that economies have become Economics through the abstraction, and then *realization* back into the world as a single and detached model, of what was once the observation and study of a myriad of "forms of social action, including production, distribution, and consumption" (page 196, see also Polanyi, 1968). In paying critical attention to the material properties and functions of the seed in agro-ecological practice and discourse, we may hope to avoid the same generalizing reification and application of an "unrooted" and monocultural model of agriculture and food practices.

**Deleuze and Guattari and "becoming", "actualizing", and "de/re-territorialization"**

Latour's ANT is to some degree more of an epistemological, or infra-reflexive, project than that of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. This may seem to be an odd statement given that the central premise of ANT is the dissolution of the ontology/epistemology bracketing. I refer to Latour’s framing of the ANT project as
redressing the use of the word “social” to mean “a specific type of ingredient that is supposed to differ from other materials”, as opposed to “a movement during a process of assembling” (2005, page 1).

The geophilosophy of Gilles Deleuze (Bonta and Protevi, 2004) is in close alliance with ANT, though far broader and less bound by the need to legitimate itself as a scientific system. Its processual connectivities and bonds are composed and dissipate in a much more originary, unitary fashion than those posited by ANT—the primacy of “becoming” over “being”. Through the lens of geophilosophy, the function and effects of words and language differ little from those of matter in the “wave, not particle” world conceptualized by Deleuze and frequent co-author Felix Guattari.

**Process and creativity**

For Alfred North Whitehead, considered by Deleuze to be one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century (Bell, 2006, page 179) and a seminal influence on his thought and work, “[c]reativity and process are not to be understood in terms of the entities they serve—the traditional Western view; rather, actual entities are to be understood in terms of the creativity and process they serve” (page 182). Process precedes, constitutes, and survives actualized entities. The achievement of a concrescence, a particular and temporarily stable state of actualization, already marks its eminent dissolution from a steady state: “[t]o say of an actual entity that it is, that it is complete, is to say that it is no longer in process, and hence its life is complete. Whitehead will consequently say that ‘an actual entity has perished when it is complete (Whitehead, 1969, page 99)” (Bell, 2006, page 181). This view of process underpins my own prehension of the praxical theoretical “project” as a necessarily never-ending “journey” (see Chapter II). As in ANT, the temporary existence of an “Event” (Whitehead again, and employed by Harvey’s dialectics), or concrescence (Deleuze) is an achievement. It is the constituent agents of this achievement which are to be unraveled, traced, and accounted for.

For ANT, this involves following the paths of various actors/actants—materials, regimens of thought, taxonomies—as they coalesce temporarily into a discrete form that appears to cloak or disavow its origins. These discrete and temporary forms are referred to in ANT as “black boxes” (Bingham, 1996, page 634);
objects taken for granted as being without historical, material, or social constituents allied in a particular combination.

Geophilosophy: Actualizing (coalescing) the virtual (potential)

Deleuze (and Guattari) take a different approach; their program begins at the molecular level of "the imbrication of the semiotic and the material" (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, page 116). The work is an expansive derivative of parallel work in complexity theory, which interrogates "the way certain material systems in the inorganic, organic, and social registers attain both higher levels of internal complexity and a 'focus' of systematic behaviour without having to rely on external organizing agents" (page 3, emphasis mine). There are three sets of fundamental terms that can be levered to grasp geophilosophy's relevance for analyzing the complex system of the Via Campesina and their political practice: the previously discussed (Chapter II) "being" and "becoming", "virtual" and "actual", and "determinitorialization" and "reterritorialization". They have developed a highly complex vocabulary where commonplace terms like "actual" and "virtual" take on very specific meanings. Similar to Whitehead's usage, "actual" here refers to a moment of concrescence and stability, of congealment- "[t]his congealment is a temporary fixing of an underlying flow to enable the emergence of functional structures or substances" (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, page 49, emphasis mine). The "virtual" is inherent and persistent creative possibility that may or may not be actualized- "the modal relation of possibility or potentiality vis-à-vis actuality for complex systems" (page 164). The actual or actualized substances- in all three aforementioned registers- agglomerate by degrees to the more spatialized Deleuzian terms "strata" or "stratification". Strata develop when

"'actual' or 'stratified' systems settle into such deep 'steady state' basins of attraction [and thus stability and ANT-like 'black boxing'] that any potential for qualitative change in behaviour (associated with the accessing of another attractor) is not only hidden from view (an epistemological point) but is also hard to access (a practical matter)...Deleuze calls this property of strata the 'burying' of the intensive beneath the extensive and/or the burying of the virtual beneath the actual." (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, page 20)
De- and re-territorialization of minor subjects

According to Michael and Still, “Foucault has traced the minute mechanisms of the freezing of the person [e.g. the disciplines, orders of discourse], and Deleuze and Guattari have theorized the transition from freezing to liquefaction” (1992, page 873). Theirs is a metaphysics—though not a metaphysics of presence associated with a priori transcendence—of flow and endless recombination. When relatively stable state systems or concrescences such as an ecosystem or economic regime are nudged toward crisis by events (“either endogenously generated fluctuations or exogenous shocks” [Bonta and Protevi, 2004, page 20]), the stratification process is disrupted (deterritorialization) and a reterritorialization can occur. These evocative geographical terms “de- and re-territorialization” are “about metamorphosis, and explicitly not metaphorical” (Katz, 1996, page 491, emphasis mine). This is an ontological prescript for being in/registering the world that is implicitly concerned with how things function (as per Guattari) as opposed to their categorization into discrete reserves of culturally assigned meaning and empirically observable form; as per Whitehead in my introduction, morphological descriptions give way to processual ones. Staying with Katz, the disruption of majoritarian or stratified systems generates a state of flux where “a becoming minor” (ibid) is possible, though not inevitable.

For Deleuze, the material and social co-constitution of the subject is a spatialized and relational assemblage; one cannot demarcate their beginnings and ends, only register their effects: “All becomings, then, involve deterritorialization and ‘imply two simultaneous movements, one by which…the subject is withdrawn from the majority, and another by which…the medium or agent rises up from the minority” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, page 291 and passim, in Katz, 1996, page 493).

Theorists and social scientists like Katz have engaged with the concept of a “becoming” and its liberatory political implications, in essence seeking to actualize the virtual, through deterritorialization then reterritorialization, in complex social and material systems. This ontological position provides a bass note of sorts for a theorization in a minor key, chording with the concepts of affordances and material semiotics in revealing potential (inherent creativity) and actualizing it through a subject’s effectivities and corporeal intuitions.

Deleuzian geophilosophy and more ontologically radical versions of ANT offer two particularly salient direct applications. The first has to do with the
movement across *and within* the already social and already material registers. Material semiotics is a "sub-discipline" within this move, and it has antecedents within other streams of philosophy and theory outside of geophilosophy and ANT. The second relates to scale and distance, travelers that transit them and the effects across them. I will now further discuss material semiotics, fleshing out what has already been invoked.

**Material semiotics**

"Since Descartes, we are looking for the minimum that could be said to be safe and certain" (Latour, 1987, page 85). Material semiotics eschews safety and certainty; it is in the mode of expansiveness, of "adding things to the world" in the key of ANT, and in the chording of geophilosophy, "[i]t is the method of AND, ‘this and then that,’ which does away with all...of Being [as opposed to Becoming]" (Deleuze, 1994, pages 179-180, in Doel, 2000, page 131. I am pursuing the direction of the material into what has traditionally been regarded as the proper realm of the semiotic—language. There is a body of analyses and work that focuses on the other direction, the semiotics of signification into materials, particularly human artifacts or built material (e.g., Jacobs, 2006). But I am less concerned with the manifest presence of signs in buildings and obviously constructed forms than with manifestations of the material register in texts.

**Charles Sanders Peirce and Webb Keane**

My engagement with material semiotics stems from two sources, Deleuze/Guattari and the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, as interpreted by anthropologist Webb Keane. I will deal with Peirce first then return to Deleuze/Guattari. In Peircian semiotics, there are three types of "relations between signs and their possible objects of signification...resemblance (*iconicity*), actual connection (*indexicality*), or rule (*symbolism*)" (Keane, 2005, page 186, emphasis in original). I will focus on the first two, in particular their practical and hence political implications and how they link object-subject relations across spatial and cultural, material and discursive fields. Both types of relations, indexical or iconical, fracture the "structuralist model of language, as consisting of signifieds which are encoded in
the form of arbitrary signifiers, in order to be transmitted to someone else, who
decode them and thereby recovers the signified meanings’ (Keane, 2005, page 185).

*Indexicality and marxian use-value*

While Keane pays relatively less attention to indexicality than iconicity, it has
perhaps the more conceptually direct (though neither the only nor most powerful)
connection to Gibson and Ingold’s affordances and effectivities. He makes this
connection primarily through a comparison with marxian analyses of production,
“[s]ince production is, in a brute sense, a cause of the product, these analyses often
work with some version of indexicality” (Page 186), or direct connection between
what a material object is, does, and, in light of Gibson and Ingold’s theories of
environmental perception, *affords*. Following Marx, Keane provides the example of
a weaver making cloth. This is an act of non-alienated labour and *indexical* in that
“insofar as the weaver can see herself in the cloth, she weaves because it bears the
evident stamp of her work’ (page 187). It is not a practical or analytical overreach to
identify peasant and small scale farming with the un-alienated labour of the artisan.
Meaning here is a measure of *function*, again; cultural constructions of language may
be important in conveying and sharing knowledge, but as described further on,
language is a cultural construction only insofar as that culture is an ongoing iteration
of material processes and their consequences. The peasant sees the function (and
hence meaning) of her environmental field in concert with her practical activity in it,
encountering affordances via direct perception and levering them in accord with her
effectivities; “How it is actually perceived will depend upon the current desires or
interests of the organism [person]” (Michael and Still, 1992, page 876). This is in
contrast to the alienation from functional meaning that industrial labour— including, I
propose, industrialized agriculture— engenders, as “alienated labour fails to index
labour, as the industrial [agricultural] worker doesn’t recognize himself in the factory
[farm] output” (Keane, 2005, page 187).

In engaging with Peirce’s indexicality it is important to keep Ingold’s use of
affordances front and centre, particularly given both analyst’s referrals to Marx. For
Ingold,

“[b]y regarding use-values as affordances, the theoretical issue of
whether they are naturally given or culturally constructed disappears.
They are neither. Like affordances, they do not belong within an
‘operational’ description of the physical world, nor are they part of a
'cognized' system of cultural representations. Though they belong to the real world, they are constituents of that world as engaged in the activities of people, that is as an environment or reality for [said people]" (Ingold, 1992, page 49, emphasis in original).

This provides us with another entry into sense-making, and now discourse, where signs are located “within a material world of consequences...[Peirce] insisted that concrete circumstances were essential to the very possibility of signification” (Keane, 2005, page 186). The usefulness of the concept of affordance for discourse can be recognized in two ways: 1) that knowledge generated individually and socially (through an affinity of shared effectivities and environmental affordances) can make its way into discourse employed by the affordance-using subjects, meaning that the function of, in this instance, Seed can maintain a resonance across spaces and cultures, and 2) that language can now be “read” or employed as a direct product of “a material world of consequences”, activating signs that are the result of “concrete circumstances”.

Iconicity and “bundled” qualities

Pierce’s iconicity (resemblance) inserts a more complex piece into this material semiotic sense-making mechanism of the transit of the material of Seed into discourse. On the surface, it would seem that an idea relying on “resemblance” rather than “direct connection” is somewhat removed from the “material world of consequences” and “concrete circumstances” it cleaves to. Keane reveals three contiguous facets in Peirce’s work that belie that notion and make iconicity integral to a workable material semiotics. They are:

1) The relationship between “sensuous” or material qualities and their “particular manifestations in any specific objects” (page 187).

2) The factor of copresence, or “bundling”, when qualities are made manifest in particular objects (page 188).

3) The role qualities and their bundled copresence in objects play in generating Latourian “hybrids”, or “quasi-objects” (Latour, 1993, pages 51-55) that inhabit both the material and semiotic registers.

To introduce us to the play of qualities with objects, Keane cites an exchange between two characters in a children’s story:
“She likes red,” said the little girl.
“Red,” said Mr. Rabbit. “You can’t give her red.”
“Something red, maybe,” said the little girl.
“Oh, something red,” said Mr. Rabbit.
(Charlotte Zolotow, Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present, in Keane, 2005, page 187)

Keane reminds us that “qualities must be embodied in something in particular. But as soon as they [are], they are actually, and often quite contingently (rather than by logical necessity), bound up with other qualities- redness in an apple comes along with spherical shape, light weight, sweet flavour, a tendency to rot, and so forth” (2005, page 188). Qualities, often arbitrarily, are bound together through their embodiment in objects- the “factor of copresence” that Keane refers to as bundling. He goes on state that “the qualities bundled together in any object will shift in their relative salience, value, utility, and relevance across contexts” (ibid). To that list I add affordances, which will indeed shift according to the effectivites of particular subjects in a specific environment. The quality, or affordance, of the grain seed that corporate science wished to enhance during the first Green Revolution in India in the 1970’s was speed of ripening. The solution was to develop short straw varieties of grains whereby more of the plant’s energy would go to producing seed, rather than the stem or straw itself (Barr, 2007). To the engineers and sellers of seed, this was the affordance that mattered most. Among the many long term destructive consequences of this was the elimination of the long straw for building and craft materials that had once been afforded. This was a direct result of the failure to see Seed as an inseparable bundle of qualities that could not be teased apart without great disruption- “speed” or “fertility” is no more available (or givable) on its own than “red” is. Pre- and post- Green Revolution constitutions of the Seed by the social and material practices inherent to agriculture arrived at two differing outcomes. The first was the result of direct perception of the environment over a long period of time that resulted in a multiplicity of affordances for the farmers and their communities. The latter was the result of a virtualism in the vein of Daniel Miller (the re-embedding of a theoretical model not based on observation and experience of the “real world”), which overrode the accreted and diverse knowledge gained through kinetic sensory movement in an environment.
...
The textual presence of the seed object’s qualities in our discourse has an immeasurable effect on the material affordances the Seed Event permits. Resemblance, or iconicity, is an effect of experience, of practical action in an environment. When employed discursively in texts, this “abstract[ion of] qualities from objects offers a way of bringing discrete moments of experience into an overarching value system on the basis of habits and intuitions rather than rules and cognitions” (Keane, 2005, page 188, emphasis mine). This statement operates just along the edge of our more-material-than-semiotic material semiotics. Abstraction is inevitable in a theorization, but as opposed to Miller’s virtualism one hopes that it is a matter of degrees and sustained connection rather than an abandonment to the ether. When Gibsonian affordance and environmental perception are chorded in, in a minor theory key, one could hope to speak truthfully of an extraction of qualities—abstracted as a result of movement rather than vapourization. “Habits and intuitions”, somewhat vague and pliable terms, also firm up into an effectively substantial material-social imbrication when direct environmental perception is invoked. “Habits” are those acquired through practice, and are subject to change as needs, affordances and effectivities change; “intuitions” are based on experience and sensuous interaction with one’s environment. Thus it is possible to see a value system, previously considered an artifact of culture in most contemporary social science paradigms, as fatefuly emergent from the material and practical contingencies of engagement with the world- expressed in discourse as well as everyday/everynight actions and gestures.

Deleuzeoguattarian material semiotics

Deleuze and Guattari’s material semiotics stems from a different ethos. Their “politically informed” engagement with complexity theory has allowed for their “thematization of signs as triggers of material processes” (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, page 5). To understand this, Guattari’s words quoted in Chapter III bear repeating:

...what we are interested in is how something works, functions-finding the machine. But the signifier is still stuck in the question "What does it mean?"—indeed it is this very question in a blocked form. But for us, the unconscious doesn’t mean anything, or does language...The only question is how anything works, with its intensities, flows, processes, partial objects- none of which mean
This is a very different conceptualization of the construction and role of modus operandi of language than that of Peirce, who for all of his innovation was working toward the logically ordered systemization “of information, representation, communication, and the growth of knowledge” (Houser and Kloesel, 1992, page xxii). In the ontological metaphysics of Deleuze and Guattari, a sign is “an element that triggers a material process in a properly attuned body” (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, page 141, emphasis mine). This element can be textual and/or material and for all intents and purposes is functionally both. In this view the proper relation of a sign is to its function, the material processes it triggers, and not to a signifier. Signifiers exist; “they are real products of signifying regimes”, which in this ontology are imperialistic overlays of a certain linguo-centricism, “the reign of the signifying sign that refers only to another sign in the circular trap of the signifier” (page 142). From this account, I infer that there is no de facto difference in function and effect between a sign embedded in text and one embedded in matter “proper”, whatever de jure differences are proffered in the defence of a discursive realm that is discrete from the “material world of consequences” and “concrete circumstances”. It is a nonsense to deny the difference in the morphology of a written word versus what that word is asked under given circumstances to represent. But in geophilosophical terms, what matters instead are the effects both have in the play of the world. For Nigel Clark, that is the point behind this typically (for Deleuze and Guattari) lyrical passage: “‘a semiotic fragment rubs shoulders with a chemical interaction, an electron crashes into a language, a black hole captures a genetic message’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987/1980, page 69). And they are quite explicit: this is the play of the world, not the play of metaphor: ‘we are not saying “like an electron”, “like an interaction”’ (ibid)” (2003, page 31).

**Scale change**

Much of what I have proposed as both practical focus and theoretical leverage accounts for what might be dubbed the phase change dimension of the transmigration of material practice into political discourse. This is the motile and mobile
transference of the biophysical effects and enlistable properties of the “thing” or “event” (“seed” in this instance) into its discursive employment by the Via Campesina and the NFU. The other dimension might be called scale change—how does knowledge generated through localized, particular, and embodied practice travel beyond those circumstances through a discursive network of summits, policy papers, press releases and websites? I propose a scalar consideration that integrates many of the ontological considerations proposed in the phase change arena.

When considering scale change, it helps to expand on the Deleuzian concept of “plateau”. Chesters and Walsh, in their work on complexity and social movements, use plateau(x) as “a descriptor for the process of intensive networking in material and immaterial spaces that occurs around nodal points of contestation or deliberation, such as protest events or social fora” (2005, page 192). This describes the Via Campesina’s bodily and discursive interventions at conferences, protests, and other fora well enough. But there is also an extensive dimension found in Deleuze and Guattari’s original application of the term: “We call a ‘plateau’ any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome”9 (Deleuze and Guattari, 2002, page 22, in Chesters and Walsh, 2005, page 192). For Deleuze and Guattari, “the reference to the subterranean nature of the botanical rhizome is intentional...meant to evoke the hidden network quality of interlinked forces that have adapted to resist...particularly the hierarchized State” (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, page 136). The plateau then is both an intensive networking process centered around nodes of contestation, and a generator of diffuse “stems” that resist ordered regimes of governance and, by extension, discourse. It is both a space (material and immaterial) of generation, and a means of dispersal. It is in this dual intensive/extensive form that I employ the term.

Drawing again on Latour, “A giant in a story is not a bigger character than a dwarf, it just does different things” (1988, page 30, in Bingham and Thrift, 2000, page 286). The fact that the Via Campesina is a group “containing” 146

9 “Rhizomes” (or “rhizomatic”) and “arborescence” are another one of Deleuze and Guattari’s heuristic pairings (e.g., being and becoming, actual and virtual, etc.). “Arborescent culture” is “linear, binary, hierarchized”, while “rhizomatic culture” is “multiplicitous, heterogeneous, non-linear” (Chesters and Walsh, 2005, page 192). Of note for this thesis are Deleuze and Guattari’s descriptions of “multiplicity” as “flat [ontologically] or immanent [in process]”, and of “heterogeneous” as “mingling signs and bodies” (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, page 136). As well, through the rhizome “all points are immediately connectable” (ibid).
organizations from fifty six countries does not mean that it has outsized properties that are evenly commensurate with its volume, rather that it fulfills a different function than the NFU and other constituent actors who are nominally designated “local”, “regional”, or “national”. These actors, particular, local, culturally and historically subsumed to the global (Marston, et al, 2005), are most productively considered as “site[s] of significant practices that have the potential to upset the ‘capitalocentric discourse of globalization’” (page 427), arguably a discernable though inter-culturally diffuse goal of the Via Campesina. Drawing on the work of JK Gibson-Graham and Cindi Katz, Marston et al posit that “the local-to-global conceptual architecture intrinsic to hierarchical scale carries with it presuppositions that can delimit entry points into politics— and the openness of the political— by pre-assigning to it a cordoned register for resistance” (page 427). In a conceptual maneuver that could prove particularly evocative for the Via Campesina’s discursive constructions of the “global” and the place of small-scale, peasant, and indigenous agricultures in it, Marston et al cite Gibson-Graham’s exhortation “to think not about how the world is subjected to globalization (and the global capitalist economy) but how we are subjected to the discourses of globalization and the identities (and narratives) it dictates to us” (2002, pages 35-36, emphasis in original, in Marston et al, 2005, page 427). I argue that the material semiotics I have described, chorded with environmental perception and affordances/effectivities, can disrupt the virtualism of hegemonic globalization discourse that Graham-Gibson are in fact describing.

**Summation**

In pursuing a minor theory of affordance and material semiotic in the transit of discourses and practices between the Via Campesina and its constituent groups, there is an iterative generation of re-rendered discourses and practices that have their source in neither of the two bodies, but rather in the textured corridor between the two. This journey is where “things” or Events are actualized or expressed, both as:

- the Via Campesina’s *textual discourse*, which is then dispersed and distributed back to member groups and “out” to NGOs, UN agencies, governance bodies, governments, and the general public, through an ontologically “flat” plateau, “AND”
as *material practices* that engage with and reconfigure the agronomies, economies, and ecologies of the regions they are embedded in.

I argue that these regions, whether politically or topographically defined, cannot be viewed as neatly demarcated areas independent of one another, but are so interrelated as to render them as codetermined and cogenerated as the practices and discourses found therein. With regard to the “textured corridor”, the “in-between”, I refer again to the spatial constructs of Latour;

The difference between...trips...comes from the number of others one has to take into account, and from the nature of these others. Are they well-aligned intermediaries making no fuss and no history, thus allowing smooth passage, or full mediators defining oaths and fates of their own? (Latour, 1997, pages 174-175, quoted in Whatmore, 2002, page 56)

In using the word “trips” I would move a little further down the path to the terms “transit” or “process”, words that inhere both a path and an action in one, the route and the locomotion (or the path and mission) inseparable. Similarly, “[a] path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, page 380, in Whatmore, 2002, page 4). It is this “in-between” in all of its social and material faces that the Via Campesina might profitably inhabit, making a virtue of their “impossible” subjectivity and “becoming” an agent of change by employing discourses that originate in affordances/effectivities and bear forward those traces in language that “escapes signification”.

**A minor theory chord, applied to the Via Campesina**

In closing this chapter I offer a brief minoritarian narrative:

A relatively stable state system of peasant and subsistence agricultures, constantly re-achieved through improvisation and intensive adjustment (Berger, 1992), has been pushed into mass disequilibrium through the combined effects of largely endogenous forces such as restrictive gender and land tenure practices, and exogenous forces such as the liberalization of global markets and the introduction of corporately developed and controlled GMOs (deterritorialization). The resultant crisis has seen the emergence of the Via Campesina as a plateau of resistance and
creative reconfiguration of these destabilized ecological, social, and political bonds and connectivities (reterritorialization). The same processual and improvised nature of peasant agriculture that allowed for its deterritorialization also allows for a “becoming” of new politicized minor subjects in opposition to the hegemonic and monocultural stratification of agriculture imposed by neo-liberal trade and high capitalism. The affordances of the seed and the conceptualization of Seed as a material/social Event are resources for this resistant and transformative bio-social politics. The Seed as Deleuzian sign is triggering movements in material processes, but there is nothing predetermined about the actualization of a progressive ecological politics emerging from the disrupted strata. Bonta and Protevi identify Deleuze’s project as nothing less than the “construction of the new earth”, along both structural and ethical axes (2004, page 10). The first axis is pragmatic and empirical while the second demands the performance of an “ethical evaluation of the life-affirming or life-denying character of assemblages [which cross the inorganic, organic, and social registers]” (ibid). This minor theorization is intended as a resource for this performance.

I now move to a reading of three sets of texts by the Via Campesina and the NFU.
Chapter V - Transits in texts

As introduced in Chapter III, there are three main events or groupings of texts I am working with. The first set of documents consists of responses to particular and varied events connected to the specific issue of biodiversity, and are temporally or spatially linked to the Conference of Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) event held at Curtiba, Brazil in March 2006. The second much larger document, “Seed Heritage of the People for the Good of Humanity (from the Women Seed Forum in South Korea)”, stands apart from the flurries of shorter texts produced around forums and events. It is comprised of seven reports by women’s representatives of Via Campesina member groups, analyzing rice, seed, trade, land reform, and global agricultural markets in relation to food sovereignty, gender, and culture in South East Asia. My third selection consists of texts by the National Farmers Union of Canada that explicate its opposition to the Seed Sector Review, particularly the proposed changes to the seed regulatory framework as envisaged by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Within each set of texts I tease out relations of discourse generation, from the material to the textual, and discourse transference between member groups or constituencies, or nodes within the plateau. In this way I hope to point to the given state of imbrication between paths or routes and the generative forces that constitute discourse in the “in-between”. This composite of generator and route marks for me a transit of the Seed. Allow me to briefly revisit my introduction to these terms in Chapter I, defining and refining them.

I had proposed two “routes” that the seed may follow. In the first route the seed may remain small “s”, simply (yet not so simple) a vital biophysical bundle as well as a surface upon which semiotic signs (after Saussurian semiotics [Bonta and Protevi, 2004, page 4, Keane, 2005, pages 185-186] and cultural meanings [Ingold, 1992, page 39, pages 46-48, pages 52-54] can be imprinted. This route might be designated the more traditional one, the one that either a socially-centered or biologically-centered analysis might arrive at. It is not wrong, it is viable and actionable, but it can be built upon via a second route.

The second route posits that the Seed Event is materially constituted and because of this maintains a palpable effective force in textual discourses; that the
matter of the Seed is not only a surface that textual meanings are imprinted on, but that carries with it properties and affordances that precede textual overlays. The bundle of qualities in the seed object cum Event offers functional meanings that cannot be untied from the object’s physical makeup, or affordances. To this I add that the Seed is a force, in Deleuzian geophilosophical terms, with effects that cross and effectively fold in together the material and social registers. The S/seeds’ transit then is effectively its intensive and extensive “becoming” into its realizable functional meaning, bearing material qualities into its discursive form.

Before presenting my readings of the Via Campesina/NFU texts, I want to briefly underline the nature of their resistance to invasive, “virtualist” GM technologies. One of the most vociferously resisted is Genetic Use Restricted Technologies (GURTs).

**Terminator Seed/Suicide Seed...GURTs?**

Commonly referred to as “Terminator” or “suicide” seed, GURTs refers to Genetic Use Restricted Technologies, a type of genetic modification of plant DNA that renders the seed of that plant sterile, meaning it can be used as food, feed, or for industrial processes but cannot be planted or used as seed stock. Patented in 1998 by the U.S. multinational Delta and Pine Land, the world’s largest cotton seed company, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, farming with Terminator seed would require that new seed be purchased every year from the patent-holding corporation. According to the ETC (“Erosion, Technology, Concentration”) Group, an activist organization based in Ottawa whose slogan is “monitoring power, tracking technology, strengthening diversity” (ETC website, 2007), Terminator is “a technology that aims to maximize seed industry profits by preventing farmers from re-planting harvested seed” (Ban Terminator website, 2007a). The NFU and the Via Campesina, along with ETC Group and related organizations such as the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network (CBAN), are part of a global civil society campaign to simply “Ban Terminator!”, and to date have been successful in securing a UN moratorium at the March 2006 Convention on Biological Diversity, discussed below, that prevents the commercialization of this technology (Ban Terminator website, 2007b).
This achievement, while substantial, is regarded as very precarious, as several governments representing developed Western economies with significant agricultural exports have actively worked to undermine the strength of the moratorium's language, stopping the process well short of an outright ban: “There is caution...since we know that corporations are still developing Terminator, that industry will not stop pursuing Terminator until national governments legislate bans on Terminator, that Canada, Australia and New Zealand will still support industry efforts to end the moratorium and find new ways to try and undermine it, and that the moratorium is not a ban” (Lucy Sharratt, coordinator CBAN, Ban Terminator website 2007b). The positions of the NFU and Via Campesina on GURTs are parallel, Francisca Rodriguez of the Via Campesina declaring “We will not stop until Terminator disappears from the face of the earth. We feel it is necessary for all people to join us in validating this action for all of us” (Ban Terminator website 2007b), and Colleen Ross of the NFU stating that “genetic seed sterilization is dangerous and blatantly anti-farmer—suicide seeds threaten to intensify corporate control over Canadian agriculture and offers [sic] no benefits for farmers” (Ban Terminator website, 2007a).

The Convention on Biological Diversity Texts, Brazil 2006

Entry to the Curitiba Documents—tech specs and speculations

“La Via Campesina says no to the legalization of Death” (Via Campesina, 24 March 2006); Curtiba, Brazil, 2006

My interest in this document set is in the connectivities between events, spaces, and times that they reveal to the attuned reader, attuned in the sense of Deleuze's “properly attuned bodies” (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, page 141). I hope that my minor theorization to this point has attuned the reader to some degree. This is my hope at least. As with much research, what I was looking for shifted after I began looking. The documents I collected from the Via Campesina website revealed several connected temporal and spatial elements at work together in the plateau, both intensive and extensive. For this reason my focus in dealing with this set of texts will be primarily on scale change, or the ontological flattening in the Curitiba assemblage of documents and events, and the affective and effective resonances across the material and social registers these texts afford.
In addition these texts are strongly representative, in both “typology” and “themes”, of Via Campesina texts resulting from fora or conferences that are either initiated by the Via Campesina and other civil society organizations (CSOs [those affiliated geographically with the forum/conference site and/or with the issue]) or are counter-fora or responses to an event staged by a governance organization. Before examining the implications for a flattened ontology (scale change) and materialized discursivity these texts afford, I will first introduce the Curitiba event(s) and compose a small aggregate of Via Campesina meso-discourses found therein. A material semiotic will be applied insofar as a degree of phase change accompanies scale change, but a deeper exploration of phase change will be reserved for the subsequent text sets.

In March 2006 La Via Campesina and other CSOs\(^{10}\) held a counter-forum to the Conference of Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) meeting held in Curitiba, Parana, Brazil. Their mandate was to resist, among other things, the proposed removal of a four year moratorium on the use of Genetic Use Restriction Technologies (GURTs), commonly dubbed “Terminator” seeds, and to highlight the perils to small farmers and peasants that genetically modified organisms (GMO) and corporate concentration present in general. Canada, New Zealand, and Australia introduced the motion to lift the moratorium, proposing a system of GURTs use on a case-by-case basis. At the counter-forum they were dubbed “the Axis of Evil” by the Coalition Against Biopiracy, of which Via Campesina is a core member (Via Campesina 2006c).

In the Byzantine language of international governance and treaty making within the compass of the UN, the full name of the CBD event is “The Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Protocol”, abbreviated to COP-MOP. It “is the governing body of Parties to the Cartagena Protocol for Biosafety” (Convention on Biological Diversity 2007). In this thesis the Curitiba event proper and the signatory states as a whole will be referred to simply as the as the “CBD”. An internal word search of the Via Campesina site using the term “Curitiba” generated nineteen “hits”, or archived documents.

\(^{10}\) These included Friends of the Earth, the Erosion, Technology, and Concentration (ETC) Group, GRAIN, and the Community Biodiversity Development and Conservation (CBDC) Network
Via Campesina discourses on Seed and the threat of GMO

Via Campesina resistance to GURTs or “Terminator” seed is unequivocal. In a dispatch the month before the CBD, reaction to agribusiness giant Monsanto’s decision to revise its pledge to not commercialize Terminator technology is emphatic:

Terminator is a direct assault on farmers, Indigenous cultures and on food sovereignty and well-being of all rural people, primarily the very poorest,” said Chukki Nanjundaswamy of India from La Via Campesina, an organization representing tens of millions of peasant farmers worldwide. ‘If Monsanto bullies the UN into allowing a ‘case by case’ assessment of Terminator, it means farmers will be carried off the land coffin by coffin (Via Campesina 2006g).

In the main it is a critique focused on the commodification of seed, a process that the Via Campesina claims is widened, hastened and intensified by the capture of plant engineering– a craft practiced in many ways over long periods of time by farmers the world over– by multinational corporations. Corporately controlled plant engineering captures both the seed and the market for seed. Terminator seed is the zenith of that capture. This is the position affirmed in the statements below; the Via Campesina documents that operate as reportage rather than declarations or policy statements are peppered with quotations similar to those from Nanjundaswamy:

Francisca Rodriguez, a member of the Chilean organization Anamuri (National Association of Women Peasants and indigenous People of Chile [a Via Campesina member group]) states that the discussion around transgenics highlights once again the importance of seeds belonging to farmers. “Seeds are the basis of human food and belong to the people. They cannot become commodities” (Via Campesina, 2006d, emphasis mine);

and from another report, reproduced more fully,

Demonstrators gathered at the entrance of Expo Trade Park in Curitiba, Parana, where the [CBD] is being held, and addressed the dangers of suicide seeds [GURTs] for peasants and society at large. As conference delegates arrived...they were greeted with hisses, boos, and jeers. Cledecir Zucchi, a leader of the Small Farmers Movement (Movimento dos Pequenos Agrocltore, MPA [Via Campesina member group]) from Parana, Brazil, stated that the protest serves to call attention to the harm caused by Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), and especially the “terminator.”
Known as the “suicide seed,” it germinates only one time, which requires farmers to purchase more seeds every year. This characteristic, along with the damages GMOs cause to the environment and rural culture, could mean the end of small farming and biodiversity. “The ‘terminator’ will break the solidarity among peasants, transforming seeds which are a source of life into a commodity,” Zucchi said. Zucchi also called attention to the rise of agricultural production costs, which would make family agriculture unviable. “With the terminator, peasants who now produce their own seeds will instead have to buy them every year. This is a price that the small producer will not be able to afford,” he argued. Additional mobilizations by Via Campesina and environmental groups will take place during the week. (Via Campesina, 2006h, emphasis mine)

In these texts, there is a notable difference in tone and vocabulary between the Via Campesina members’ quotations, and the contextualizing reportage or exposition around them. There is a shift not only from the spoken text quality of the peasant protestors to the syntax of report writing, but a shift in direction from the direct and evocative to “enhancement” and commentary. A statement like “Seeds are the basis of human food and belong to the people. They cannot become commodities” is embedded in the contextualizing delivery device, a “discussion around transgenics [that] highlights once again the importance of seeds belonging to farmers.” The activist’s original statement is reinforced by the writer’s in order to “flesh out” the recurring discursive theme that GMOs are a threat to both small farmers, eaters, and the environment as a whole. What I want to do is focus on the original statement by Rodriguez quoted in the Via Campesina text, extracted from a text which was in fact produced by Igor Felippe Santos. Santos is an activist with the Movimiento sim terra (MST), a social movement advocating for the many thousands of small farmers and landless peasants in Brazil. It is a highly active member of the Via Campesina network, among others, and their texts are a frequent presence on the websites of the Via Campesina and the Latin American activist information website Minga informativa (http://www.movimientos.org/), which itself often provides links to and information Via Campesina activities. The functional plateau of the Via Campesina, the effective concentration of activities and forces, includes both diffuse and direct connectivities to these organizations. Santos authored three of the Curitiba
documents I am using and his name appears as a press contact on a press release from the CBD event (Via Campesina, 2006i).

**Authorship and voice**

I interject with the mention of Santos here as it points to my concern with material semiotic effects rather than the issues of voice, intent, power, and authorship. Two other persons were attributed with several Curitiba-CBD texts and/or had their names mentioned as press contacts. Solange Engelmann is an independent journalist from Brazil whose work can also be found at the Centro do Midia Independente (www.midiaindependente.org) and Minga informativa; Isabelle Delforge is a one-time director of Focus on the Global South based in Bangkok (as of July 2004), and in 2001 she was an independent journalist based in Vientiane, Laos. They could fairly be described as both activists and journalists. There is a degree of concentration of voice, perhaps even professionalization in the case of Engelmann and Delforge, that the Via Campesina tries to keep to a minimum: “La Via Campesina acknowledges the great need to “socialize” [a term I will return to] the movement beyond those who have the opportunity to participate in its conferences, delegations, or actions, or those who represent the Via Campesina in international events” (Desmarais, 2007, page 150). While it is difficult to speculate on the position of Santos, Engelmann, or Delforge within the Via Campesina and its constituent groups such as the MST, or on what roles they played in Curitiba in March 2006, I refer to layers of authorship here as it is important to remember that the discourses around seed and GMO are not suí generis, directly emergent from the mouths of idealized peasants. They are accretive, but there are underlying seed affordances and material relationships that imbue what is added with additional political potential.

It is imperative to acknowledge this double distance between the activists’ statements and the reader, and at the same time concentrate on their statements as being proximal to the Seed matter at hand. As members of small farmers organizations in Chile and Brazil respectively, Rodriguez and Zucchi are likely farmers themselves. It is impossible to corroborate this. I hypothesize this given the Via Campesina mandate to “socialize” the work of activism amongst their farming rank and file, and the knowledge that the while NFU, for example, permits and encourages non-farmer members to join as “associate members” (NFU 2008c), these members do not have a vote or the right to forward motions at meetings, nor are they
used as spokespersons for the organization. The consistent mass mobilization of farmers at conferences and protest events around the world, at least since 1996, supports this as well. Even if Rodriguez and Zucchi are not farmers, past or present, their statements would still be of primary analytical interest to me, lifted from their contextualization in the larger reports and read for what they contain in and of themselves. We can avoid suffocation by Foucault’s category of “commentary”, one of his “rules concerned with the principles of classification, ordering, and distribution” (Foucault, 1971, page 12), as an iron clad determining force in discourse formation. So let me revisit the statements, “Seeds are the basis of human food and belong to the people. They cannot become commodities,” and “The ‘terminator’ will break the solidarity among peasants, transforming seeds which are a source of life into a commodity” and track the resonances of the Seed through the diffuse traces of place and time.

**Functional and dysfunctional meaning—Seed and seed**

The two obvious connections between these statements are the words “seeds” and “commodity/ies”. It is also emphatically stated that seeds are not in and of themselves commodities; they may only become, or be transformed into them. And something happens to them along the way. The following is an observation of what the GURT’s seed does, its *functional* meaning. This is what Nanjundaswamy, Rodriguez, and Zucchi fear seed will become:

1. It does not *reproduce* by itself, while by definition, seed is a regenerative resource. Genetic resources are thus, through technology, transformed from a renewable resource into a non-renewable resource. (Shiva, 1993, page 144, emphasis in original, in Hawthorne, 2002, page 16)

Does the genetically modified “Terminator” remain a “seed” by definition?

2. It does not *produce* by itself. It needs the help of inputs to produce. As the seed and chemical companies merge, the dependence on inputs will increase, not decrease. And ecologically, whether a chemical is added externally [through fertilizer or pesticide] or internally [through genetic manipulation], it remains an external input in the ecological cycle of the reproduction of the seed. (ibid)

Again, does this version of the seed remain a seed in its *functional* meaning? One could argue yes, if one believed that rapid and invasive genetic manipulation is
simply an extended effectivity of corporations like Monsanto, Delta and Pine, and Syngenta, interacting with the genetic affordance latent in the seed germplasm. After all, peasant farmers traditionally employ external inputs such as fertilizers, and have themselves bred seed for certain characteristics. However, the transformation from seed to GURTs, echoing the language of Zucchi, comes at the expense of “the natural characteristics of the seed itself”, which are “obstacles to the capitalist penetration of agriculture” (Kloppenburg, 1988, page 10). Perhaps the word “definition” is too clean, too tidily lexical. In spite of Shiva’s word choice, it is more processually accurate to refer to the “things’” properties or, as below, character. In the introduction to First the Seed (1988), Kloppenburg elucidates the latent properties of the seed that afford (not solely constitute) its becoming into Seed:

Like the Phoenix of myth, the seed reemerges from the ashes of the production process in which it is consumed, A seed itself is used up...as the embryo it contains matures into a plant. But the end result is the manifold replacement of the original seed. The seed thus possesses a dual character that links both ends of the process of crop production: It is both means of production and, as grain, the product. In planting each year’s crop, farmers also reproduce a necessary part of their means of production. This linkage, at once biological and social, is antagonistic to the complete subsumption of seed (as opposed to grain) under the commodity form. (pages 10-11, emphasis mine)

In my reading through the lens of this nameless minor theory, genetic engineering of the sort that results in GURTs can only afford “grain”, not seed, and thus not Seed. GURTs seed also fails to meet the Peircian criteria of indexicality as there is no iterative and direct connection between the function of that GURTs seed and the environment that the peasant farmer perceives through sensory kinesis– it is alienated/alienating in the marxian sense and environmentally insensate in Ingold’s construct. It is instead a product of virtualism, where the abstracted laboratory-built model of sterility is re-embedded in the world of material circumstances. These circumstances are born by farmers and most heavily by peasant and small farmers who either through their colonial-capitalist marginality, resistance, or efforts at the state level (less commonly) have retained some autonomy from the most invasive circuits of global capital. As iconic objects, bearing qualities that resemble qualities
found in other objects but uniquely manifest in the materials they are bundled in, Seed and GURTs do not share a relationship along the plane of iconicity.

“Seeds are the basis of human food and belong to the people. They cannot become commodities”  
-Francisca Rodriguez

“The ‘terminator’ will break the solidarity among peasants, transforming seeds which are a source of life into a commodity”  
-Cledecir Zucchi

The seed that Rodriguez and Zucchi refer to, and seek to retain and protect, is Seed in its most manyfold forms and affordances; a “basis for human food”, “a source of life”, and a non-commodified source of solidarity. And it is the expansive properties of this Seed Event that allow it to cross both the material and social registers. Shiva’s “definition” of the seed’s function, surely a discursive maneuver, is reinforced in its essential materiality through testing it against the study and experience of its bio-physical properties. A material semiotic allows for an ethical and political reading of the texts that reinforces the functional meaning, in Guattari’s sense, of the role of Seed for peasants, small farmers, and the Via Campesina as a body.

Scale change and flat ontology— a view of space and time

Of the nineteen “hits” generated by the Curitiba search term, two refer to the October 21, 2007 murder of Via Campesina activist Valmir Motta and the serious wounding of six other peasant activists by militias allegedly hired by the multinational agribusiness corporation Syngenta. The victims were part of a group of 150 peasants affiliated with Via Campesina, who were occupying a plot Syngenta had illegally planted with GM soy and maize near the municipality of Santa Teresa do Oeste, Parana state, (Via Campesina 2007g), of which Curitiba is the capital. The remaining seventeen documents were generated in the lead up to, during, or in the wake of the CBD.

Although the murders occurred nineteen months after the CBD, one of the seventeen documents produced during the CBD proper (March 2006) refers explicitly to the question of Syngenta’s ownership of the contested plot of land. The document “Governor Requiao discards reintegration of ownership” reports on a meeting
between Parana state governor Roberto Requiao and "members of La Via Campesina, environmental groups, and NGOs such as Greenpeace and the ETC group" where he purportedly announced that "the reintegration of ownership of the area belonging to the Swiss corporation Syngenta Seeds, occupied since March 14 [2006] by peasants of La Via Campesina, will not be put into effect until the federal government resolves the question of the corporation's illegal planting of transgenic soy" (Via Campesina 2006c). Tragically the issue was partially "resolved", after a fashion, at the barrel of a gun a year and a half later. So while the focus of my "Curitiba" term search was the CBD Event, the Via Campesina's use of the certain terms such as "seed", "GMO", and "GURTS", and the consequent development of meso-discourse themes, I was also (inadvertently) able to follow a chronology of the real and immediate life and death consequences of Via Campesina's struggle against GMOs, impressing on the reader the bodily sacrifices and labours driving the network's discursive efforts. The dream-like (and so nonetheless very real) space of the internet carried the news of murder and ongoing violence over the very seeds (soy) that travel the skein of GMO test plot, meeting hall, and website. In this instance the documents around the place Curitiba, as a geographical node of activity on seed and biodiversity contestation chosen using the search term "Curitiba", proved a potent mix of policy formulation, practical organizing, and reportage across differing times and physical sites.

All of this is to say that no interaction, no matter how seemingly discrete and bounded into a temporary concrescence or Event, takes place in singular, pointilist space or time. As a site of global governance, the CBD was also simultaneously a site of resistance to the capture of farmer's autonomy, of food sovereignty, by transnational capital. This resistance took the form of bodily demonstrations at the Curitiba Expo Trade Park as reported by Santos and the textual form of Santos' report (among many others) itself. As receiver of this report via the internet, I am also introduced to a material-social plateau that includes the Syngenta GMO soy test plot, via reportage on Governor Requiao's meeting with the Via Campesina during the CBD on the situation there, and the murder by Syngenta security forces of Valmir Motta, the report of which was written nineteen months after the CBD but which appeared in "real" time, October 2007, in relation to the event it covered. For the reader as well as the proximal actors "real" time is folded, as I found and read the documents on the Via Campesina website on the same day in 2007. "Syngenta" and
“Curitiba” connected the events, for me as reader, textually, as did the presence of terms “GMO” and “seeds”, which were not among my search terms but appeared as central actants in all four events- CBD conference, counter protests, the meeting with the state governor to discuss Syngenta’s illegal plantings, and the subsequent killing and wounding of the peasants at Santa Teresa do Oeste.

As Latour says “Time is always folded” (2005, page 201). In a series of negative definitions of what “interactions” are not, he lists five temporal and spatial qualities that material-social interactions are often presumed erroneously to have. He purposefully uses the negative to affirm his ANT position, in the project of “clearing the way...so that the social [can] be deployed enough to be assembled again” (page 200). No interaction is:

1) Isotopic—“What is acting at the same moment in any place is coming from many other places, many distant materials, and many far away actors...”

2) Synchronic—“[T]he idea of any synchronous interaction where all the ingredients will have the same age and same pace is meaningless...”

3) Synoptic—“Very few of the participants in a given course of action are simultaneously visible at any given point.”

4) Homogeneous, “since the relays through which action is carried out do not have the same material quality all along.”

5) Isobaric—“Some of the participants are pressing very strongly, requesting to be heard and taken into account, while others are fully routine customs sunk rather mysteriously into bodily habits.”

— from Latour, 2005, pages 200-202

I posit that the skein of events around Curitiba, the CBD (and the “counter CBD”), Santa Teresa do Oeste, and my intrusion into them from Ontario are ontologically flattened in keeping with Latour’s five “negative” principles. The “character of a giant in a story” referred to earlier might be Via Campesina or Syngenta, Seed, or GURT; “the dwarf” might in fact be myself, writer Igor Felippe Santos, or the murdered Valmir Motta. Perhaps under a different lens Motta is the “giant”, and GURT is the “dwarf.” The ethical disconnection that ANT is sometimes accused of in its insistence on the ontological symmetry of actants human and non-
human (Whatmore, 2002, pages 160-162) must be guarded against through the direct exercise of practical judgment in the making of the new Earth.

The Seed as generative locus in peasant women’s discourses in Asia and the Pacific Rim

With the second selected text I want to consider more deeply the material semiotic explicit in the Seed Event as described in the Curitiba text reading, as well as its political ramifications. I will also illuminate the two routes, object and Event, that the seed follows as it transits from practice to discourse as typified by Seed Event/seed object exchanges. Finally, I will briefly examine the role of women in the reproductive, productive, and resistance work of the Via Campesina in light of a material semiotic understanding of experience and knowledge, and the implications this has for a minor theorization that incorporates material semiotics and feminist-inspired theories of the body and intersubjectivity.

I’ll let the Via Campesina describe the report “Seed Heritage of the People for the Good of Humanity (from the Women Seed Forum in South Korea)” in their own words:

This seed booklet is the compilation of the papers and experiences of the women peasants from peasant organizations members of la Via Campesina in the region [East and South East Asia]. The booklet explained about the role of the women peasant in conserve seed and in another hand we are loosing [sic] the native seed we have.

This booklet also given example how woman peasant save the seed and exchange the seed among the peasant. Seed exchanges not only exchange the seed but also the knowledge on how to conserve and grow it. (Via Campesina 2007h, page 5, emphasis mine)

Compiling these reports from six different Asian Via Campesina national member groups (as well as one from Chile) was one of several activities stemming from the Women’s Seed Forum hosted by the Korean Women Peasant Association (KWPA) on September 4-11, 2007. As well as the seed forum itself, attended by women peasant delegates from South Korea, Philippines, Timor Leste, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Brazil, and Chile, there were meetings with local Korean organizations who work on seed conservation and environmental concerns, a
September 10 rally against neo-liberalism, and “the field trip” to a local farming family (Via Campesina 2007h, page 7).

The syntax and grammar of the individual reports, as well as the introduction which is not attributed, vary widely. One can speculate that they have been translated by different translators with varying levels of proficiency. The report by Juana Curio of ANAMURI (Chile) has been translated very clearly; Young-Me Han’s report on behalf of the KWPA (South Korea) can prove difficult in its final form. I have left all of the text as is, and have used “sic” only in citation information or in the instance of an inarguable spelling error (e.g., “governman” vs. “government”, ibid, pages 21 and 23). The translated texts often employ a simple grammar and forthright vocabulary that may not have been present in a defter or more nuanced translation. I use these texts as they were put out into the world by the Via Campesina, focusing on their effects as Deleuzian sign-triggers of material processes.

**Hybrids, material practice and functional/dysfunctional meaning**

A distinguishing feature of the Seed Heritage booklet is its stress on hybrid seed as the vehicle for penetration by global agribusiness, rather than GMO per se. Peasant activists from Indonesia, Cambodia, and Timor Leste all specified the threat that hybrid seed posed to their communities, cultures, and environments (Via Campesina 2007h, passim). Hybrid seed is produced through the sexual reproduction or cross-pollination of two varieties of the same species (something farmers have always done), but to the extent that the resultant seed, bred for its preferred characteristics, is “inbred”; it germinates once but its progeny are largely sterile and cannot be effectively used for seed again (Kloppenburg, 1989, page 68). Only grain is produced, not Seed. “Hybrid” once referred to any type of seed produced by crossing two strains. Since the Second World War, when scientifically hybridized corn was commercially introduced in the United States and became the basis for the boom in increased agricultural yields there, the term has been almost exclusively reserved for the commercially produced sterile variety (ibid). It is a form of genetic modification that might be said to “bridge” traditional open pollination and farmer selection methods and contemporary GMO and GURTs. According to Kloppenburg, “Hybridization has proved to be an eminently effective technological solution to the
biological barrier that historically had prevented more than a minimum of private investment in crop improvement" (Kloppenburg, 1989, page 11).

Testimonials from the Seed Heritage booklet speak to the role corporate hybrids have played in disrupting subsistence and peasant agroecological economies:

Agrobusiness system based on capitalism started with the industrialization and urbanization controlled by development dictatorship of Korean government. In the beginning of 1980’s, neoliberalism agricultural system began to enter Korea. As a result, seed industry was dominated by foreign capital...Furthermore, we can find GMO among farm products harvested in Korea, even though we don’t cultivate GMO food. On top of that, many farmers were damaged in the process of hybrid seed experiments so a great number of farmers started to struggle to get compensation for seed damages. (Via Campesina, 2007h, page 13)

Activists also speak of their practical resistance to the invasion of peasant communities by the “Green Revolution” in agriculture, brought about in part by developmentalist regimes such as the one in South Korea in the 1980’s. This lengthy passage speaks to both the harmful effects of, and practical resistance to, hybrid monocultures:

Kuro is a village in Pampangan district [Sumatra, Indonesia]. The location is very isolated...The main source of income for Mata Kuro’s community is peasants and fisher folk. Agricultural commodities were dominated by paddy [rice] as the main commodity. But most peasant use hybrid seed in their farming system named IR 64, IR 42, and Cherang. This situation is the impact of green revolution implementation on [ex-Indonesian president] Soeharto’s regime. Green revolution has forced people eat the same staple food that is paddy. Before, the peoples also consume wheat, sweet potatoes, maize etc, but after that they only consume rice from hybrid paddy seed. As the impact, Indonesian peasants have lost more than 10 000 local paddy varieties.

Whereas there are big amount of hybrid seed utilization, there are several peasant which joined in Melati peasant group, member of South Sumatra peasant union (SPSS) member of FSPI– still use and maintain their local seed named Padi Salek, Sawah Kanyui, Padih Puteh, and Padi Sibur. From these mentioned local seed, the peasants mostly use padi salek in their farm. It is because it is very applicable in Kuro village which have temperature for 30 degree of Celsius. Padi salek also have big tolerance both with drought or being submerged in the water. Padi salek have taller stalk and has more leaves. Weeds can not grow because the leaves are dense, so the peasants don’t need any herbicides to combat the weeds. Historically,
we can not trace the place and discoverer, but peoples say that the
paddy has already cultivated for along time and it becomes an
inherited property from their ancestor. (ibid, page 19)

These passages refer to "seed" and "hybrid seed", but if we take again Shiva
and Kloppenburg's observation that the seed is both the means of production and
reproduction, hybridized seed does not maintain a functional meaning as Seed.
Kloppenburg states that "This linkage [between the powers of both production and
reproduction within seed], at once biological and social, is antagonistic to the
complete subsumption of seed (as opposed to grain) under the commodity form"
(Kloppenburg, 1989, page 11). There is a conventional semantic hedge there, a
discursive way out where capital might overcome the "antagonism" to
commodification that the seed enacts, nominally remaining Seed even after its
capture. A material semiotic reading assigning importance to the functional meaning
of seed denies this possibility. The hybridized seed is no longer functionally seed, as
it cannot fulfill the first of Shiva's aforementioned material functions of the seed ("It
does not reproduce by itself, while by definition, seed is a regenerative resource"). In
the sense of a full functional meaning, as it cannot fulfill its biological function, by
dint of the affordances now restricted and denuded by hybridization, it can no longer
fulfill its social or cultural functions for the peasants and small farmers who work
with them. Peasant activists understand completely the weapon-like nature of the
non-Seed seed in and of itself, with the ecological, social, and economic ramifications
trailing after- the dysfunctional meaning of them:

Agriculture used to depend on the natural cycle, but the cycle was
broken by capital. Seeds are the first loop of vicious circle...In the
future, the one who controls seeds will control the global. (Han,
Young-Me [Korean Women's Peasant Association] Via Campesina
2007h, page 13)

Awfully, for Indonesian peasants, seed just become a source of
problem. Seed make the peasant as an exploitation object to generate
profit for big agribusiness company. (Ellius, Marda [FSPI Indonesia]
Via Campesina 2007h, page 17)

Here the dysfunctional seed is presented as "the first loop of a vicious circle",
"a source of problem", and chillingly the objectifier of the peasantry into an
exploitable mass. The hybrid seed, and by extension GMO seed, is in Deleuzian terms a product of "Royal" or "major" science, operationally and philosophically positivist and committed to the "extraction of constants from variables of extensive properties and the formation of laws expressed in linear equations for the relation of independent and dependent variables" (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, page 138). While the Via Campesina actively encourages ecologically and socially sustainable agronomic research in solidarity with their movement and the principles of food sovereignty (Desmarais, 2007, page 39), the Royal science of hybridization and genetic modification focuses on the extensive properties apparent in the seed— in this case size of yield— while ignoring the intensive and creative forces that allow for the Seed to remain fully functional and to possess functional meaning as an Event. This sort of science cannot possibly account for the manifold and shifting densities of "relation[s] of independent and dependent variables" that the Seed affords and instantiates. It cannot arrive at a product, an endpoint seed, which matches the technical efficiency, achieved through corporeal and environmental engagement, that the process of handling padi salek in Mata Kuro offers:

Seed preserving step

1. Paddy that will be used for seed harvested with particular way using anai-anai (traditional rice cutter) so the grain didn’t fracture
2. Paddy separated by set foot on it
3. Separated paddy grain should dried using sunlight for one day
4. Let wind fly the empty paddy grain
5. Put paddy grain to bag, keep in isolated box and put in dry place for more less 6 month
(Via Campesina, 2007h, page 20)

Seed has other functional meanings outside of the dual ability to produce and reproduce, functional meanings inherent to the physical properties or affordances found in food, the generic term for Seed’s productive (vs. reproductive) property once the grain is prepared:

It is evident that food... is a continuous necessity for the care and sustenance of life, just like air and water. However, for human beings food is more than just a physiological necessity, because through food we interact and share. Food enhances our capacity to create, and awakens our sense by its colour, taste and smell. It also at the heart of our festivities and ceremonies, it encourages dialogue and is
sometimes an offering of thanksgiving at funerals. (Via Campesina, 2007h, page 12)

Food here serves several functions, which I have divided into two orders of functional meaning. The first is what food affords us nutritionally, as a “continuous necessity for the care and sustenance of life”; “care” also implies a processual relationship that manifests over both the social and material registers. Care must be taken in handling and preparing the seed in “moving it” to food, a process that began with direct perception as to what is edible and pleasurable and has been enhanced through a plethora of social and cultural mediations. An “ethic of care” then, a praxis-oriented social relationship (Whatmore, 1997, page 44) generated in practical action between embodied (inter) subjects, again imbricates the social and material registers and generates second order functional meanings, “because through food we interact and share...[it] enhances our capacity to create, and awakens our sense through colour, taste, and smell”. These second order functional meanings, whilst fully social, are also fully material, generated as they are from the properties of the material Seed cum food itself. I read the preceding quoted passage on food and note that the most abstracted cultural interactions such as celebrating and mourning, as important as they are, seem superseded by the discussant’s prior mention of the senses, sustenance, and care. If Ingold is right and we are social beings irrespective of our classification of objects by cultural meanings and the applications of language, by merit of our “awareness of living in a common world– the communion of experience that lies at the heart of sociality” (1992, page 47) and our direct sensory perception of that world, we create functional meanings as part of the Seed Event. We can only be social because we are material. This is typified in Via Campesina discourses on exchange, both through dialogue and meeting (co-presence) or the physical exchange of Seed grains. In a material semiotic reading, the two exchanges share the same functional meanings, but transit through two routes.

**Seed exchange as inexorably material and discursive**

Physical exchange of Seed is an important activity at many Via Campesina events (Via Campesina 2007b, 2007i, 2007j) and is literally integral to exchanges of information and political strategy, when the planting and processing of Seed is
resistance. From a Via Campesina report on the 2007 World Forum on Food Sovereignty in Mali:

Lamduan Serathong participated in one of the small forums of people from Southeast and East Asia to analyze the problems that farmers are encountering and what they can do about them.

Lamduan Serathong collected some of the African seeds that were left on the stage in front of the auditorium tent after the opening ceremony of the World Forum on Food Sovereignty. The Malian host had offered the seeds and some root crops as an offering to Mother earth during the ceremony.

"I want to add more varieties of seeds in Thailand's soil. I will plant some on my small plot of land, and if they grow well, I will distribute them to my neighbours and our networks," said Lamduan, a mother of two and a former fisherwoman on the Moon River.

Lamduan had an offering of her own; she had carried with her some sweet tamarin seeds from Thailand and gave them to some of the conference participants and local Malians. She also planted some of the seeds at the training centre where the forum took place.

She showed delegates from other countries how to plant, water, and nurture the seeds with organic fertilizers [sic], using a mixture of her native Isan dialect and body language, which was probably more effective than any interpreter.

"I think they understand what I want to say, because most of us are farmers. To us farmers, seeds are very crucial for our lives— not something we have to sterilize and sell," she added with a broad smile. (2007i, emphasis mine)

What I am highlighting here is that, in being akin to the process for preparing padi salek for use as Seed, which generated the material-social Seed Event, exchange of Seed among peasant farmers and peasant farmer activists follows two routes. In the first route the Seed can remain as a purely bio-physical object— a kernel of germplasm with a hull removed as chaff— which is then "discussed". Knowledge of the Seed is framed as strictly a cultural adaptation to our “niche” in the environment. Political efficacies are achievable by the introduction of non-GMO seeds to a new environment which may or may not then be usable for production/reproduction by the farmer. They are also achieved in the discursive act of solidarity and cultural knowledge sharing that the social moment of the exchange itself entails. In the
second route, employing a material semiotic and a flattened poststructural ontology, the Seed Event carries the functional meaning, generated by the inherently material nature of said meanings derived from affordances and effectivities, across both the material and discursive (or textual) fields. Serathong’s embodied participation in the forum, employing the Seed materially and demonstrating this through practice before linguistic competence, constituted part of her analysis. For as stated elsewhere in the Seed Forum booklet, Food Sovereignty is a “logic” (Via Campesina, 2007h, page 17), one that I maintain cannot be achieved through the Cartesian logos of the passive observer processing data from a spare and chaotic world-outside, to refine it into a complex mental world-inside that only then allows it to be useful. Furthermore, from this foundational material-semiotic Seed Event, the Via Campesina is afforded a variety of strategies that vary in relative emphasis on discursivity, cultural expression, and latent materiality: “In the long term, it’s the plan to inform the people that genetic resources mean one of the sovereignty...the people will have in the future, [informing them] through seed campaign, seed festivals, and establishing seed banks” (ibid, page 5).

Meaning and relationality between subject and object

Outside of the routes of exchange, the material semiotic also inheres in the reception of such discourses and practices. The bundling of qualities inherent in the seed, or Seed, again raises the issue of Peirce’s iconicity, or resemblance as a criterion for the presence of the material in the semiotic.

To gain an enormous profit for the company, the peasants being enticed by productivity of hybrid seed. Though hybrid seed can not guarantee for big profit, peasants get more dependence day by day. Even for some case, ministry of agriculture and several agricultural field trainers just become a sales agent for the company and force peasants to use the product (seed and its packages). Usually, the peasants become more dependent not only for seed, but also for fertilizer and pesticide that have been packed in same packages with seed. (Via Campesina, 2007h, page 18, emphasis mine)

Here the situation of an object possessing qualities that are de facto “bundled” together in their embodiment as an object is inverted, or externalized. The Indonesian Department of Agriculture and its field agents have created a new object, a bundle of objects in seed, pesticide and fertilizer that now function as their own
Latourian “hybrid object”. Whereas the Seed itself possessed a plethora of qualities that may have afforded the peasant farmer a variety of needs-meeting options—harvestability, resistance to local pests, drought or flood resistance, ease of milling and handling, desirable taste, smell, and colour for local tastes—the hybrid or GMO seed is present as but one part of a bundle of objects that must “stand in” or make up for the qualities that hybrid or GMO seed lacks. Denuded of many of its own qualities or affordances, it must be literally packaged with external inputs to retain the functional meaning of production. Being sterile it still cannot achieve reproduction regardless of the bundle it is co-packaged into. Being unable to exist as Seed in the functional sense, it now depends on an external grafting of commercialized and laboratory derived qualities of fertility and resistance, constituted as a “package”. The field agents’ package is now a grotesque version of the Seed. In this reading, the seed-quality present in this new package is categorically not the same as the manyfold qualities afforded by the Seed, whereby the Seed becomes itself. The removal of the intensive properties, in Deleuzian terms, of production and reproduction latent in the seed disables the extensive and relational properties of the Seed, encountered as affordances that allow for the social-material Seed Event.

The use of the term “seed” in referring to both objects, the corporate seed and the Seed Event, becomes an unwitting contradiction. A raspberry is red, as is blood. Raspberries and blood are both very different objects in the conventional semantic sense of the meanings we assign to things, even though both possess the quality of redness. But if we are able to remove “red” from blood, it is only because we have removed the particular iron-bearing cells (“red blood cells”) that give blood its red colour. What we are left with is plasma, platelets, leukocytes— not blood, as those are but components of blood and function in different ways if unbundled from blood as a whole. To remove the quality of fertility or reproduction from Seed is to render it not-Seed. This is the case in spite of the rhetoric employed by agribusiness when it comes to the seed package/as package.

As the president of Agrigentics—a company formed expressly to apply the new genetic technologies to crop improvement has observed, “The seedsman, after all, is simply selling DNA. He is annually providing farmers with small packages of genetic information. (Kloppenburg, 1988, page 16)
Reading this statement through a material semiotic, one might argue that the “seedsman” is doing nothing of the sort. They are instead interposing themselves between the Seed and the farmer, disrupting the sociality that co-constitutes the Seed Event, and selling a seed object that does not have a functional meaning as Seed. There is another dimension to Peirce’s material semiotic, that of the relation between writer and reader, or speaker and listener. While to this point I have focused on discourse generation, reception is also accounted for in Peirce’s understanding of the relationship between signs, signifiers, and the signified.

The material semiotic in reception

In his extraordinarily complex essay “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs”, Peirce describes in his original terminology the triadic relationship between “signs”, “interpretants” and “objects” (Peirce, 1955, pages 98-101), and introduces us to what might be called a proto-material semiotic, a 19th century high philosophy of knowledge and communication:

Logic, in its general sense, is... only another name for semiotic, the quasi-necessary, or formal, doctrine of signs. By describing the doctrine as “quasi-necessary”, or formal, I mean that we observe the characters of such signs as we know, and from such an observation, by a process I will not object to naming Abstraction, we are led to statements, eminently fallible, and therefore in one sense by no means necessary, as to what must be the characters of all signs used by a “scientific” intelligence, that is to say, by an intelligence capable of learning by experience. (page 98, italics in original, underlining mine)

The basic assertion I derive from this is that a sign is achieved through observation of concrete material circumstances, and that the observation itself must be achieved through direct experience. Pierce accounts for the “Abstraction” inherent to (“eminently fallible”) statement-making through the insertion of another figure, that of the “interpretant”:

A sign...is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea. “Idea” is here to be understood in the Platonic sense, very familiar in everyday talk...in that sense in which we say that one man catches another man’s idea... (page 99, italics in original, underlining mine)
A sign cannot exist in detachment from observing persons; it must "stand to somebody" just as it must "address" them. The sign may then be further "Abstracted" by an intervening "interpretant", but the sign itself must continue to bear a direct relation to the materiality of its object and the corporeality of the observer/interpreter. The kinesthetic sensory experience of the observer is central just as it is in the interplay of affordance and effectivity, "the Outward Clash...[that] direct consciousness of hitting and getting hit [that] enters into all cognition and serves to make it mean something real" (Keane, p. 186, 2005). For Peirce, practical and experiential knowledge is a prerequisite for the transference of information implied in the action of communicating a sign, one person to another- "The Sign can only represent the Object and tell about it. It cannot furnish acquaintance with or recognition of that Object..." (Peirce, 1955, page 100).

As befitting someone who was employed by the US Coast and Geodetic Survey for thirty years, Peirce offers the following scenario as an example of his experiential (and material) semiotic in operation:

Two men are standing on the seashore looking out to sea. One of them says to the other, "That vessel there carries no freight at all, but only passengers." Now, if the other, himself, sees no vessel, the first information he derives from the remark has for its Object the part of the sea that he does see, and informs him that a person with sharper eyes than his, or more trained in looking for such things, can see a vessel there; and then, that vessel having been thus introduced to his acquaintance, he is prepared to receive the information about it that it carries passengers exclusively. But the sentence as a whole has, for the person supposed, no other Object than that with which it finds him already acquainted. (page 101, italics mine)

As superior eyesight afforded the speaker the means to see the ship, differing effectivities among subjects will allow their engagement with different affordances, in both instances changing the fundamental nature of what the Objects in any scenario are. Meaning is embedded in experience, and experience is a result of the interplay between affordances and effectivities. The experiences and effectivities of the receiver of discursive or textual information, in this instance the listening man who could not see the ship, impact directly the functional meaning of the Objects in play. Likewise the experiences and effectivities of the peasant farmer, unabstracted
by an “interpretant”, are integral to the functional meaning of the Seed Event. The experiences and effectivities of the technicians of Royal science, virtualist Economists included, have led to the creation of seeds such that their functional meaning cannot be spoken of as Seed. The reader of Via Campesina discourse on Seed, GMO, and GURTs will perceive their own Objects in the field, based on their corporeal and practical experience with the matter at hand. Hence the importance for a material semiotic reading of these texts, irrespective of the fact that they were not written with any such minor theory in mind.

In reading this way and articulating the relationship between material and the discursive employment of it, functional meanings might be revealed that offer resources to both peasant activist and lay reader alike, and the dysfunctional meaning of GMO seed parsed and made concrete.

**Women's practice, materiality, and meaning**

There has been much productive debate about the role of women in local and global struggles to protect the environment. Central to the debate has been the troublesome question of essentializing feminine identity as inherently “close to nature” by dint of, among other things, the reproductive capacity of the female body in giving birth and providing food (Nightingale, 2006, page 6). This essentialist conceptualization has been used to some effect in the work of Vandana Shiva, among others, but is also increasingly challenged. Bina Agrawal, “drawing from her own work on women and fuelwood issues in the Himalayas”, has argued “that while indeed a relationship between women and their motivation to protect the environment could be identified, this relationship was based on their material realities and not some inherent, close connection to nature” (ibid). Rather than carrying an innate intuition as to how people should engage sustainably with their environments, Agrawal posits that this close identification with, and knowledge of, the workings of ecological systems is based on practical experience. The “material realities” Agrawal speaks of are not glands or organs but the necessities of providing food and finding fuel for women’s families. It is this interactive, relational, and complex set of materialities that appears so often in Via Campesina texts, including the Seed Forum booklet. A minor theorization of affordances and environmental perception allows us to see the power that peasant women possess without ignoring the very real
physical and social limitations placed on women in rural and farming societies, as indeed they are in all.

In most peasant societies there is a strong division of labour that has meant women tend, collect, sort, select, preserve, and store Seed: “according to Khmer tradition on role of women in household management (property, things), seed selection and storage are women work, and heavy work is for men” (Via Campesina 2007h, page 27). Far from being a marginalizing experience, the women of the Via Campesina, as expressed at least in their texts, see this role as pivotal to the health and survival of their communities, and consider the political and ecological to be both profound and interconnected. This centrality of the material importance of women’s roles in agroecological practice has translated, to a certain extent, to an increased presence in activist discourses at the local level. In Cambodia, the FNN established a women’s seed “purification” (sorting and selecting) group, “in purpose of”

1. Share experience and ideas related to ecological agriculture and women affairs
2. Local seed prevention and share to others both inside and outside villages
3. To be self-reliance (produce to supply inside and outside)
4. Teach to young generation
5. Maintain identity of local seed
6. Build capacity to women in participatory activity such as speaking out, fulfill their roles, communal development planning, small infrastructure improving, etc (Via Campesina 2007h, page 27)

Here, both “speaking out” and fulfilling a role are not mutually exclusive; presumably the experiential voice in “speaking out” is informed through women’s material practices. These practices can be extremely intimate and engage a complex nexus of material conditions and social needs, as indicated in this passage by Pinee Monekow of the Assembly of the Poor (AOP) of Thailand:

In Karen communities, an ethnic minority in northern Thailand, native varieties of rice, grain, vegetable, and herb, have been conserved in rotational cultivation system. The ancestors instruct us to grow at least 30 varieties a year. Karen women have a main role to select and keep seeds for cultivation. We keep the seeds in a kitchen.
The smoke from fuel woods will protect them from humidity, insect, and deceases. Each family has different varieties of seeds depend on their flavours, spirits, and basic elements of their bodies, as we believe that some kinds of seed can be flourished by somebody only.

We always borrow or exchange seed varieties among community members or neighbours. And we often get new varieties from relatives, friends, and other ethnic minorities, even from distant communities. (Page 30)

So while the collection and preservation of Seed is performed by women, and Seed is propagated and cultivated based on the corporeal and spiritual needs of families and individuals, there is a free and expansive exchange system that allows for the introduction of new genetic material to the local “stock”, employed and retained only if it meets the requirements of local ecological conditions and community and family tastes and needs.

Women’s knowledge of the skein of local conditions and the particularities of scores of Seed varieties is an accomplishment of direct perception and sensuous kinetic engagement with their environment. I posit that this knowledge plays a central role in Via Campesina discourses around the Seed, along the two routes elucidated previously. “Talk of” Seed accompanies the material exchange of Seed itself; the Seed that is talked of is an agglomerative Event that, through the lens of a material semiotics and poststructural spatialized ontology, functions across both the material and social registers. In Peircean terms, in relation to the second route, the sign “Seed” stands for something, the object “Seed” which is defined as such because of its functional meaning. “It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the [sign]” (Peirce, 1955, page 99, emphasis in original). In my minor theorization, that ground is material and processual: the functional meaning of Seed in its two defining characteristics, properties, qualities, or affordances: those of production and reproduction.

A re-visitation of intent

Having dealt for some time now with a variety of texts, it may be appropriate to “bring forward” from Chapters II and IV some of my approaches to textuality, as a touchstone much as I have tried to use my “problem quest” in relation to my research
question. While I have focused exclusively on the texts of the Via Campesina as objects of analysis, using texts from agribusiness only to contextualize agro-political struggles, I do not propose that Via Campesina texts are written in a minor language while hegemonic discourses are written in the major. As stated earlier, emotive and political appeals based on the defense of tradition and culture may also begin in the major key. I hope by my minoritarian reading of these texts to wring another function from them, that of the textual sign as a Deleuzian trigger of material processes. For Deleuze and Guattari, signifiers in the traditional (Saussurian) sense do exist, but they are part of a regime of signs that has come to dominate, imperialistically, “the many different regimes of signs” (Bonta and Protevi, 2004, page 141). The “regime of signs” I have theorized in this thesis has drawn on Deleuze and Guattari, Gibson, and Ingold, Peirce and Keane to demonstrate the possibility of material properties entering textual discourses through their resonating effects, rhizomatically linking culturally and geographically disparate discourses in a material/immaterial plateau. It is through “the method of AND, ‘this and then that’” Deleuze, 1994, pages 179-180, in Doel, 2000, page 131), that I proffer this parallel function of, in this instance, the Via Campesina’s texts.

Rose indicates that “academic performances” are laden with “material and discursive power” (Rose, 1997, page 317), but are “part of a web of discursive interpretations where it may invite and be given a range of diverse meanings. ‘Webbed connections’ are not made by the researcher alone” (ibid). Similarly, the texts produced by the Via Campesina and NFU cannot be controlled by their authors and editors. The discursive construction of the seed booklet report may well be designed to appeal to contemporary Western ideals of a radical peasant politics, just as the authors of the Curitiba documents chose to selectively quote certain peasant activists. However, the “signifying regime” I attempt to theorize is not intended to erase Foucauldian discursive orderings of self-representation and coding, but rather to work on them from within, as “the major and minor are not so much different languages as different uses or treatments of the same language” (Katz, page 490, 1996). With this re-visititation in mind, I will now move to the final set of texts, written by the National Farmers Union of Canada in response to proposed regulatory change of seed variety registration.
The NFU, Seed/seed, and traces of resistance

The NFU believes that agriculture should be economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable. Food production should lead to enriched soils, a more beautiful countryside, jobs for non-farmers, thriving rural communities, and enriched natural ecosystems. The decimation of rural communities, growing environmental problems, declining farm numbers, and the present farm income crisis cast doubt on the sustainability of the current high-input, export-oriented, expansionist model. The NFU has taken a lead in advancing and implementing affordable, effective alternatives to current agricultural policies. (NFU, 2007a)

While less rhetorically elegant than much of the talk surrounding the goals and ways of food sovereignty, the NFU’s immediate and equal foregrounding of the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of agriculture provides a reasonable measure of assurance that the goals of food sovereignty, if not necessarily the means toward them, are shared with the Via Campesina as a whole to an appreciable degree. Of particular note is the “doubt” expressed toward an expansionist, export-oriented agriculture, the alternative to which would seem to indicate a greater attention to local and domestic production and consumption patterns. It is accepted among the Via Campesina’s membership that the means toward food sovereignty might not be universally shared by members. Indeed differences in geography, culture, and history are seen as a diversity resource, according to Francois Dufour, a leader of the Via Campesina member Confederation Paysanne:

You can’t talk about factions within Via Campesina...What holds for Santiago or Bamako doesn’t necessarily hold for Rome or Paris. The exchange of opinions and experiences makes this a wonderful network for training and debate. The delegations to the Via Campesina don’t negotiate in terms of conquering the market but to promote, above all, development of mutual respect. (Desmarais, 2007, page 33, emphasis mine)

In the area of seed breeding and production, ownership, use and the rights and responsibilities thereof, the NFU has been active in two interrelated campaigns- the international movement to “Ban Terminator” (NFU website, 2007c), and their ongoing resistance to the Seed Sector Review, an “ambitious, industry-led initiative to restructure Canada’s seed and grain quality assurance systems” (NFU, 2004), and
its successor the National Forum on Seed (NFU, 2006, page 11). Having already discussed GURTs, GMOs, and resistance to them at some length, I will now discuss the Canadian Seed Sector Review, the National Forum on Seed, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and NFU resistance to these bodies and the regulatory framework they propose. My two main source texts for NFU critiques and resistance are “Nine things farmers need to know about the Seed Sector Review” (NFU, 2004) and “An Analysis of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency’s ‘Proposal to Facilitate the Modernization of the Seed Regulatory Framework’” (NFU, 2006).

**Contextualizing the NFU- resistance in high modern/late capitalist agriculture**

Canadian farmers operate under very different social and economic conditions than do many farmers in the Majority World of the Global South. The “high modernism”, characterized as having a “‘muscle bound’ belief in science and technology and exhibiting a zealous self-confidence in the linear process of progress” (Scott, 1998, in Desmarais, 2007, page 43), that has driven agricultural change in the 20th century has fully manifest itself in North American agriculture. It may be that some areas of the Majority World have until recently been partly insulated from “the modernist tragedy masquerading as progress” (Bello, 2007, page 3), due no doubt to a certain double-edged social and geographical marginality in this age of urbanism and developmentalism. However, linear progress and expansion have always been hallmarks of Western North American agriculture, along with the railway, mass immigration, and the seizing of territories from First Nations.

In “Living Nets in a New Prairie Sea”, Kansas-based activist, scientist, farmer, and essayist Wendell Berry writes of the rapid and total transformation of the western grasslands that took place within a few generations. He recounts the joke, apparently circulated among western farmers in the late 19th century, of a Sioux man watching a Scandinavian immigrant farmer plowing a field. The indigenous man sticks his hand in the furrow, feels the soil and buried grass and comments “Wrong side up” (1987, page 77). Berry recalls the memoirs of a writer in the 1930’s describing how his grandfather “broke prairie sod, driving five yokes of straining oxen, stopping every hour or so to hammer the iron ploughshare to a sharper edge. Some of the grass roots immemorial were as thick as his arm. ‘It was like plowing through a heavy woven doormat,’ grandfather said” (ibid). For Berry these
reminiscences highlight the stultifying mythology of the heroism and sacrifice of settlement, and the introduction of till and monocultural agriculture to a region that had been grassland for thirty million years and home for a nomadic (and according to the farmer’s joke, ignorant) people.

I write of these things, here in the context of the NFU, not to disparage the work and community developed by the early settler-farmers in North America, for as Berry asks “who among us, in their time, would have done otherwise?”(ibid) And conversely there should be no valorization of indigenous peoples’ relationship to the Via Campesina, as evidenced by this passage from Desmarais (2007):

Although indigenous concerns were raised in Mons [the first international Via Campesina conference in 1993], Consuelo Cabrera Rosales, a Mayan peasant woman leader from Guatemala, suggests that the Via Campesina still has a long way to go. She argues that if La Via Campesina had integrated an indigenous as well as a peasant identity, its whole approach to land, the earth, territory, and its vision for the practice of agriculture, would be considerably different from what it is now. (page 162)

I want to highlight instead the complexity arising from practicing agriculture in the milieu of the settler state and late capitalism/high modernism, for “as economist Richard Levins quips: ‘the shortest possible economic history of...agriculture during the twentieth century would be this: non-farmers learning how to make money from farming’” (NFU, 2006). So the resistance of the NFU to corporate control over the Seed begins from a very different place, immersed from the start in a productionist, global market-oriented milieu. There are of course deep connections between the conditions of farmers and farming in the industrial (or “post-industrial”) north and the Majority World of the Global South, as highlighted in Desmarais’ analysis of the Via Campesina (2007). Peasant farmers in the South are not seeking to emulate Northern farmers by any means, but recognize clearly the commonalities in the struggle. In the following passage “Pedro Magana, a leader with UNORCA [a Via Campesina member group from Mexico], explains the importance of his visits with Canadian and U.S. farmers:

...an important conclusion for me was that the model and conditions in which family farmers of the United States find themselves is not a future that we want for ourselves. Then, we turn around and see our own situation and we don’t want that either. It really had a big impact on me. I believed American farmers were super producers, that they
were doing really well, they had the best, an organized development superior to ours. Now I know that this is not the case...They have lost the quality of life. Today a farmer must work 14-15 hours a day...they are living on credit. Often they lose the land. Their children do not work the land, they have to leave. They’ve lost the community life. The quality of food is seriously questioned because of the high use of chemicals and hormones. The suicides of American and European farmers is a daily occurrence. We do not want to go there...

We also had the opportunity to host Canadian farmers. They went to Guanajuanto and were shocked to see how small our landholdings are, how backward our technology is, the differences in costs of production, and how high our interest rates are...But, in the end...we face the same transnational strategy, a strategy of capital accumulation with a devastating consequence on people’s economy. Our enemy is the same. The strategies may be different. But, as farmers, our objective is the same: give to society adequate and healthy food. But the governments do not recognize the social function of the production of food. And, this is the common objective of the global struggle, that the social function of agriculture be recognized, that the farmer’s right to produce...be recognized. (page 82, emphasis mine)

For the NFU, achieving some degree of autonomy from corporate agriculture starts with the Seed, as it does in Indonesia, Mexico, Korea, Brazil, Cambodia— for all of the farmers whose texts have been represented here and beyond. The NFU is also a vast agglomeration of farmer subjectivities, practices, identities. At their 38th annual convention held in London, Ontario, November 22-24, 2007, I was a registered guest, and privy to a range of opinions and observations. The NFU membership varies widely in the “radicalness” of its members’ activism; when the question was raised as to whether or not to support an initiative that would license and label organic tobacco, thus “adding value” to the organic tobacco producers’ product, some agreed while others protested vehemently that the NFU should not associate itself with any tobacco product. At an informal lunchtime working group facilitated by members of the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network, one farmer lamented the disappearance of “heirloom” watermelon seed due to the almost exclusive use of hybrids, while another openly questioned the economic viability of his family farm if he did not grow GM soybean. The Seed is the primary site of struggle, though its position (and by inference the position of Canadian farmers)
along the Seed/seed spectrum may differ greatly from that of Seed/seed engaged with in peasant communities of the Majority World.

Embedded as it is in the late/high capitalist ethos of contemporary North American agriculture, NFU contributions to the larger food sovereignty project are often framed in discourses that reflect the pervasive corporate presence in members’ agricultural practice, from production through marketing and trade. Indeed, while the NFU questions “the sustainability of the current high-input, export-oriented, expansionist model”, the short term survival of farmer-members dictates some sort of continuing compliance to that model. Achieving greater autonomy from corporate agribusiness is the first goal, necessitating resistance to the various Canadian state governance and consultative bodies that serve, in the agricultural sector, to bolster corporate influence and control over farmers.

This resistance to the growing entwinement between state and agribusiness can be seen in NFU policies and responses to the Seed Sector Review and the National Forum on Seed. The Seed/seed here is already situated as seed of dysfunctional meaning. The complex task is to draw that dysfunctional seed along a socio-material transit into a Seed Event that retains the liberatory properties of the functionally meaningful Seed described earlier.

The Seed Sector Review and the National Forum on Seed (NFS)

From the NFU text “Nine things farmers need to know about the Seed Sector Review”:

Begun in 2003, the [Seed Sector] Review is a joint venture of the Canadian Seed Growers Association, the Canadian Seed Trade Association, the Canadian Seed Institute, and the Grain Growers of Canada.

Review participants initially identified three objectives: “Regulatory flexibility and timeliness; supportive environment for science and innovation; and profitability of the sector.” The first objective translates to “deregulation” for the companies involved, and Review documents detail plans for deregulating our seed and quality assurance systems. The third objective is refreshingly clear: more profit for seed companies. And the second objective— a “supportive environment for science and innovation”— is largely a restatement of the first and third goals: A “supportive environment” for seed companies is one that is more profitable and less regulated. The Seed Sector Review proposes removing rules that protect farmers and
introducing new rules designed to restrict farmers and to increase the profits of corporate seed developers such as Monsanto and a dwindling number of seed growers. (NFU, 2004)

And according to the “Overview of Seed Sector Review” published on the National Forum on Seed website,

[t]he primary objective of the [Seed Sector Review] was to conduct an industry-wide assessment of the Canadian seed sector and Canada's seed regulatory environment in the global context. The more specific purposes of this assessment were:

- To contribute to the development of a common understanding among the key stakeholders in the Canadian seed sector (including government) of the nature of the sector, the challenges facing it and the options for facilitating constructive change within it (in particular, the regulatory framework and related systems).
- To develop recommendations for the structure of the CFIA's [Canadian Food Inspection Agency] regulatory scheme and for priorities for regulatory change. The project will also identify recommendations for a permanent consultative process and structure that would continue beyond the project termination date [this became the National Forum on Seed]. (National Forum on Seed [NFS], 2004, emphasis mine)

I reproduce these texts here as a starting point, to illustrate the divergences in interpretation between the NFU and the corporate-state consultative body the Seed Sector Review as to what is at stake for the peoples and fields of practice involved. Where the NFU sees “removing rules that protect farmers”, the NFS sees “facilitating constructive change” within the regulatory framework. Given that many of the technical and economic parameters of Canadian agriculture are shaped through regulatory rather than legislative processes, it is important to bear in mind that the primary agricultural regulatory body in Canada is the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and that both the Review and Forum were initiated by agribusiness interests to exert their influence there.

The NFU resists the Seed Sector Review and the National Forum on Seed (NFS) on the grounds of both their content and their process. According to the NFU, “the NFS is a creature of the same mix of organizations and interests that formed the Seed Sector Review. Throughout its various iterations, this industry-led coalition has proposed nearly an endless string of policies that would reduce farmers’ rights to save
seeds and would increase farmers’ costs” (NFU, 2006, page 2). Tracing the
genealogy of these bodies, the Seed Sector Review operated from June 2003 to
March 2004, a timeframe dictated by project funding from Agriculture and Agri-Food
Canada (Seed Sector Review, 2004). As per the NFU’s reference to industry-led
“iterations” of governance bodies, the National Forum on Seed is the progeny of the
Review, created “to respond to a central recommendation of Phase 1..., which
identified the need for an ongoing consultative process to deal with regulatory and
other policies affecting the seed sector” (NFS, 2008a). It is an ongoing process and
was meeting as recently as April 8, 2008, in Winnipeg, Manitoba (NFS, 2008b).

Both the Seed Sector Review and the NFS are shot through with agribusiness
interests, not via the direct representation of seed and agricultural input corporations
per se, but through their presence in the large producer and trade associations that
dominate these consultative bodies. The routes of these interests’ influence are
labyrinthine and use entry points at various stages of the bureaucratic process (see
Figure 5.1). For example, as mentioned one of the Seed Sector Review’s mandates
was “to develop recommendations for the structure of the CFIA’s [Canada Food
Inspection Agency] regulatory scheme and for priorities for regulatory change.” This
was in 2004. In turn, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, in its “Proposal to
Facilitate the Modernization of the Seed Regulatory Framework” in 2006, “proposes
to officially recognize the National Forum on Seed (NFS) as part of its three-part
‘permanent consultative framework’” (NFU, 2006). Hence, the Review developed
proposals for the CFIA, and two years later the CFIA decided to formalize Review
and NFS participation in its consultative processes.

The CFIA’s “Proposal to Facilitate the Modernization of the Seed Regulatory
Framework”, which the NFU critiques through the texts I am using, though drafted in
2006, is part of an ongoing consultative process that has continued at least as recently
as March 2008. According to their website, “[s]ince October 2006, the CFIA has
consulted on the Proposal to Facilitate the Modernization of the Seed Regulatory
Framework through an online workbook, five regional seed regulatory workshops
and two national meetings...Shortly thereafter, the CFIA will be making a second
phase Seed Program modernization proposal, including changes to the placement of
crops within the new variety registration framework” (CFIA, 2008). This ongoing
process is the Seed Program Modernization Initiative, a “second phase” CFIA
initiative based on responses to their Proposal (ibid). So to be clear, the Seed Sector Review and its offspring the National Forum on Seed are consultative bodies, while the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is the regulatory body soliciting said consultations.

**Tracing the routes of influence in Canadian agriculture**

Who constitutes the Review and the NFS (see Figure 5.1)? The Seed Sector Review was entirely industry led, comprised of the Canadian Seed Growers Association, the Canadian Seed Trade Association\(^{11}\), the Canadian Seed Institute, and the Grain Growers of Canada\(^{12}\) (NFU, 2004). This is not, in the view of the NFU, a benign intervention, with corporate involvement in processes like the Review and NFS occurring over several fronts:

Seed companies are using all available means to expand their control over seeds: legislative (PBR [Plant Breeders’ Rights] amendments, legal (patents, lawsuits, contracts, TUAs [Technology Use Agreements]), biological (Terminator technology, hybridization), regulatory (proposed changes to variety registration), and commercial (mergers and takeovers). It is hard to imagine anyone could miss this pattern. In terms of control of and profits from seeds, the pendulum has swung dramatically toward the seed corporations. At the same time, farmers have found themselves in the worst farm crisis in Canadian history, largely as a result of rising input costs and overdependence on purchased technologies. (NFU, 2006, page 3, emphasis mine)

The position of some core participants of the Seed Sector Review appears to contradict the Canadian state’s official legal obligations and commitments to farmers and agriculture. In the NFU’s “Nine things farmers need to know about the Seed Sector Review”, the Canadian Seed Trade Association (CSTA) Vice-President is quoted as saying “Within the current Patent Act, we’re saying there is no so-called farmer privilege to save seed. We don’t think there should be.” The article then states that indeed in 2002 “Canada signed the International Treaty on Plant Genetic

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\(^{11}\) “The [Canadian Seed Trade Association’s] 165 members include AgricoreUnited/Proven seeds, BASF, Bayer CropScience, Dow AgroSciences, Monsanto, Pioneer Hi-Bred, Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, and Syngenta Seeds” (NFU, 2006, page 11).

Resources for Food and Agriculture. That treaty affirms farmers’ right to save seed” (NFU, 2004). Another central corporate player in the Seed Sector Review, the Grain Growers of Canada, asserts its influence both through the Review itself (as a now formalized consultant to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency), and by its presence in “the Crop Specific Consultative Groups the CFIA proposes to create” (NFU, 2006, pages 1-2). These groups are formed “in whole or in part” by large commodity groups like the Canadian Canola Growers Association. According to the NFU, “[m]any such commodity groups have a history of supporting industry interests and working against farmers’ interests. To give just one example, the Canadian Canola Growers’ repeated interventions in defence of Monsanto patents while that corporation used those patents to sue over 100 farm families” (NFU, 2006, page 2).
Tracing the routes of influence in Canadian agriculture

Seed Sector Review June 2003- March 2004*
- Grain Growers of Canada (GGC)*
- Canadian Seed Institute (CSI)*
- Canadian Seed Trade Association (CSTA)*
- Canadian Seed Growers Association (CSGA)*

* The four founding members successfully applied to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada’s (AAFC) Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development Fund (CARD) and received $600 000 from the AAFC. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) also contributed to the application, committing to provide in-kind support, including professional expertise, staff services, and office infrastructure. The seed industry also contributed approximately $500 000 in “in kind” support.

Figure 5.1 Industry influence in Canadian seed sector consultative processes

Sources: National Farmers Union, 2006, National Forum on Seed, 2008a

Key to member organizations:
* Industry association
** Government body
*** Farmers’ group or CSO

Crop Specific Consultative Groups (CSCGs)

Industry

Canadian Food Inspection Agency

National Forum on Seed as a whole

National Forum on Seed 2004-Ongoing

Executive Committee:
- GGC*
- CSI*
- CSTA*
- CSGA*

Other members:
- Canadian Wheat Board***
- CropLife Canada**
- l’Union des Producteurs Agricoles***
- National Farmers Union**
- Plant Breeder Communities (private, public and university)**
- Registered Seed Establishments+
- Provincial Government Representative – East**
- Provincial Government Representative – West**

Ex officio members of the Forum
- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (2 seats at the table)**
- Canadian Food Inspection Agency (1 seat at the table)**
- Canadian Grain Commission (1 seat at the table)**

Executive Directors of the four ACAAIF* applicant organizations:
- GGC*
- CSI*
- CSTA*
- CSGA*

* Advancing Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food (ACAAF) Program, which provides financial support for the National Forum on Seed
** CropLife Canada is the trade association representing the manufacturers, developers and distributors of plant science innovations - pest control products and plant biotechnology - for use in agriculture, urban and public health settings” ("About CropLife", CropLife Canada website; accessed May 4, 2008; http://www.croplife.ca/english/aboutcpi/aboutcpi.html).
*** The Canadian Grain Commission (CGC) is the federal agency responsible for establishing and maintaining Canada’s grain quality standards” (“Home page”, Canadian Grain Commission website; accessed May 4, 2008; http://www.grainscanada.gc.ca/main-e.htm).
The NFU also resists the policy content that has emerged from these consultative bodies, as well as their corporate-heavy structure that has ignored farmer interests. I will focus on the seed variety registration system and the regulatory changes proposed by industry-driven consultative bodies. These proposed changes, the NFU insists, will maximize corporate control and profits to the detriment of farmer viability and autonomy and eater/consumer safety. This highly technical route of the Seed/seed moves through complex regulatory and legalistic discursive territory, but the Seed/seed remains material-discursive, both as “first route” object and as “second route” Event identified by its functional meaning. The fact that this second route, of Seed as Event, is incomplete signals the enormous and particular difficulties the NFU faces in its struggles within the highly regulated environment of high capitalist agriculture. In this context, the circuits and passages from dysfunctional seed to functional Seed Event are blocked by many intermediaries.

**Seed registration, regulation, and NFU resistance**

Currently, “In order for a seed variety to be grown in farmers’ fields and sold and processed into food, that variety must first be “registered”—that is, accepted as a high-quality seed variety that meets certain criteria and that will serve farmers, customers, and consumers of food” (NFU 2006, page 5). The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has ultimate authority to grant registrations, but does so through an arm’s length testing body. This body conducts tests and most importantly subjects new varieties to two or three year “independent field trials to determine yield, performance, and quality” (NFU 2006, page 6). The testing body is comprised of a variety of subcommittees, overseeing breeding and agronomy, disease, and quality, with the breeding and agronomy committee holding a slight edge in decision-making over the other two (ibid, and see Figure 5.2).

According to the NFU, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency’s “Proposal to Facilitate the Modernization of the Seed Regulatory Framework” and the policy trajectory since generated by it would dramatically weaken the criteria new seed varieties need to meet in order to qualify for registration. This would happen by creating a three-tiered registration system that if implemented would erode or remove various criteria, particularly those associated with quality. In the past, for a new variety to be registered it had to be proven to be “equal to or better than currently
registered varieties” (NFU 2006, page 5). The new three-tiered system would include Tier 1) a subcategory for some seed varieties that would require evaluation of only one of the agronomy, disease, and quality criteria, rather than all three; Tier 2) no “requirement for the variety to go through a recommending committee process—no lab testing, no co-op trials, no independent verification of yield or disease resistance, no requirement to demonstrate the variety is equal to or superior to existing varieties”, creating a ‘buyer [read farmer] beware’ system” (NFU 2006, pages 6 and 7). The final “tier” actually falls outside of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency’s tier system; rather it would be, in the view of the NFU, a de facto third tier that would involve an expansion of the existing Contract registration system. As of 2006, a very limited number of crops (nine) were exempt from the variety registration process and registered under the Contract system, as they “fall outside the normal traits of a particular crop class, but have a very specific end use. These are crops designated as too harmful to be co-mingled with ordinary crops and commodities. Proponents of such varieties must utilize a closed-loop system to segregate the variety and guard against contamination” (NFU 2006, page 6). The proposed changes, which are still under review through the CFIA and National Forum on Seed’s consultative processes, would expand the number of crops registered under this system, effectively bypassing the variety requirements that even the weakened proposed two tiers would maintain and thus producing several critical disadvantages for the farmer.
Proposed Regulatory Change- the CFIA, the National Forum on Seed and the NFU critiques

Variety Registration Criteria

- Agronomy/Breeding
- Disease
- Quality
  (Contract registration)

CFIA Proposed Regulatory Changes

Tier One

Three Tiers
One- Testing one rather than three criteria
Two- Eliminating criteria
Three- Expanding Contract registration
(Case-by-case assessment, 3rd party audits, stiffer farmer compliance)

Extended Practical Impacts of Regulatory Change

Common Seed?*

Loss of seed breeding for regional ecological needs

Creation of “Variety Treadmills”

* Common seed is “non-pedigreed seed” produced by farmers for their own use or for sale to neighbours and family. Proposed requirements to have all seed sold under a variety name would effectively outlaw the sale of common seed. Ways of collecting fees for farm-saved seed have also been proposed.

Figure 5.2 Effects of proposed CFIA regulatory changes
Sources: Canadian Food Inspection Agency, 2008; NFU, 2004; NFU, 2006

Registering seed varieties- Time and the Treadmill

A fundamental constituent of the seed as realized Seed Event is time. Earlier I discussed time as a connective agent between texts and their relation to place, practice and conflict in Curitiba, Brazil. But time is also a constituent of practice itself, and experience is perhaps practice plus time. For the farmer more than most,
time is not a frictionless medium through which journeys are conducted, with traveling Events remaining consistent and intact from points A to B. This engaged approach to time underscores the NFU's resistance to an emerging "variety treadmill". According to the NFU,

Currently, seed companies and other developers can de-register seed varieties relatively easily and quickly— they need only submit a request and minimal paperwork. In a system where varieties can be quickly de-registered, adding the option to quickly register new varieties makes possible the creation of a variety treadmill— more varieties will be registered and, most important, varieties may only be registered and on the market for a short time. (NFU, 2006, page 8)

This variety treadmill, a potential result of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's 'Proposal to Facilitate the Modernization of the Seed Regulatory Framework' (NFU, 2006), would impact farmers in a variety of ways. Again from the NFU:

- It will constrain farmers' abilities to save and re-use their own seed because their farm-saved seeds will more quickly become de-registered;

- Farmers will have fewer years over which to amortize their seed investment because a given variety will be registered and usable for fewer growing seasons;

- There will be less data available to farmers on long-term seed performance; [and]

- Farmers will find it harder to compare the performance of varieties (NFU, 2006, page 8)

The proposed combination of removing or weakening merit as a criterion for variety registration, and creating a regulatory environment that fast-tracks variety registration, creates a legal and regulatory environment that is antithetical to farmer autonomy. For as varieties are deregistered more quickly, farmers would lose the ability to save and re-use seed, as that seed would no longer be permitted for food production. The removal of merit contributes to this by permitting seed companies to produce, and register, new seed varieties for purely commercial purposes, exploiting the increased regulatory "obsolescence" of de-registered seed and forcing farmers' to purchase new registered varieties of corporate seed (NFU 2006, page 8). This is a
pattern consistent with the capitalist production of a vast array of consumer goods (Soron, 2006, page 231) where rapid obsolescence is built into their design. In this instance regulation rather than genetic manipulation strengthens capital’s hold on the seed. This combination of removing merit and speeding up variety registration speaks to the first two of the four points on the NFU’s list above, whereby farmers not only lose the ability to reuse saved seed but also suffer economic loses, as they have fewer seasons to recover their costs when purchasing seed that may then in turn be quickly de-regulated.

**Time as practice/maintaining the practice of time materially and socially**

There is another more encompassing and perhaps destructive aspect to this combination of regulatory forces. Aside from the loss of farmer autonomy and profitability, the NFU is concerned that farmers will also lose direct, experiential knowledge of the seeds they use. The temporal dimension of the seed, in the NFU texts still a Seed Event-in-waiting, dysfunctional in many ways as hybrid and dependent on external inputs, is truncated and distorted by the threat of the variety treadmill. Time is an integral force in the “becoming” of Seed\(^\text{13}\). Lest this sound like a hollow truism (after all, all things are subject to time in their composition and decomposition), let me expand on this to say that time operates on Seed and Seed operates through time in becoming what Seed is in its **fullest functional meaning**. More succinctly, time is “in” the Seed as well as acting upon it to shape what it becomes; the Seed may not be unique in this as an object or Event, but time does figure in its becoming in a particularly integral and intensive (as opposed to extensive) way. For example, making a clay pot or a computer keyboard requires “an expense” of time in that materials are gathered, shaped and molded. Clay must be fired, keyboards assembled. In terms of geological time, the plastic used in a keyboard or the clay for a pot are the product of millions of years of geomorphological processes. But neither clay nor petroleum contains the seed of its own reproduction, through time, like the seed itself does. The seed in agriculture functions along two temporal dimensions, the one shared with all labour processes in

\(^{13}\) I use the capitalized word “Seed” here in an aspirational spirit, recognizing that hybrid seed is already partly dysfunctional in meaning and that the NFU struggle to maintain farmers’ access to Seed’s affordances and properties is contingent first on their economic survival. After this paragraph I largely revert to the common small- “s” spelling.
the time "spent" on them, and the other unique to itself— the property of self-reproduction which Kloppenberg claims has made agriculture so difficult to penetrate by capital (1988, pages 10-110, and see Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3

While traditional seed breeding techniques have been used to accelerate temporal processes like germination and ripening, they have never denied the centrality of the temporal dimension in the socio-material Seed Event. The last two NFU critiques of the CFIA’s proposals speak to farmer resistance to this possibility: “[t]here will be less data available to farmers on long-term seed performance; [and] farmers will find it harder to compare the performance of varieties” (NFU 2006, page 8). The functional meaning of the Seed struggles to assert itself in the NFU’s necessarily technocratic and particular critique of corporate seed registration regulatory framework, regulations which ultimately co-determine actual breeding practices. The NFU lays out the dangers implicit in the creation of a variety treadmill, quite explicitly making the link between the truncation or capture of the temporal dimension by capital, and the material, experiential requirements of engaging farmer effectivities with the seed’s affordances. In their words, “If seed varieties are registered and de-registered with increasing rapidity, farmers will find it harder to judge varieties. Farmers will have less data on medium- and long-term performance, and farmers will have less shared experience with ‘benchmark’ varieties [those being successful varieties by which farmers judge others’ performance]” (NFU 2006, page 9). The NFU uses the example of canola production
(page 10), stating that “[a] proliferation of varieties and the rapid introduction and withdrawal of varieties will undermine farmers’ shared experience and make it hard for farmers to compare performance” (ibid).

Shortening both extensive and intensive temporal processes in farmers’ engagement with seed negatively alters the liberatory affordances and properties of the seed (or becoming Seed Event) in two ways, along two analytical routes. The first route, where the seed remains conventional object for analytical purposes, involves the introduction of new varieties for profit through de-registering perfectly suitable varieties and registering new ones that do not need to meet merit criteria, and the accompanying loss of farmer autonomy in using saved seed. The seed need not be spoken of as a Seed Event to be traceable through NFU, government, and corporatist discourses in this way. The NFU also posits that the variety treadmill will essentially weaken farmer effectivites that require longer temporal cycles and the accompanying social dimension. This speaks to the seed, in my minor theorization, as infused with or constituted by an active temporality that necessarily and indivisibly includes material practice. Theorized this way, the seed as site of struggle is suspended between seed as captured object and Seed as socio-material Event with its liberatory affordances intact and available. The material semiotic of the second-route tracing of the Seed’s movement embraces both the inherent materiality and sociality of time in the activation of the Seed’s affordances, in both the relational engagement with humans (labour) and the latent temporal processes of germination, growth, and particularly self-reproduction. To be fully functional in meaning, the seed needs time. To resist capture by capital and become a politically just Seed Event, time and extensive proximal contact are required.

The materiality of temporal experience in discourse

John Berger draws the connection between peasant experiences of time and peasant prehensions of meaning and power in the face of Walden Bello’s “modernist tragedy masquerading as progress” (Bello, 2007, page 3). Emphasizing the universal peasant practice of repetition and improvisation (“His faithfulness to tradition is never more than approximate. The traditional routine determines the ritual of the job: its content, like everything else he knows, is subject to change”[Berger, 1992, page xxiv]), Berger connects peasant temporal experience with supposed peasant conservatism, but with a twist. Rather than a conservatism that actively defends
privilege, in Berger’s view peasant conservatism is one of meaning—the defense of generationally (temporally) acquired knowledge against the blind promises of new productivist technologies that ensure growth, but somehow not survival (pages xxiv-xxv). The peasants’ worldview is essentially one of scarcity (page xix). A prehension of scarcity might be effectively defined here as a recognition of limits and the essential hollowness of the promise of more wealth with less work. The future is seen as one of continuance, or survival, rather than unlimited growth and opportunity (ibid). And as Berger has it:

Closely connected with the peasant’s recognition, as a survivor, of scarcity is his recognition of man’s relative ignorance. He may admire knowledge and the fruits of knowledge but he never supposes that the advance of knowledge reduces the extent of the unknown...The unknown can only be eliminated within the limits of a laboratory experiment. Those limits seem to him to be naïve. (page xix)

Resisting efforts to shorten the period a seed variety may remain in production is not only a defence of farmers’ economic viability, but of the inherently temporal nature of the productive and reproductive capacities of the seed itself. To cite again the NFU critique of the variety treadmill for the example of canola production, “[c]urrently, many farmers have experience with certain types of canola (Westar, Excel, Garrison, etc.) or wheat (Columbus, AC Barry, etc.). These farmers speak a common language when discussing and comparing varieties” (NFU, 2006, page 10). Even for farmers employing monocultures in the productivist milieu of high capitalism, seed company claims based on laboratory results and the observation of field results in controlled conditions in a truncated time period (as the weakening or elimination of some registration criteria suggests would be the case) can not be a substitute for experiential knowledge attainable only over time. A material semiotic reading of NFU texts engenders the appearance of functional meanings, generated through proximal and temporal contact, that contain the promise of maximal affordance engagement.
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Connecting discourses—shared material semiotics and resistance to distance as a common theme

This NFU discourse of course concerns hybrids and corporately designed and disseminated seed bearing names that would not be out of place in a contemporary car ad (e.g. “Excel”, “Columbus”). The discourse present in “Seed Heritage of the People for the Good of Humanity” (Via Campesina 2007h) has already criticized and rejected the pervasiveness of hybrids and many market-based interactions with agribusiness. The connections between the two discourses are diffuse rather than direct. They are more complex than a hierarchical or nested notion of one discourse (e.g., that of the women peasants who gathered in South Korea) being somehow “closer” to an actualized (in Deleuzian terms) Seed Event than the necessarily technocratic and regulatory discourses of the other (e.g. the western Canadian grain farmers of the NFU). What I hope my material semiotic reading does, among other things, is draw notice to the attention paid in both sets of texts to the necessity of function in the meaning of the seed. The seed’s functional meaning provides the basis for a resource for resistance that is both practical-material and socio-material.

In other words, both the practice of working with seed and the discourses around that practice carry the irreducibly material nature of the processes involved, latent in the seed itself and activated in an affordance-effectivity engagement. In both instances, whether from Timor Leste or Alberta, discursive critique and resistance is advanced by the material function of the seed forming the basis of its functional meaning for the farmer.

In both milieus as well, agribusiness intervention into the seeds’ functioning, whether intensively (e.g. genetic manipulation, hybridity) or extensively (e.g. creating a regulatory variety treadmill, binding farmers contractually to purchase “bundled” inputs) distances the farmer from the experiential knowledge and sensory kinetic movement necessary to employ autonomous effectivities and engage liberatory affordances. This process of distancing can be quite literal in contemporary food systems as a spatial matter (Kloppenburg et al., 1996), and, as I have argued here, distancing occurs in an ultimately no less impactful way as a temporal concern.

Kloppenburg speaks of the epistemological consequences for the farmer of spatial distancing:
There is also a critical epistemological dimension to the phenomenon of distancing. The enormous market for machinery, pesticides, and other inputs represents the degree to which farmers are now “thought for” (Berry, 1984, 28) by agribusiness. The kind of local knowledge and live, craft intelligence which is sensitive to the “expectations of the land” (Jackson et al., 1984) has all too often been replaced by the universalizing perspectives of agricultural science that are generated in the nowhere/everywhere of the laboratory and experimental plot. (Kloppenburg et al., 1996, page 36, original emphasis)

Resisting distancing—triggering a reproximalization via discourse

A minor theory that embraces a material semiotics, that incorporates an understanding of affordances and the latent mobility and creative flux in what appear to be stable systems, also points us to the ontological consequences of temporal compression. Ironically, in the temporal plane the effect of distancing— or increasing separation— is achieved by reducing or truncating time. Losing time means losing the sensorial and kinetic experiences upon which the utilization of affordances depends. Losing time means short-circuiting the possibilities latent within a “becoming”, and the generation of, and perception of, minoritarian subjectivities and discourses. Improvisation “out of time” cannot lead to greater understanding of one’s conditions and practices. For Kloppenburg, although he writes primarily in terms of physical distance, distancing has consequences for the eater or consumer as well as the farmer. I argue that this distancing, exemplified in NFU resistance to the variety treadmill and the implications that has for the seeds’ functional meaning, can be a result of temporal as well as spatial distancing:

But while even those farmers who are most profoundly committed to the technological domination of nature retain some direct knowledge of the land’s limits, most consumers do not...Of course, much of the power of agribusiness ultimately depends on farmers and consumers not knowing. If we do not know, we do not act. (ibid)

This observation is supported by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency’s attitude toward the NFU position. While the NFU has made a clear link between specific detailed technocratic discourses and broader political discourses such as those that constitute food sovereignty, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), as the chief regulatory body responsible for implementing policy on seed in Canada, actively denies such a connection. Such a denial is an overtly political act. On their
webpage summarizing the consultative process to date, the CFIA have this to say about small producers' concerns:

There were concerns expressed by some groups of a more general nature, around the themes of “variety treadmills”, “globalization”, “corporate control and profits”, “genetic engineering of plants” and impacts of current seed policy on the viability of organic production. Our initial conclusion is that these particular concerns are rooted in much larger issues that for the most part go beyond the scope of the variety registration changes to address. (CFIA, 2008)

But these “concerns” are critical precisely because they are “particular”. I argue that they are made more particularly incisive by foregrounding the materiality of the sort of seed the NFU is seeking, versus the meanings the CFIA has assigned to seed through its proposals. I have framed the NFU’s discursive resistance to proposed regulatory changes in terms of keeping liberatory seed affordances available to farmers through proximal and temporal contact, in spite of seeds’ embeddedness in a productivist industrial milieu. The resultant resource for resistance this framing provides allows the bio-physical and social imperatives of a just and sustainable agriculture to be surfaced even out of highly technocratic and legalistic discourses. It follows that such “particular concerns” are rooted precisely in the practice-oriented regulatory framework the CFIA has created. These concerns travel from that framework to the interrelated and “larger” plane of struggle for the just and sustainable agriculture that food sovereignty invokes. Small farmer groups such as the NFU and other Via Campesina members are fully aware that their struggle begins with what they are able to plant and harvest and only moves to the transitive, discursive sphere when these material conditions are demarcated, as ever-changing as they may be. The CFIA, in denying the link between farmers’ concerns about seed production and proprietorship and the “larger” political discourses around “globalization” and “corporate control”, enable a process of temporal and spatial distancing that denies fundamental knowledge to farmer and eater alike. This politically motivated adherence to a hierarchical vision of scale, separating the “local” from the “global”, particular material practice from some higher plane of politics, might be productively challenged by the concept of scale and relationality envisioned in this minor theory.
Summation

I have attempted in this chapter to apply my minor theorization of the presence of the materiality of seed in political discourses on agriculture and food sovereignty. My reading of each set of documents has, I hope, illuminated various related ways through which the functional meaning of seed “survives” the transit from material practice to discourse and informs such discourses with transformative political potential. The Curitiba texts focused on scale change, the Women’s Seed Forum texts on phase change, and the NFU texts on the challenge of surfacing these changes even through the technocratic static of discourses on regulation and policy in late modern industrial agriculture, hopefully made visible in my focus on time as a constitutive agent of matter and practice alike. All three document readings, particularly the Women’s Seed Forum and the NFU critique of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency’s regulatory proposals, emphasized the centrality of spatially and temporally proximate experience in the material semiotic of functional meanings and liberatory affordances.

The seed here is a process, the process of becoming a liberatory Seed Event wherein the ecological and social affordances of the seed remain available to those who, through proximal and temporal contact, engage their effectivities with the seeds’ latent affordances. In a material semiotics, the full-affordance bearing seed might then inform its own functional meaning in contrast to the dysfunctional meanings the captured seed has acquired. The discursive sign of the Seed is measured by its ability to trigger material processes.

I will now conclude this work with a more complete summation of what I have attempted, reminding myself again of the broader imperative behind my research question: to earthbind transformative progressive politics without denying social agency, but rather by expanding the parameters and web of actors that frame and generate agency; to assert limits over capitalist productivism by critiquing the under-materialized and as yet underexamined politics around that most basic and necessary product, food. In summarizing I will briefly examine the political efficacy of, and implications for, this minor theorization for progressive eco-political movements. I will also speculate on the challenges this type of minor theorization presents to social research more generally.
Chapter VI- Conclusion with open door

If this minor theory on the transit of Seed from material practice through the discourses of the Via Campesina has fallen short, and it inevitably has, “is it our fault if the networks are simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society?” (Latour, 1993, page 6, emphasis in original). I would actually argue that yes it is our fault, separating the “real” from the “narrated” and the “collective”. As useful as it is, Latourian ANT falls short of capturing the intensive-extensive relationships inherent in any Event, be it nominally material or social. Deleuzian geophilosophy, and antecedents like Whitehead and in an oblique way Peirce, argue that the material and the social both operate to produce effects on systems. It is the effects that matter rather than temporary and contingent boundaries along the lines of the social and the material. So what effects might my minor theory itself then have on the creation and dissemination of political discourses around food and the environment? Around agriculture and activism, politics, or social relations generally?

How does a material semiotic in the reading of these texts, or the ordering of them in the ontologically flat littoral zone of resonances and effects, make any difference to their efficacy as political texts? Reading the Via Campesina texts through a material semiotic is one way of discerning what is being talked about. It is an ethical project and the only reason for performing this exercise. Once the what is determined then this changes how the central objects of analysis—Seed, seed, GMOs, GURTs, Via Campesina, TNCs— are received when being talked or written about, and illuminates how they transit through the material and social registers into discourse. So I have in fact, contrary to my earlier assertion, constructed an analysis of what as objects of analysis in order to get to the how or processes between them. It was in fact necessary to reconfigure the what in order to talk about them again. I have tried to establish that the Seed invoked and employed by Via Campesina representatives is categorically not the same as the seed invoked and employed by agribusiness corporations in the circuits of global capital, either in substance or in consequent functional meaning.

This is of course not to say that the writers and compilers of these texts are directly employing anything like my minor theorization; clearly (and perhaps
thankfully) that is not their task. In this interplay, the academic bears this rather light burden: to theorize what is in fact being done by those in the world who do not refer to themselves as “subjects”, or distinguish between “being” and “becoming” in the course of their practice and communication, or see the qualities of the materials they engage with as “bundled affordances”. As social scientists employing theory, we create idea engines that then must be employed within an operating vehicle, operating in the colloquial and practical world of people who write “seed”, not “Seed” (Miller, 2005, page 45). How we talk and write, hear and read, in relation to the what of what it is we are communicating, has major implications for our interactions materially and socially, and for the generation of technologies and practices that might lead to a profoundly democratic and sustainable world for humans and non-humans alike. I will also address the implications of my minor theorization, particularly as applied to these texts, for the social sciences (Royal or “nomad”). In general terms, within each following sub-section I will move from specific suggestions to their broader implications, and introduce new authors whose work expresses a soundly practical dimension of my theorization.

How we talk and what we do: implications for civil society and networked activism for socio-ecological justice

Fore grounding social and ecological function in contested legalistic discourses

One of the ways in which this minor theory might be productively employed is by enhancing existing connections in Via Campesina discourses and illuminating pathways for new ones. Here I return to the “impossible” subjectivities under the Via Campesina mantel, and the relationship between the audacity of this collectivity and their very concrete political demands. While Patel focused on the transgressive use of rights talk in the pursuit of food sovereignty, Saturnino Borras Jr. also explores expanded Via Campesina uses of existing discourses and demands, including those already embedded in state-level laws and programs (2004). In examining the Via Campesina’s often precarious tactical maneuverings between reformist (or co-opting) and radical state and non-governmental actors, Borras cautions that not all such actors can be presumed to be homogenous in composition and intent (page 18). Acknowledging this political terrain calls for cautious and selective interactions on a case by case basis, wherein the use of existing state laws and programs by Via
Campesina for their own more transformative ends cannot be dismissed out of hand (page 15).

Borras considers the instance of existing national land policies and land reform laws. In navigating the space between merely opposing neo-liberal land policies and promoting actual alternatives, Borras enjoins the Via Campesina to leverage certain positive developments in Mozambican resistance to externally imposed neo-liberal land policy and cross-pollinate those gains with extant land reform laws in states as diverse as the Philippines and Brazil (page 15). The key here, argues Borras, is to “maximize initial opportunities and further pry open preliminary reformist openings at different levels of the polity” (ibid). Current land reform laws on the books of states like those mentioned sit at a threshold where lobbying from different sectors might either tip them back toward a conservative reformism that favours the status quo of concentrated land ownership, or forward towards the “land to the tiller” ethic that has been the rallying cry for peasant justice movements worldwide (Via Campesina 2006b, page 12, page 37).

Just as I attempted with my minor-key reading of texts about seeds and GMO, a minor-key approach to land law and land ownership discourses might serve to better identify what (and whom) land is in fact for—its function for peasants and small farmers—in a variety of discursive contexts, be they regulatory, legal, or more vernacular. Borras suggests that the Via Campesina conduct a “mapping” of existing but dormant land reform laws, using existing laws to “assist national movements to revive coordinated actions around such pre-existing land laws” (Borras, 2004, page 15). A minor-key reading of these legal texts, particularly the competing discourses around them as was the case with my exploration of the NFU and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, might serve as a resource to maintain a broad transnational approach that still remains consistent with the social and ecological needs of peasants and small farmers. Just as importantly, “the communion of experience that lies at the heart of sociality” enables resonances of solidarity that serve to strengthen transnational peasant claims to land reform, operating rhizomatically between national plateaux of activity.
Technology and democracy

If affordances can be a resource for resistance (Michael and Still, 1992), what further forms can this resistance take within the impossible field of this minor theory? In attempting to sensitize our discursive portrayals, our readings of them, to the material properties of matters at hand, what routes to positive change are opened? I posit that one route might be an augmented understanding of the relationship between cultural norms and material practices. In her collection of lectures “The Real World of Technology” (1992), metallurgical engineer and peace activist Ursula Franklin draws manyfold connections between culture, practice, technology and more discursive technologies of systematic control. Among her many ideas and observations are the two competing paradigms of “growth” vs. “production”, and “holistic” vs. “prescriptive” technologies. Both have great analytical traction for an earthbinding of transformative politics to material imperatives that sustains democracy and agency. Both have epistemological and ontological resonances with my minor theory of meanings and functions transiting across the material and social registers and functioning within multiple politicized plateaus.

Franklin on “growth” vs. “production” models

Franklin writes of two visions or models for the manufacture of various things and objects. One is the “growth model”. “Within the growth model”, she writes

all that human intervention can do is to discover the best conditions for growth and then try to meet them. In any given environment the growing organism develops at its own rate...Size is a natural result of growth, but growth itself cannot be commandeered; it can only be nurtured...by providing a suitable environment. Growth occurs; it is not made. (Franklin, 1992, page 27, emphasis mine)

Sustainable agriculture as envisioned by the Via Campesina clearly sits within the parameters of Franklin’s growth model, the farmer’s role being to discover “the best conditions for growth and then try to meet them”. This discovery, I posit, is the result of effectivity-affordance engagement that is best realized over an extended time period and through close proximal relations between farmer, Seed, and the immediate environment. In opposition to the growth model, Franklin presents the production model, which in her view has come to dominate most of our practical activities.
A production model is different in kind. *Here things are not grown but made*, and made under conditions that are, at least in principle, entirely controllable. If in practice such control is not complete or completely successful, then there is an assumption, implicit in the model itself, that improvements in knowledge, design, and organization can occur so that all essential parameters will become controllable. Production, then, is predictable, while growth is not. There is something comforting in the production model—everything seems in hand, nothing is left to chance—while growth is always chancy. (page 27, emphasis mine)

The production model, within which our contemporary industrial (post-industrial) society “makes” most things— including people via education and health care, Franklin argues (pages 28 and 29)— is “perceived and constructed without links into a larger context” (page 27). While this allows the model to be replicable and transportable, it also “discounts and disregards all effects arising from the impact of the production activity on its surroundings. Such externalities are considered irrelevant to the activity itself and are therefore the business of someone else” (ibid). The production model embodies the practical application of Deleuzian Royal Science, the temporal and spatial distancing cautioned against by Kloppenburg in his critique of contemporary industrial agriculture.

**Holistic vs. prescriptive technologies**

Franklin also describes two opposing types of technologies, “holistic” and “prescriptive” (Franklin, 1992, page 18). The differences between these two categories have much to do with the means they provide for centralized command and control over creative processes and labour. Holistic technologies are those where artisans “control the process of their own work from beginning to finish. Their hands and minds make situational decisions as the work proceeds...These are decisions that only they can make while they are working. And they draw on their own experience, each time applying it to a unique situation” (pages 18 and 19). This then, is a specialization by product (page 19) rather than by task. Specialization by task is a feature of prescriptive technologies and is one we have come to be very familiar with in the bulk of our creative, practical activities: “It is based on a quite different division of labour. Here, the making or doing of something is broken down into clearly identifiable steps. Each step is carried out by a separate worker, or group of
workers, who need to be familiar only with the skills of performing that one step" (page 20).

The analytical distinction between holistic and prescriptive technologies draws obvious inspiration from marxian concepts of alienated labour, and of course, division of labour. In the agricultural context, as in so many other practical, creative activities (including preparing and consuming food), prescriptive technologies serve to deskill farmers and distance them from the Seed’s affordances and the socio-material relations that allow the widest and most lasting range of benefits from food production. As analytical devices, I argue that Franklin’s distinction between “growth” and “production” models, and “holistic” vs. “prescriptive” technologies provide a pragmatic and activist-oriented traction for my minor theory of the materialization of discursive environmental and agricultural politics.

Reading and writing the functional meaning and indexical and iconic properties of materials and material processes into discourse is an intervention into the iterative cycle of discourse-practice-discourse-practice, ad infinitum. In her lecture series “The Real World of Technology”, Franklin is at pains to relate this iterative process to us as not predetermined by technology, and insists that material contingencies shape practices, but do so “within a particular social, economic, and political context. They [technologies] arise out of a social structure, they are grafted on to it, and they may reinforce it or destroy it” (page 57). By the same token however, “[a]ny task tends to be structured by the available tools” (page 56). The implication is that social structure determines to some extent the nature of our tools, and that these tools in turn set parameters for how we perform material tasks. What we produce materially and the processes used in production then influence and shape our social structures. Here, while I admire the practical possibilities for transformative ecological politics and political economy moving within her analysis, the distinction between practice and discourse appears too binarized and as a dialectic suffers for it somewhat. What are perhaps missing are the properties of the materials themselves—after all a tool was something(s) else before our effectivities allowed us to arrange it, or perceive it, as “tool”. In the case of agriculture, the Seed is in fact the farmer’s primary tool, suited to the “growth” rather than “production” model. Berger’s commentary on the improvisational nature of peasant’s livelihoods mels well with Franklin’s statement that “growth is always chancy”. The need for
protracted temporal and proximal contact is implicit in the stewardship the growth model demands, making it the preferred model for the maximal availability of affordances. Likewise, the same principles apply in determining that sustainable and just agriculture is primarily a “holistic” technology, rather than a prescriptive one. In paying attention to the properties of the Seed, the factor of the material’s voice is added to the iteration between the social structure and tool use. This voice is apparent on its own by way of the material’s effects and the Deleuzian take on signification and meaning as a trigger of material processes. It is also apparent, in the Keane/Peirce variant of the material semiotic, in its resonances in human voices, exemplified in this thesis in political discourse around agriculture and food.

**Minor theory in the academic littoral zone**

I want to close with two parting speculations on how social theory is employed with regard to agriculture and ecology, and “materiality” more generally. Trajectories within the social science disciplines have in many ways proven less than friendly to an “earthbinding” of transformative politics, and I have hoped throughout this thesis that I have taken some very small steps in rectifying that. My first observation is on the bias towards what is presented as new and novel. The second is a very brief accounting of the material register in the social sciences more generally, seeking to make room for normative demands for both social and ecological sustainability and justice.

**A caution on Novelty**

If I am going to take license to issue a “caution”, I should clarify my position and admit to the partiality of it. In assembling this thesis, my dual foci on peasant activism and social theory have presented practical limits to the readings I undertook. Therefore I open myself to the possibility that many other bodies of work exist that remedy the point I am “cautioning” about. Nonetheless, I think there is some salience in my observations, though they are not particularly unique or radical in themselves.

Ontological approaches have until recently been absent from food and food systems studies (Goodman, 2001). Much work on agriculture and food systems has historically focused on the labour process; as Goodman notes
Benton (1989), Castree (1995) and others, both within and outside the Marxist tradition...have emphasized that the analytic point of entry privileged by the inherited concept of the labour process leaves little or no space for green politics...this theoretical lens or 'framing' device does not focus directly...on the new socionatural relations, inter-species metabolisms and exotic corporealities unleashed by agricultural biotechnologies...[T]hese new constellations or assemblages of nature-society relations are key catalytic elements of contemporary bio-political activism in agro-food networks. (p. 196, 2001, italics mine)

I bring attention to words such as “new” and “contemporary” to point to an analytical bias in much work that focuses on hybridity, ANT-inspired assemblages, and intersubjectivity between humans and non-humans. It is my view, and one I hope this thesis supports, that peasants have been co-constituting complex socionatural relations for centuries, metabolically and corporeally present in assemblages that are intrinsically bio-political. And yet, much social theory that attempts to tackle a social-material separation or binary operates under the assumption that this confluence of the biological and political is a very recent development.

Sarah Whatmore’s work with ANT and posthumanism (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997, Whatmore, 1997, Whatmore, 2002) was one of several inspirations for this thesis. But in much of Whatmore’s work, where the objects and systems associated with food are analyzed as relational, productive of intersubjectivities, and resonating across the material and social registers, the dominant themes are the recent technologies of GM, chemical inputs, and bovine hormone treatments and the like. In “Dissecting the autonomous self” (1997), Whatmore’s exemplar of “Hybrid cartographies of ethical community” (pages 46 to 49) is an “agrofood” pictogram representing the networks of the “industrial cow”, from state regulation to the lactose intolerant consumer (page 48). The inputs depicted going into the “industrial cow” are “hormonal treatment”, “chemically treated pasture”, and “animal-derived feed components” (ibid). Not by design, but rather by the act of focusing on the novel products of the “production” and “prescriptive” models of agribusiness, when repeated enough it is eventually implied that only hormonal treatments are worthy of study, only chemically treated pasture is a noteworthy technology, and that feed components not derived from animals could not bear the burden of a complex social
analysis. While she states that “the connectivities between people...are fashioned in and through animals, habitats, and technologies, whose presence is integral to recognizing ethical community” (page 49, emphasis in original), that presence seems to only come to our attention when it speaks in the voice of the dramatically novel, or in the parlance of posthumanism, “monstrous”. Indeed in her 2002 book Hybrid Geographies there are chapters devoted to wildlife and animal taxonomy, territorial mapping and governance, and GM food, the last of which is entitled “Transgressing objectivity: the monstrous topicality of ‘GM’ food” (Whatmore, pages 121 to 145). The term “monster” or “monstrous” features frequently in the literature of posthumanism particularly and poststructuralist takes on the social-material generally (e.g. Gandy, 2005).

Genetic modification, while a quantitative step apart from traditional plant breeding methods, is somehow seen as a technology that resonates and functions in entirely unique ways. But we focus on the dramatic speed and invasiveness of GM technologies at the expense of ignoring the farmer-led Seed technology that has resulted, in the Via Campesina’s view, in a vast plane of biodiversity with sustaining and sustainable properties. GM technology and its effects are obviously worth intense study. However, to the student or reader it appears that a zero-sum game is in effect: the disciplinary space granted to the study of material processes is given over to the contemporary technologies of laboratory science, communication, computers, transportation and the like. The sharp and reactive intake of breath the social sciences have collectively taken with regard to these technologies— their shocking “monstrosity”— threatens to deoxygenate similarly ambitious study of the more “coarse”, “homely”, and “mundane” world of farming.

In a wide-ranging piece that explores ANT, hybridity (the social science term, not the agronomic term), and Deleuzian philosophy, Nick Bingham (1996) writes that “[o]bjects, if we are to grant them their rightful place in the disorder of things, can no longer be reduced to social ties” (page 654) and that he is “striving to tell of a world full of heterogeneous bodies” (ibid). He writes, in a statement wholly at home with my own views on matter and material processes, that “[t]hese bodies might be characterized in three (intertwined) ways: as being defined (only) by what they can do (that is, what affects they can have); as being temporally emergent....and being (therefore) nothing more or less than (dynamic) bundles of relations” (ibid). Yet the
objects and bodies referred to repeatedly throughout the work are those associated with the advanced technologies listed in the preceding paragraph. Computers and cyberspace figure prominently. Effects and affects, and the temporal and spatial relations between them and bodies/objects, are seemingly the domain of the latest developments in the extension of our technological reach and purview. Plants, animals, and agricultural practice seem to be relegated to a world of stasis and silence, as Goodman earlier implied. And when such things do appear, they are often in the context of consumption, often institutional or urban. The 2002 edition of *Theory, Culture, and Society* devoted to “things” and “objects” featured articles discussing the Zimbabwe Bush Pump, viruses, Maltese megaliths, transcontinental railways, computer screens and foreign exchange markets, the Parthenon Frieze in the British museum, and one article on “the eating practices of patients with dementia in institutional settings” (Pels D, Hetherington K, Vandenberghhe F, 2002). In a 2005 collection of interdisciplinary papers on materiality (*Materiality*), food and agriculture are hardly mentioned at all, over the course of eleven essays.

Many of these works were valuable resources in my research and reading. It is only after several months of de Certeau-esque journeying that I came to feel the deficit in analysis, the paucity of attention to the rural, the...dirty. For even while using the works of philosophers and theorists like Michel Serres and Gilles Deleuze, and quoting at length their texts referring to “winds, currents, glaciers, and volcanoes...bearing messages and creating dynamic systems of relations that flicker and fluctuate like flames” (Bingham, 1996, page 653), the objects of analysis these meditations are tied too are invariably not glaciers or winds but “planes, satellites, electromagnetic waves from television, radio, fax, electronic mail...” (Serres and Latour, 1995, pages 118-119, in Bingham, 1996, page 653)

One way of enlarging the spaces that ontological approaches might inhabit, thus breaking the zero-sum game in the social sciences, is by engaging with the mutability and dynamism of things “on the spot”, through time rather than space. Returning to the Deleuzian concept of *detterritorialization* from Chapter II, we can see a dynamic system of variation and change that does not demand the horizontal mobility engendered by the technologies beloved by the cyber/cyborg-theorists. “Deleuze’s earth,” rather,
‘constantly carries out a movement of deterritorialization on the spot.’ Humans and other life-forms find themselves having to adapt, or improvise, there and then: not just in the case of abrupt climate change, but in the face of all the flips and shifts, spikes and oscillations of the physical systems we rely upon. ‘Nomadism’, then, can be viewed as the practice of occupying, inhabiting, holding space – (or place as we might say), throughout quiet spells and radical discontinuities alike; ‘nomad science’ as learning to work with and through critical transitions, to anticipate them, ride them out, take advantage of them. On the spot. (Clark, 2006, page 9, emphasis in original)

This seems a very apt description of the dynamism and improvisation a farmer experiences in their practice. The nomad is another iconic figure in the Deleuze lexicon, an unfixed agent not dissimilar to the minor subjectivity Katz invoked in her discussion of “becoming”. Here, the nomad travels and adapts, but

‘the nomad is not at all the same as the migrant...he occupies, inhabits, holds...space; that is his territorial principle. It is therefore false to define the nomad by movement’ [Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, pages 380 and 381]. Deleuze and Guattari’s nomad composes specific pathways in order to take advantage of shifting and vacillating physical forces, riding out earth movements ‘on the spot’...Nomadism, then, is about going with the flow, and this can have as much to do with holding onto a place through all its eventfulness, as it does with letting go and moving away. (Clark, 2006, page 7)

And of course, Serres too has much to say about people’ s relationship to their environments, couched in terms of proximal and temporal intimacy with ecologies rather than focusing on the brokerage of tool use and the electronic media. It is all a matter of where one wishes to turn one’s gaze:

How do we keep ourselves busy? With numerical data, equations, dossiers, legal texts, news bulletins hot off the press or wire: in short, language. True language for science, normative language for administrators, sensational language for the media. From time to time some expert, a climatologist or an earth scientist, goes off on official business to gather on-site observations, like some reporter or inspector. But the essentials take place indoors and in words, never again outdoors with things. We’ve even walled up the windows in order to hear one another better or argue more easily. We communicate irrepressibly. We busy ourselves only with our own networks...

We have lost the world. We’ve transformed things into fetishes or commodities, the stakes of our stratagems; and our a-
cosmic philosophies, for almost half a century now, have been holding forth only on language or politics, writing or logic. (Serres, 1995, pages 28-29)

I invoke this discussion of transformation and creative adaptation “on the spot”, of resisting the fetishization of the novel and “produced” rather than ubiquitous and “grown”, as a means of pointing to the dynamism of the plateaux of peasant practice and politics that then inform the discursive plateaux of their activism, in which of course the “new and novel” technologies of the internet and the like also loom large. The transit of the Seed from material to discourse occurs across both.

Dethroning the social

In my introduction I spent some time talking about anthropocentricism and environmental politics. I expressed the view that the analytical and ethical impasse around humanity’s position in the world may not be resolvable by somehow striving to remove ourselves from view. It seems that the nature of the “anthro” is the nub, rather than a tendency to “centre”. Two authors whom I have referred to throughout this work speak closely to this proposition. The following passage, on intersubjective agency and democracy, addresses a materializing of politics and the question of voice, material and discursive, whether effectively imbricated in a material semiotic or remaining “more excessive than we can theorise”:

In the end, if agency (or animacy) is not some fixed property carried by some entities and not by others, if it is instead a circulating quality or force by which relations are enacted, then the normative criterion that most readily suggests itself is this one: that the networks we coconstruct be such that agency/animacy can circulate freely, not be fixed and confined within rigid hierarchies of who is heard and who is silenced, who issues orders and who is to carry those orders out. An ethic of circulating agency, then, is one of dialogue, relationality, and, in one sense or another, participatory democracy– an expansive democracy that included various kinds of actors, some of whom vote in elections, others who vote with their feet (or fins), and others who enter silently into contracts but who alter those contracts in the process. (Ivakhiv, 2002, page 402)

And finally, what if the “social” itself is not merely reconfigured as being materially co-constituted, but scrambled entirely as an organizing principle and recast? I want to conclude with this thought. Daniel Miller is an anthropologist,
and while the following is from the introduction to a volume comprised largely of anthropological works, I believe the sentiment here has clear interdisciplinary applications for all of the social sciences. Recalling the formation of the social sciences in the 19th century, Miller proposes a regicide of sorts, a non-hierarchical approach to the emergence of, the “becoming” of, new ethical relations and political forms:

At the same moment that Durkheim desacralized religion, he sacralized the social. The social sciences became devoted to the study of all phenomena that stand for what we now call society, social relations, or indeed simply the subject...

We can hardly be surprised that a discipline called anthropology for so long encouraged the social subject to retain a reified position to which all else should be reduced. Behind this may lie an assumption that our ethical stance to the world depends upon retaining some fundamental allegiance to ourselves and our essential humanism. Yet just as the secular believe that the dethronement of the previous essential guarantor of morality— that is the deity— released, rather than suppressed, the development of a modern ethical sensibility, so also it could be argued that the dethronement of humanity, or “social relations”, can be the premise for the further development of modern ethics, not its dissolution...

But then who or what climbs up upon the now empty pedestal? It is essential that the pedestal remains empty. (Miller, pages 36-37, 2005)


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