

Out in the Field: Lesbian and Queer Farmers in the Rural Midwest

By

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## To Christopher Cheevers (1969-2021)

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## Abstract

This is an ethnographic dissertation about queerness in Midwestern agriculture. While gender and sexuality influence all farmers, cisgender and/or heterosexual farmers' career trajectories are often regarded as the norm, minimizing queer experiences. This work centers queer gender and sexuality by examining how lesbian, bisexual women, transgender people, and queer women (LBTQ) build community in, through, and beyond farming. In other words, how does queerness shape Midwest LBTQ sustainable farmers' pathways into and out of agriculture, agricultural networks, and relationships with neighboring farmers? I argue that farming as a queer person equates to navigating heteropatriarchal oppression while exerting queer resistance. Queer farmers challenge dominant agricultural models and proliferate alternative possibilities for the future of agriculture in the United States.

Chapter One, "Coming Out and Burning Out: Farming Entry and Exit for Lesbian and Queer Agriculturalists," addresses the future of farming. I argue that LBTQ sustainable farmers followed non-traditional pathways into farming and their entry points diverged from heterosexual women farmers as they lacked familial and spousal pathways to land. I find that heteropatriarchy, not just patriarchy, created entry barriers and exit points for LBTQ farmers, while queer sexuality simultaneously pushed some individuals into farming and pulled others away from the field. I conclude by challenging the bifurcation of farm entry and exit, instead viewing the career of a LBTQ person in sustainable agriculture as a daily practice involving queer resistance to heteropatriarchal oppression.

Chapter Two, "Lesbian and Queer Sustainable Farmer Networks in the Midwest," examines LBTQ farmers' connections to agriculture networks. While LBTQ farmers utilized government agencies, neighborhood farmers, sustainable agriculture groups, and women farmer

groups, these outlets did not necessarily align with their sustainable practices or queer identity. LBTQ farmers created alternative networks, queer networks, to access human resources necessary to enter and remain in sustainable agriculture. I conclude that LBTQ farmer networks and labor market opportunities circumvented heteropatriarchal gatekeepers to human resources, providing LBTQ farmers direct pathways to knowledge, skills, and social networks to bolster their success as sustainable land managers.

Chapter Three, “Land Allyship: The Promises and Limitations of Rural Solidarities,” explores LBTQ farmers’ relationships with their rural farming neighbors. I argue that the LBTQ farmers combined a politics of difference and a politics of similarity to build bonds with rural farming neighbors. I term this process *land allyship*: a commitment to a shared threatened value of rural agrarianism. In a moment of threat to small- and medium-sized farms, ‘farmer’ became a more salient identity than sexuality or farming practices. LBTQ farmers found belonging in rural communities as farmers, even if their sexuality was not centered or fully accepted. While land allyship offered a pathway for some farmers, it was more available to white LBTQ farmers than to farmers of color or gay cisgender men.

The dissertation identifies barriers and inroads for queer people looking to enter and contribute to sustainable agriculture, addressing sociologically intriguing questions about small farms’ economic viability and rural communities’ social sustainability. Bringing a queer feminist lens to ethnographic and interview research with LBTQ farmers, I demonstrate that gender and sexuality influence access to land and capital, social networks, and community ties. The work contributes to understanding agricultural career pathways, necessary resources for farmers, and bonds across difference. The work frames gender and sexuality as foundational elements to rural agricultural analysis, seeking to re-orient environmental sociology to consider feminist and queer

perspectives in any analysis. The dissertation also centers queer experiences in predominately rural settings, urging sexualities scholars to continually examine queer life beyond and between urban landscapes. These perspectives alter the analysis grid to enrich social and economic investigations within environmental sociology and within sexualities scholarship. Beyond the academy, queer people must be acknowledged and centered in real-world efforts to strengthen sustainable food systems and resilient rural communities.



## **Introduction**

This is an ethnographic dissertation about how lesbian, bisexual women, transgender people, and queer women build community in, through, and beyond farming. Sexuality cannot be distilled or separated from these farmers' careers; lesbian, bisexual women, transgender people, and queer women (LBTQ)<sup>1</sup> farmers simultaneously belong to queer communities, rural communities, and agricultural communities. This work centers sexuality in rural agriculture by examining how queerness shapes Midwest LBTQ sustainable farmers' pathways into and out of agriculture, agricultural networks, and relationships with neighboring farmers. Farming as a queer person equates to navigating heteropatriarchal oppression while exerting queer resistance. Queer farmers challenge dominant agricultural models and proliferate alternative possibilities for the future of agriculture in the United States.

### **Why I Research Queer Farmers**

Though I spent the first 18 years of my life in the Garden State, the Granite State cultivated my interest in farming. As a college athlete at the time, I conflated food intake with athletic performance and severely limited my eating. Volunteering on my college's organic farm my junior and senior years helped me return to more nourishing eating habits. Located along the Connecticut River, I biked, ran, and even paddled the three miles to the farm where I planted corn, trellised tomatoes, and harvested zucchini. When I prepared meals with the farm's vegetables, my restrictive compulsions around food abated and I no longer suppressed my hunger. Reconnecting

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<sup>1</sup> The farmers in the sample identified their gender as cis woman, nonbinary, and transman. They identified their sexuality as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or no label but in a relationship with a person who identified as the same gender. Due to the number of identities, I broadly refer to the farmers as lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LBTQ) or queer as an umbrella term.

to my body, I became aware that I had also been repressing my queerness. Farming helped me discover my sexuality, catalyzing my experiences at the intersections of agriculture and queerness.

Newly out, I pursued agriculture after graduation by working as my college's student farm manager. I felt supported in my sexuality on the farm as queer students worked and volunteered alongside me. The longtime farm manager—a back-to-the-lander who lived off the grid—welcomed all of us. This farming experience starkly contrasted to my next farm job in Wisconsin where my boss and host family both openly criticized gays and lesbians. Alone in the rural Midwest and reliant on these individuals for housing, employment, and transportation, I did not disclose my sexuality and feared discovery. I did not know other queer people in the community, let alone farmers. I sought queer community at the end of the season by returning to New England to work for a queer woman on a barn raising project, and then moved to California's Bay Area where I found myself working on two agricultural projects led by queer women. The glaring differences I experienced in agriculture related to my queer identity fueled my curiosity about other queer people's experiences in farming.

During my first semester in graduate school, I conducted an ethnography at Madison's downtown farmers' market. Per the recommendation of another vendor, I came to work with Kathy<sup>2</sup>, a farmer, beekeeper, small business owner, and lesbian. A white woman in her late-50's, Kathy had sold honey and seasonal produce at the market for almost 20 years. Kathy permitted me to help her behind the stand as I observed and took notes on my phone. During this fieldwork, I became interested in the role that Kathy's sexuality and gender presentation played in her interactions with customers, managers, and fellow vendors at the urban market. Reflecting on my

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<sup>2</sup> All participants' names are pseudonyms.

own time in agriculture, I wanted to expand my research from one market to learn more about queer people's experiences in other farming spaces.

That fall, I attended a conference for women in sustainable agriculture that shaped the trajectory of my dissertation. A lunchtime speaker called out to the almost exclusively white audience of 400 attendees, "Stand up if you've been farming for less than five years." Chairs scraped and applause greeted the women as they reached full height. "Stand up if you're over 45 and left another career to farm," the speaker varied her rallying cry to include teachers, students, and activists, recognizing nearly everyone as a feeling of unity branched across the room.

Helen, a white Iowan who recently returned to farm in her home state at 61 years old, pulled me aside after lunch, "I wanted to shout 'And stand up if you're a lesbian!'" Erasure of the type worried Helen. She told me, "I do not want my landyke culture to vanish from women's culture due to lack of a voice. We are all working on the same issues in food, water, care of the earth. We are also a group of women with a proud and diverse herstory." Helen introduced me to the 1970s to 1990s lesbian land, or landyke, movement. Described in following chapters, landyke communities were often small, land-based, and rural. Women served as land stewards, cultivated rural skills and crafts, and empowered themselves as women, including by raising food and farming for self-sustenance (Anahita 2004; 2009).

The following morning, the conference's executive director addressed the audience to promote her organization as gay-friendly and invited Helen to the microphone. Helen walked across the stage to a podium in blue jeans and a tucked-in button down shirt, and said, "Well, I just want to recognize lesbians of the land; we have a listserv and we're all over the world. We're on the land and doing our part."

### **What Surveys, Media, and Academics Tell Us About Lesbian and Queer Farmers**

The literature unfortunately confirmed that this conference broadly captured queer farmers' experiences in agriculture: they were present and active, but agricultural surveys, media, and academia—whether the usual suspects or more progressive outlets—largely minimized their existence and contributions.

Agricultural surveys from both conventional and progressive sources fail to capture queer farmers. The USDA Census of Agriculture omits sexuality questions and presents binary “female” and “male” sex categories. This sexuality bias adds to the Census's long-standing gender and race biases, described further in Chapter One. For example, the survey did not add a sex classification until 1978 and the Census permitted only one operator per farm until 2002; straight couples likely marked the man as the sole operator (Hoppe and Korb 2013). In terms of race, 95% of the USDA's 3.2 million farm operators identified as white (USDA 2019c). This data reflects that U.S. agriculture was established on stolen land with forced labor post-conquest, systematically blocking Black and Indigenous people from land access and culminating in white people owning 96% of farmland in the country (Gilbert, Wood, and Sharp 2002). As such, USDA numbers likely undercount Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers, including the 2.4 million predominantly Latinx farmworkers in the country (Farmworker Justice 2019). The dearth of sexuality questions on the Census additionally embeds heterosexism in the survey, translating into a lack of understanding about queer farmers and subsequent policies to support their efforts. It may be unsurprising that a government survey established in 1840 which only began considering sex in 1978 fails to capture queer farmers; yet heterosexism appears even in progressive surveys.

In 2017, National Young Farmers Coalition (Young Farmers)—a grassroots organization that advocates for equity and sustainability in agriculture—conducted a survey to capture young agriculturalists' demographics, markets, and challenges. The survey inquired about gender identity

beyond the USDA's traditional male or female categories; 1% of the sample identified as transgender. The survey, however, omitted questions about sexuality and therefore precluded the ability to analyze similarities or difference across identities. For example, while 8% of respondents stopped farming because of family dynamics, this number may be even higher for LGBTQIA+ farmers—as suggested in qualitative data on queer farmers in New England (Leslie 2017; 2019). Without surveys that account for queer farmers, subsequent farm policies and resources will likely continue to perpetuate heterosexism in agriculture.

In addition to agriculture surveys, media outlets question or minimize the existence of lesbian farmers. Political conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh proclaimed disbelief that lesbians were rural farmers unless part of a “Democrat scam” to “bust up one of the last geographic conservative regions in the country.” Limbaugh claimed:

Rural America happens to be largely conservative. Rural America is made up of self-reliant, rugged individualist types. They happen to be big believers in the Second Amendment. So here comes the Obama Regime with a bunch of federal money and they're waving it around, and all you gotta do to get it is be a lesbian and want to be a farmer and they'll set you up. I'm like you; I never before in my life knew that lesbians wanted to be farmers. I never knew that lesbians wanted to get behind the horse and the plow and start burrowing. I never knew it. But apparently enough money it make[s] it happen, and the objective here is to attack rural states (Limbaugh 2016).

Although Limbaugh had no evidence for these claims, he painted lesbian farmers as extensions of the liberal Obama administration, aiming to “attack” rural American's beliefs and ways of life. Though this narrative—both questioning lesbian farmers' existence and their motives—aligns with the rightwing radio host's inflammatory brand, women's media also minimizes lesbian farmers.

In 2012, filmmakers and romantic partners Laurie York and Carmen Goodyear released a documentary—*Women on the Land*—that recounted their experience living on women's land in California. The film, however, minimized lesbians in the movement. For example, the film

mentioned “lesbian” just once: an interviewee described the women land movement as “a combination of the back-to-the-land movement, the wave of feminism, and then, to a large degree, the lesbian feminist movement and the creation of women’s institutions.” The trailer included this soundbite up until “feminism,” cutting the film’s one mention of lesbians. Across the political spectrum, media outlets have questioned or downplayed lesbians’ farming contributions.

In academia, scholars have pushed back on agricultural patriarchy by attending to women farmer’s experiences, but they ignore sexuality. In *The Invisible Farmer*, sociologist Carolyn Sachs (1983) compared 21 single, widowed, or married women farmers. She described one case of single farmers as: “Two single women who are farming a 43-acre farm together also experience some exclusion from their neighbors because they are women attempting to farm without men” (ibid:92). She elaborated:

The women who have purchased the forty-three-acre farm both work full time off the farm in order to make payments and improvements on their farm. They live in a trailer on the farm and plan to build a house when they save enough money. Eventually, they would like to support themselves completely on the farm, but as yet that remains a dream. (ibid)

While the farming duo could be platonic, their joint housing, future dreams, and financials suggest a romantic partnership. Their social exclusion from neighbors may be a function of this potential romantic partnership, in addition to their efforts to “farm without men.” Given that the book was published in 1983, it is unsurprising that Sachs analyzed all women as if they were straight, missing a category of invisible farmers.

Yet, *The Rise of Women Farmers and Sustainable Agriculture* (Sachs et al. 2016) continued to under analyze sexuality. Though the sample contains queer women, the analysis did not include this lens. For example, the text described women farmers’ pathways into agriculture, differentiating between “traditional” and “innovative” means. Traditional means included women

accessing land through marriage to husbands, whereas innovative pathways included accessing land on their own. The authors used participant Marilyn (55) to capture innovative pathways; Marilyn stated: “I was not going to marry a farmer to get land,” “I did not want to be a farm wife. I was a farmer,” and “But societally speaking, the guy was the farmer and the woman was the wife. ... That was not for me” (ibid: 38). Though the methodological chapter mentioned that Marilyn was married to another woman, this pathways chapter did not discuss how Marilyn lacked a male partner through which to obtain land and may not have been able to legally get married until later in life. An alternative examination could have highlighted that queer identities may preclude women farmers from traditional pathways into farming and necessitate innovation. Research analyzing both gender and sexuality in agriculture is crucial in order to more fully grasp farmers’ trajectories and experiences in agriculture.

### **What I Ask and How I Answer**

In light of their clear presence yet pervasive erasure, this dissertation investigates LGBTQ farmers’ experiences in their careers and communities - as both queer people and as agriculturalists. I ask the following research questions: How do queer women and transgender farmers enter agriculture? What helps them thrive in this arduous occupation? How do they navigate rural farming communities? What are the reasons that some leave farming and rural communities? These questions are intentionally broad as existing literature sheds little light on LGBTQ farmers’ lived experiences as queer people—not just women or farmers—in agriculture. The dissertation aims to address how power and oppression impact farm(er) viability and how socially marginalized farmers resist and (re)shape food systems.

To research these questions, I deployed an extended case method research design. According to sociologist and ethnographer Michael Burawoy:

The extended case method applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, the move from the “micro” to the “macro,” and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory (1998:5).

Burawoy’s (1998) design aims to extend in four ways: 1) theoretically, 2) from observer to participant, 3) by observing over time and space, and 4) out from processes to forces.

Beginning with theory, Burawoy stressed the importance of reconstructing and revising theory in light of data, rather than confirming and ossifying existing theory. Each chapter extends current theories related to rural agrarianism, socially marginalized farmers, and rural queerness, respectively. Second, I extend from observer to participant: a reflexive intervention that “distorts and disturbs” (Burawoy 1998:7). As a queer person and former farm employee, I designed the research to actively participate in the fieldwork, acknowledging that my presence disrupts usual routines and brings forth conversations likely absent or rare during typical farm work. I particularly intervened when I organized and facilitated queer farmer meet-ups at farm conferences, but did not collect data during these meet-ups. Third, “Ethnographers join participants for extended periods of time as well as in different places” (ibid:17). I designed the research to track farmers over time in several locations. I followed some farmers across their farms, markets, and social occasions since 2014, which allowed me to document their relationships across time and place. I interviewed others in the summer 2014, and conducted follow up interviews in 2017, capturing snapshots of their lives rather than extended histories. Finally, the extended case method extends from processes to forces, “tracing the source of small difference to external forces” (ibid:19). In my design, I overlay farmers’ individual experiences with larger historical and socio-political forces, such as state-level civil rights legislation, polls on Americans’ acceptance of LGBT people, and the Farm Bill. Together, these extensions provide a robust and holistic research design that



allowed me to investigate multiple facets of the farmers' lives across, time, place, and in light of both micro-interventions and larger macro-forces.

My case draws on lesbian, bisexual women, transgender, and queer women sustainable farmers in the Upper Midwest. I selected this population due to theoretical, geographical, and personal considerations, detailed in each chapter's methods section. To ground those methodological discussions, I would like to define my terms.

First, "farmer" in this dissertation refers to individuals who farm. Unlike other definitions, I did not consider the size of fields, crop yields, relationship to land (own, rent, lease to own, etc.), relationship to a farm (owner, manager, employee, apprentice, etc.), farm income, or amount of income from farming. Nevertheless, my sample skews toward farmers who have been able to secure land access and make decisions about farm operations. The sample also includes individuals who worked on farms currently or formerly; I refer to these participants as farm employees rather than farmworkers. I delineate between farm employees and farmworkers in order to communicate power relationships on farms. For example, the farm employees in my sample are U.S. born, English-first speakers, highly educated, and almost exclusively white. The farm employees went on to operate their own farms or exited farming for other careers. In contrast, I reserve the term farmworker to refer to a population of farmers who farm, but largely lack decision-making power on farms and pathways to their own farms, land, or alternative careers. As discussed in later chapters, farmworkers in the U.S. are majority non-U.S. born and lack documentation (Farmworker Justice 2019). As such, I use separate terms for farm employees and farmworkers in order to recognize the demographic and power differences in their experiences and trajectories.

Second, the farmers in my sample broadly identify or exist beyond heteronormative gender and sexuality constructs. I was interested in researching farmers at the intersections of patriarchy

and heteronormativity given the lack of research on this population and my own identities. As such, my sample excludes cisgender men who identify as gay. The farmers in the sample identified their gender as cisgender women, nonbinary, and transgender men. Some participants shared changes in their gender identity over the course of the fieldwork and/or that their gender identities were different than previous times in their lives. When referring to the farmers' genders, I use the broad terms cisgender women and transgender; transgender in this context is intended as an umbrella term for identities other than cisgender identities.

In terms of sexuality, participants identified as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or without a label but they were in a relationship with a person who identified as the same gender. My sampling technique captured individuals who were interested in participating in research explicitly on queer farmers; as such, I likely fail to capture farmers with queer attractions and experiences, but who lack queer personal identities. Similar to gender identities, participants' sexual identities fluctuated over the life course.

Given that the sample contains overlapping and intersecting identities that broadly do not conform to binary or heteronormative constructs around gender and sexuality, I refer to the farmers as lesbian, bisexual women, transgender, and queer (LBTQ). Though this term allows me to communicate about the varied sample with conciseness, it conveys a rigid and fixed taxonomy that does not reflect the reality of the farmers' identities, experiences, and attractions. I also use queer as an umbrella term to refer to the sample, yet it is important to restate that cisgender gay men were not included in the research. Though some LBTQ farmers do not personally use the term, I deploy queer as an imperfect word to communicate about the population with a broad stroke. When I refer to individual farmers, I use their specific gender and sexuality identities.

In terms of time period, I conducted ethnography and interviews between 2014 and 2019. Notably, I began developing relationships with participants as early as 2012 and I remain in contact with several farmers to this day. The farmers ranged from 22- to 70-years-old, with an average age of 43. Given this age range, some farmers' memories and experiences with queerness and farming extends to the 1970s, capturing waves of feminism, the peak of the lesbian land movement, and increased queer visibility in U.S. media.

The data collection spanned two presidencies in which queerness and rurality were highly politicized. The research began during the Obama presidency, and witnessed marriage equality in Wisconsin in 2014 and nationwide same-sex marriage in 2015. Following the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in 2010 that allowed gays and lesbians to openly serve in the military, transgender people were permitted also serve in 2016. That same year, the killing of 49 people at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, devastated the queer community. The Trump administration increased this sense of precarity for queer people by rolling back LGBTQ protections in housing, healthcare, employment, including reinstating the ban forbidding transgender service members. In addition to queerness, rurality became a source of tension in the 2016 election. While the Republican nominee leaned into rural support, Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton referred to Trump supporters as belonging in a "basket of deplorables." Together, this moment suggested a politicized dichotomy and incommensurability between queerness and rurality. While I acknowledge the tensions and gravity in this historical period, I avoid a one-dimensional analysis that posits queerness and rurality as inherently opposed, rather than concepts that became tools for political rhetoric.

I fall into a tradition of ethnographers who research a socially marginalized group to which they belong (Anderson 1978; Drake and Cayton 1945; Orne 2017; Siu 1953). As a queer person and former farm employee, I share demographic and experiential commonalities with participants.

I disclosed these identities to participants, which may have imparted me with in-group trust, facilitating farmers welcoming me into their homes and embracing the research process. At the same time, I am not from the Midwest, a rural resident, nor a current farmer. I am a graduate student from the New York City suburbs who briefly spent time on farms and in rural areas. Rather than attempt to speak for LGBTQ farmers, I center the farmers' experiences in my writing and seek to maintain a participant-driven ethnography (Cobb and Hoang 2015), especially in light of ethnographies that hypersexualize sexual minorities (Herdt 1987; Humphreys 1970).

### **What is Ahead in the Dissertation**

Gender and sexuality shape farmers' pathways into and out of agriculture, support networks in farming, and alliances with neighbors. These forces influence cisgender and heterosexual farmers' careers, yet are often taken for granted or as the standard pathways. The queer women and transgender sustainable farmers in this dissertation live in rural Midwestern communities known for conservatism and industrial agriculture. Little scholarship focuses on this population—a group that counters both stereotypical notions about queer people and about farmers. They not only challenge metronormative (Halberstam 2005) assumptions about queers exclusively thriving in urban areas, but they also deviate from norms in their agricultural communities—as gender minorities in a patriarchal occupation, as queer people surrounded by “family” farms, as new and beginning farmers among generational farm families, and as sustainable practitioners amid industrial farming landscapes.

Though LGBTQ farmers faced sexism and heterosexism in their efforts to contribute to sustainable agriculture, the research demonstrated that some farmers were able cross these divides and even challenge their existence. Using their agency and resilience, the farmers leveraged their identities and connections to land to form bonds and alliances within their occupation and

communities. These connections provided farmers with social, financial, material, and emotional resources to support their farming careers. The dissertation contains three chapters:

Chapter One, “Coming Out and Burning Out: Farming Entry and Exit for Lesbian and Queer Agriculturalists,” addresses the future of farming. While conducting fieldwork with participant farmers, I asked them about how, when, where, and with whom they came into the career, and how their sexuality and sexualized gender impacted those pathways. What I did not expect, however, was that almost half of the farmers ceased farming for markets or completely stopped farming over the course of the research. While the Census of Agriculture captures the decline in the number of farmers—largely white men—in the country, the measure sheds little light on career trends for socially marginalized farmers.

In this chapter, I draw on rural agrarian literatures that focus on young farmers, BIPOC farmers, and women farmers in the U.S. to ask how queer sexualities and gender identities impact farm entry and exit. I argue that LBTQ sustainable farmers, like other sustainable farmers (Ackoff, Bahrenburg, and Shute 2017), followed non-traditional pathways into farming and that their entry points diverged from heterosexual women farmers (Pilgeram and Amos 2015; Sachs et al. 2016) because they lacked familial and spousal pathways to land. I find that heteropatriarchy, not just patriarchy, created entry barriers and exit points for LBTQ farmers, while queer sexuality simultaneously pushed individuals into farming and pulled others away from the field.

I conclude by challenging the bifurcation of farm entry and exit, instead viewing the career of a LBTQ person in sustainable agriculture as a daily practice involving queer resistance to heteropatriarchal oppression. I pursue this theme in the subsequent chapters by examining how LBTQ farmers navigate these tensions in their relationships with sustainable agriculture communities and rural farming communities.

Chapter Two, “Lesbian and Queer Sustainable Farmer Networks in the Midwest,” examines LBTQ farmers’ connections to agriculture networks, particularly sustainable farming and women farmers. I attended sustainable farming conferences and women farmer gatherings to recruit farmers for my research, yet learned that LBTQ farmers not did necessarily feel supported in these spaces or communities. This misalignment challenged scholarship suggesting that sustainable agriculture may contain less toxic masculinity than industrial agriculture (Brandth 1995; Ferrell 2012; Peter et al. 2010) and that women farmer networks provide farmers with crucial resources and solidarity to support their careers (Carter 2017, 2019; Sachs et al. 2016). Given that LBTQ farmers encountered oppression in spaces where other sustainable and women farmers felt welcome, how did LBTQ farmers gain access to knowledge, mentors, and skills to support their careers?

While LBQT farmers utilized government agencies, neighborhood farmers, sustainable agriculture groups, and women farmer groups, these outlets did not necessarily align with their sustainable practices or queer identity. LBTQ farmers created alternative networks, queer networks, to access human resources necessary to enter and remain in sustainable agriculture. I conclude that LBTQ farmer networks and labor market opportunities circumvented heteropatriarchal gatekeepers to human resources, providing LBTQ farmers direct pathways to knowledge, skills, and social networks to bolster their success as sustainable land managers.

This chapter demonstrates LBTQ farmers exerting queer resistance to agricultural heteropatriarchy by creating and participating in queer farmer networks. Yet, queer farmers constitute a demographic minority in rural communities and within sustainable agriculture. The final chapter shifts focus to how LBTQ farmers sustain themselves in rural farming communities in the Midwest where they largely interact with straight white men in non-sustainable farming.

Chapter Three, “Land Allyship: The Promises and Limitations of Rural Solidarities,” explores LBTQ farmers’ relationships with their rural farming neighbors. On the surface, LBTQ farmers appear to be anomalies in rural Midwest farming communities for their farming practices, their gender in the occupation, their sexuality, and often their liberal politics. A metronormative perspective would assert the inherent incompatibility of queerness and rurality, yet I met farmers’ neighbors as they helped with tasks on the farm and heard numerous similar stories. I also observed farmers minimizing their queerness in these interactions or agreeing to disagree about farming practices. How did LBTQ farmers navigate their differences with neighbors, all the while establishing neighborly bonds that supported their farming livelihood?

In this chapter, I draw on sexualities literature to investigate queer identity management in rural communities. I argue that the LBTQ farmers combined a politics of difference and a politics of similarity to build bonds with rural farming neighbors. I term this process *land allyship*: a commitment to a shared threatened value of rural agrarianism. In a moment of threat to small- and medium-sized farms, “farmer” became a more salient identity than sexuality or farming practices. LBTQ farmers found belonging in rural communities as farmers even if their sexuality was not centered nor fully accepted. While land allyship offered a pathway for some farmers, it was more available to white LBTQ farmers than to farmers of color or gay cisgender men.

Whereas Chapters One and Two bring queerness to bare on farming scholarship, this chapter brings rural farming into conversation with sexualities literatures on queer identity management and the post-gay era. It deepens rural scholarship within queer studies by creating nuance around previous theories of rural queer assimilation. The findings demonstrate that queerness need not be accepted nor hidden in order for queer individuals to find belonging in rural communities. This chapter offers extensions beyond rurality and queerness, highlighting that

threatened values may shift the salience of identities and build alliances while maintaining differences.

### **Why This Dissertation Matters**

While farmers are 1.3% of the United States' employed population, agriculture constitutes 44% of the country's land (Trading Economics N.d.) and accounts for more than a trillion dollars of the country's GDP (USDA N.d.a). Though farming has an occupation is often overlooked, U.S. farmers are in crisis: the number of farmers in the country is rapidly declining, farmworkers are facing precarious legal status and working conditions, and land is becoming increasingly inaccessible, especially to BIPOC people who have been forced off land, forced into labor, and forced into exploitative relationships with food systems. The pandemic highlights farmers' struggles to access basic resources like capital, land, and healthcare to support resilient farms to feed themselves and others. All the while, political rhetoric uses farmer iconography to divide eaters and the populace.

My research identified barriers and in roads for queer people looking to enter and contribute to sustainable agriculture, addressing sociologically intriguing questions about small farms' economic viability and rural communities' social sustainability. Bringing a queer feminist lens to ethnographic and interview research with LBTQ farmers, I demonstrate that gender and sexuality influence access to land and capital, social networks, and community ties. The work contributes to understanding agricultural career pathways, necessary resources for farmers, and bonds across difference. The work frames gender and sexuality as foundational elements to rural agricultural analysis, seeking to re-orient environmental sociology to consider feminist and queer perspectives in any analysis. The dissertation also centers queer experiences in predominately rural settings, urging sexualities scholars to continually examine queer life beyond and between urban



landscapes. These perspectives alter the analysis grid to enrich social and economic investigations within environmental sociology and within sexualities scholarship. Beyond the academy, queer people must be acknowledged and centered in real world efforts to strengthen sustainable food systems and resilient rural communities.

## **Chapter 1: Coming Out and Burning Out: Farming Entry and Exit for Lesbian and Queer Agriculturalists**

Gendered sexuality – not just gender – impacts LBTQ farmers’ pathways into agriculture and their longevity in the field. Like young farmers and women farmers, the majority of LBTQ farmers lacked land access and farming knowledge through their families, necessitating farm entry through education or later in life. For the few individuals with farming in their families, they encountered heteropatriarchal barriers that precluded land access or positions of influence on the farm. Queer community drew farmers into and helped support them in agriculture. The lesbian land movement and the coming out process inspired some LBTQ to seek farmland and farming experiences. I argue that the career of a LBTQ person in sustainable agriculture is a daily practice involving queer resistance to heteropatriarchal oppression.

United States farmers constitute an aging and declining population, which raises questions about the future of farming and rural livelihoods. The number of farms—defined as “any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold” (USDA 2020b)—in the U.S. decreased from 2.48 million in 1982 (USDA 2014b) to 2.02 million farms in 2019 (USDA 2020b). From 2007 to 2012 alone, the number of farm operators declined by 3.1% (USDA 2014a). The average U.S. farm operator is 57.5 years old, a 1.2 increase from 2012 (USDA 2019c). Scholars posit that these demographic shifts may increase agriculture consolidation, exacerbate food insecurity, and erode rural economies (Howard 2016). Despite the high exodus of farmers from agriculture, limited scholarship analyzes farmers’ decisions to leave agriculture (Mishra, Fannin, and Joo 2014; Susanto et al. 2010). As scholars, non-profits, and the U.S. government investigate strategies to recruit and retain farmers, the conversations have taken on a justice lens to examine underrepresented farmers’ entry trends.

Yet, there are counter-trends to farm exodus. First, young farmers (under 35-years-old) recorded an 11% increase in the 2017 Census of Agriculture while 35- to 64 years-old decreased by 2% (USDA 2020a). Young farmers differ from their older peers on factors beyond age: they are educated, not from farming families, and more likely to be farmers of color (Ackoff, Bahrenburg, and Lusher-Shute 2017). Second, the Census of Agriculture documents an increasing number of farms owned by farmers of color (USDA 2019a; 2019b; 2019e). Finally, the 2017 U.S. Census of Agriculture recorded the highest number of female farmers ever (USDA 2019d). Though the increase in women farmers partly reflects changes in survey questions (USDA 2019c), this trend suggests that more women are finding pathways into agriculture, which is a historically patriarchal field. Women’s entry into sustainable agriculture remains largely predicated on heterosexual relationships; women sustainable farmers largely accessed land through their

marriage to a man (Pilgeram and Amos 2015). There is little to no statistical information about farming trends that considers sexuality—let alone gender identity—beyond binary female and male categories.

LGBTQ+ farmers appear in studies focusing on young farmers, racially marginalized farmers, and women farmers, which raises questions about how queer identity may impact farm entry and retention. Given that queer and transgender people lie at the intersections of heteropatriarchy, heterosexism, and transphobia, we may expect LGBTQ+ farmers to offer different perspectives on these processes. Indeed, emerging literature documents the unique ways in which queer farmers access land and social capital for their careers (Hoffelmeyer 2019, 2020, 2021; Leslie 2017, 2019; Wypler 2019). New England queer sustainable farmers demonstrated trajectories into farming, for example, that frequently diverged from heterosexual farmers'; some lost access to family land upon coming out as queer and did not necessarily want to participate in the institution of marriage, a basis for land access (Leslie 2019). More research is necessary to identify queer farmers' access points and hurdles into farming, as well as the forces that draw queer farmers away from the field.

How do queer sexualities and gender identities impact farm entry and exit? To investigate this question, I draw on five years of ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with 40 lesbians, bisexual women, transgender people, and queer women (LBQT) sustainable farmers in the Midwest. LBQT people represent a socially marginalized group of farmers, understudied in their farming career trajectories. In my analysis, I address how queer women and transgender people began a career in agriculture and the factors that contributed to some leaving the field. My analysis focuses on patterned pathways into and out of sustainable agriculture rather than on percentages of participants in each pathway. As I trace these pivotal career moments, I pay

particular attention to how sexuality and sexualized gender identities impact farming pathways. I regard exit as part of a farm career life cycle; exiting farming does not denote a farm business nor a farmer failure.

I find that LBTQ sustainable farmers, like other sustainable farmers (Ackoff et al. 2017), followed non-traditional pathways into farming and their entry points diverged from heterosexual women farmers (Pilergam and Amos 2015; Sachs et al. 2016). LBTQ farmers, for the most part, did not access farmland or farm knowledge through family relationships. In the few cases where they did possess familial farmland or knowledge, patriarchs delayed their entry or minimized their leadership in sustainable farming. Though patriarchy impacts women farmers broadly (Sachs et al. 2016), I emphasize that LBTQ farmers experience a different kind of oppression due to their sexualized gender through heteropatriarchy. This theme of heteropatriarchy in agriculture followed farmers through their sustainable farming careers, indirectly impacting farm exits due to financial constraints. While heteropatriarchy created entry barriers and exit points, queer community facilitated both farm entry and exit for LBTQ farmers. For some LBTQ people, farming became an avenue for queer identity development and an opportunity to replicate landyke communities. But even as queer communities supported LBTQ farmer longevity, the search for queer family, partnership, and community drew some to leave agriculture. These results demonstrate that heteropatriarchy—not just patriarchy—may deter, delay, and deteriorate farming careers for LBTQ people eager to contribute to sustainable agriculture. Sexuality serves as a draw to and away from farming, calling to scholars and farm advocates to more deeply analyze sexuality's role in the future of farming. These findings may lead to policy recommendations to better support queer sustainable farmers, and in turn help retain their contributions to rural communities and sustainable food systems.

## **Literature Review**

### *USDA Census of Agriculture Data Limitations*

According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, the number of farmers in the U.S. has been declining since 1935 (USDA N.d.b), decreasing from 2.48 million in 1982 (USDA 2014b) to 2.02 million farms in 2019 alone (USDA 2020b). Yet, the Census of Agriculture is a limited tool. The Census captures only farm operators: a category of farmers who are disproportionately white, older, men, and U.S.-born. For example, 96% of farmland in the U.S. is white-owned (Gilbert, Wood, and Sharp 2002). Furthermore, the Census did not inquire about gender until 1978, and only allowed one operator per farm until 2002 (Hoppe And Korb 2013), limiting data on women farmers and young farmers. The Census excludes approximately 2.4 million farmworkers in the U.S., 75% of whom hail from other countries. Estimates place 49%-70% of farmworkers as undocumented immigrants, or 1.1-1.7 million individuals (Farmworker Justice 2019). While the Census of Agriculture captures trends within this particular segment of the farming population, it is not representative of farmers in the U.S. and minimizes the contributions made by underrepresented and socially marginalized farmers. The following section focuses on young farmers, BIPOC farmers, and women farmers' strategies and trajectories, and looks for insights they might provide on the forces shaping LGBTQ farmers' experiences.

### *Justice Lens on Farmer Trajectories*

Although the number of U.S. farms is decreasing, young farmers counter these trends. In the 2012 and 2017 Census of Agriculture, the number of farmers under 35 years old rose from previous counts (Ackoff et al. 2017; USDA 2020a). According to a survey by the National Young Farmers Coalition, young farmers (defined as 40-years-old and younger) present different demographics than their older peers. Of the 3,517 past, current, and aspiring farmers who

responded to the survey, 60% identified as women, 75% did not grow up on a farm, and 69% held degrees beyond high school. While 87% of respondents identified as white, this sample was twice as likely to identify as BIPOC than farm operators in the 2012 Census of Agriculture. Among current farmers (79% of respondents), 81% operated diverse farms (2 or more products) and 48% listed vegetables as their crops with the highest sales. 75% of current farmers labeled their farms as “sustainable” and nearly half earned less than \$2,500 in sales a year. Respondents operated a median farm size of 19 acres, even though the average acreage for all farms in the U.S. was 276.2 acres; the survey report concludes that there was “a large difference in average farm size between respondents who grew up on farms and those who came from non-farming backgrounds” (Ackoff et al. 2017:24). Less than half of the young farmers owned all of the land they farmed, and 61% worked another job to cover expenses (ibid).

Findings based on this young farmer survey help illuminate possible career trajectories for LBTQ farmers in my sample.<sup>3</sup> The survey separately analyzes aspiring farmers, current farmers, and former farmers. Aspiring farmers in the survey (5%) named land access as their largest barrier to begin farming or ranching; they listed student loan debt, adequate training opportunities and/or lack of skill as other main challenges. Among current farmers (79%), land access posed the most significant challenge to their farming careers. Other main challenges for current farmers included student loan debt, labor, and health insurance. 15% of survey participants no longer farmed; these former farmers named land access as the most significant reason they stopped farming. Other top factors that pushed former farmers out of the profession included student loan debt, family

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<sup>3</sup> The Young Farmer survey respondents were overall younger (29.6 average, median 30) than my participants (43.1 average, median 38.5). Half of my participants were under 40 at the time of the interview. Like the survey respondents, my participants were also predominately white, sustainable farmers, and women.

dynamics, affordable housing, training opportunities, personal health/health of a family members, seasonality, and farm profitability (Ackoff et al. 2017). These findings indicate that land access presents a significant barrier for young aspiring, current, and former farmers. This chapter investigates the role that sexuality and sexualized gender play in farmer trajectories, especially in LBTQ farmers' land access.

Farmers of color constitute a significant presence in U.S. agriculture—historically and currently—despite systematic white supremacist efforts to steal BIPOC land, appropriate BIPOC labor, and exploit BIPOC farming knowledge. Though 95% of the 3.4 million farm operators captured in the Census of Agriculture identify as white, some groups of farmers of color increased between 2012 and 2017. For example, farms owned by American Indian/Alaskan Native farmers (2.3% of producers) grew 7% (USDA 2019a). Farms owned by Hispanic farmers increased by 8% over this 5-year period when all U.S. farms decreased by 3% (USDA 2019e). Black-operated farms, however, witnessed a decrease that mirrored the overall decline in U.S. farms. Since the Census of Agriculture captures farm operators, it likely undercounts cooperative, community, and urban farming models that closely align with Black agrarianism.

Based in “the collective experiences of slavery, white supremacy, and systematic discrimination,” Black agrarianism champions hard work and self-sufficiency alongside emancipation and liberation (Touzeau 2019:48). These values appear in the historic efforts by George Washington Carver (White 2018) as well as Fannie Lou Hamer (White 2017). For example, Hamer founded Freedom Farms—a 680-acre agricultural collective—in 1967 as a liberation project for displaced farmers driven off land after advocating for Black voting rights (White 2017). Reflecting on this history, contemporary Black women collectively farmed in Detroit as a means to exert their agency and build community in the face of racialized and gendered



traumas (White 2011). Similarly, young Black farmers reported a sense of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and empowerment in the career “from reclaiming land and actively choosing to engage in work their ancestors were forced to do without pay,” while also desiring community support and a greater representation in agriculture (Touzeau 2019). Findings on Black farmers’ careers shed light that socially marginalized groups indeed face oppression, but also demonstrate community agency and collective resistance (CACR) in their efforts to farm (White 2018). My analysis of LBTQ farmers utilizes frameworks from Black agrarianism to examine not only oppression in farm entry and exit, but also resistance.

Like young farmers and BIPOC farmers, women farmers also challenge dominant trends on the decline of farms. I focus heavily on the women farmer literature because women and gender minorities constitute my sample. Women farmers nearly tripled from 5% of farmers in 1978 (when the Census of Agriculture began to ask about sex) to 14% in 2012. In 2007, primary and secondary female operators accounted for 30.2% of farmers—just over one million (Hoppe and Korb 2013). In terms of land, women own—as an individual or in a partnership—half of the farmland in the country (Carter 2017) and 46% of the rented farmland (Farmland Information Center 2018), yet their farms are smaller on average than men’s (Hoppe and Korb 2013).

Contemporary women face land access and financial challenges in their farming pursuits. Compared to men, women are less likely to have capital to buy farmland (Alsgaard 2012). When women seek loans from the USDA to farm, they encountered discrimination in the form of denial, late loans, and small loan amounts (ibid). Scholars propose that bias drives discrimination, as loan officers “did not ‘read’ women and racial minorities as farmers,” (Keller 2014:76). According to a sample of Northwest sustainable farmers, women who were able to farm primarily accessed farmland through three pathways: 1) marrying a male farmer, 2) pooling finances with a husband

who works off the land, or 3) using personal finances later in life, usually following a divorce from a husband (Pilgeram and Amos 2015). These pathways predominately rely on a husband's land, income, or divorce, placing women without a husband at a disadvantage when pursuing a farm. Land access, therefore, relies on combining farm business with a (hetero)sexual partnership.

In light of these challenges, the literature reveals strong connections between farming practices and gender ideologies. Grounded in 4-H ideologies that socialize young boys to operate farms as a business (Rosenberg 2015), industrial agriculture entails notions of hegemonic masculinity: large machinery, big fields, and domination over nature (Peter et al. 2010). Masculinity dominates notions of agriculture to the extent that farming tools—such as tractors and machinery—are coded as masculine (Brandth 1995). Consequently, men farmers who transition farms from industrial to sustainable practices also shift their ideas about masculinity (Ferrell 2012). For example, men in sustainable farming are more likely than men in industrial farming to admit and learn from mistakes, attempt to work with rather than against nature, seek cooperation with fellow farmers rather than competition, and encourage women's input (Peter et al. 2010). For women in the field, “farmer” carries masculine notions to the degree that women who identify as farmers see themselves as more masculine than women on farms who instead identify as homemakers (Smyth, Swendener, and Kazyak 2018). Women farmers struggle to identify as farmers (Bell et al. 2021; Brasier et al. 2014) and to defy stereotypical feminine roles on farms (Shisler and Sbicca 2019).

Whether pushed due to land access and farm loan discrimination, or pulled by gender relations, women have found inroads into farming through sustainable agriculture. Women comprise a higher percentage of sustainable and organic farmers than industrial farmers (Sachs et al. 2016; Trauger 2007). Though sustainable agriculture was traditionally “dominated by men's

participation and contributions” (Meares 1997), the Feminist Agrifood Systems Theory (FAST) proposes that women farmers challenge masculine domination in sustainable agriculture in several ways: creating gender equity on farms; claiming ‘farmer’ as an identity; pursuing innovative pathways to access land, labor, and capital; integrating economic, social, and environmental values into farming systems; and forming networks with women farmers (Sachs et al. 2016).

Women farmers resist patriarchy in agriculture through women farmer networks (Hassanein 1999; Sachs 1983; Sachs et al. 2016). When transitioning to sustainable practices, Iowan women landowners rely on women farming networks to access mentors, support, and resources. These women then act as “changemakers” who champion conservation and sustainable practices in their communities (Carter 2017). Women farmer networks center peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and collaborating (Sachs et al. 2016). For example, only 35% of Wisconsin women farmers report utilizing extension services whereas 83% call upon other women farmers when making decisions (Lezberg, Newenhouse, and Hamann 2009). As mentioned earlier, Black women in Detroit collaborate to transform vacant lots into community farms, building spaces to heal trauma and expand food security (White 2011).

These findings on young farmers’, BIPOC farmers’, and women farmers’ strategies and career trajectories shed light on possible pathways for LBTQ farmers. Like young farmers, this group of queer farmers may be more educated and lack a farming background. LBTQ farmers’ process of acquiring land, however, may not mirror heterosexual women sustainable farmers who predominately access land through their husbands. For LBTQ farmers, farming may be a means to demonstrate agency and resilience against societal oppression. LBTQ farmers are likely to face heteropatriarchy in their farming careers, and may turn to farmers with similar identities to find support.

*Bringing Sexuality to Farming Trajectories*

While scholars identify age, race, and gender as key factors in farming careers, both quantitative and qualitative studies tend to lack an analysis on queer sexuality or expansive gender identities. For example, though the Census of Agriculture began in 1840, the survey did not inquire about sex until 1978 and only presents two options: male or female. The 2017 National Young Farmer Coalition Survey (Ackoff et al. 2017), however, offered more expansive gender categories; 1% of the sample (N=3,517) identified as transgender and 2% preferred not to answer. The survey report did not analyze the data based on gender identity. The Young Farmers survey, like the Census of Agriculture, lacked questions about sexual identities.

Same-sex marriages, however, can be inferred from the Census of Agriculture (Dentzman et al. 2021). The authors limited the 2017 data to farms with just two operators, then analyzed the gender and marriage status of those two farmers. Of the 930,782 two-producers farms, 81% were run by a wife and husband couple. 11,852 farms were operated by queer couples: men married to men accounted for 8,302 farms (0.89% of two producer farms) and women married to women accounted for 3,550 farms (0.38% of two producers farms). Overall, the researchers identify a total of 11,852 queer operated two-producer farms, operated by 16,604 queer men and 7,100 queer women (23,701 queer farmers in total). Of these married queer farmers, the majority were white and non-Hispanic,<sup>4</sup> but they were more likely to identify as a racial or ethnic minority than other two producer farmers. In terms of location, queer men farmed in rural areas at rates similar to other groups, but farmed in urban areas at higher rates than farms run by unmarried men. As such, the authors conclude that “gay men’s sexuality does not eliminate the advantages of their gender but

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<sup>4</sup> Among men married to men and women married to women, no more than 5% identified as nonwhite and no more than 4% as Hispanic (Dentzman et al. 2021).

does cause significant differences between them and straight men,” (ibid:244). The authors suggest that queer women, however, “appear to be doubly impacted by their gender and sexuality,” as they are more likely to farm in urban farms and have farm characteristics that align “with both alternative agriculture and a lack of access to farming resources and support” (ibid). While the authors conclude that gender may be a more important factor than sexuality for queer women farmers, it is important to analyze the intersection of these factors rather than attempt to isolate them. Additionally, it is unclear whether queer women farmers, for example, choose alternative practices due to oppression, as the authors suggest, or to align with their values, as suggested in Sachs et al. (2016). While this research presents the first attempt to capture queer farmers in the Census of Agriculture, it retains the survey’s biases (described earlier), and undercounts queer farmers beyond two-producer married farmers.

The mere recognition of LGBTQ+ farmers in surveys fails to shed light on their career trajectories. Historical accounts capture gay men as farmhands on Pacific Coast farms, where work was seasonal and intermittent and likely did not translate into owning or operating a farm as the men were low paid and often men of color (Shah 2011). Midwest gay men came into farming through their family’s land and farms. While some left family farms to live in more urban areas, others remained in rural areas or eventually returned to farm (Fellows 1996). These findings counter metronormative (Halberstam 2005) assumptions that queer people can only find belonging in urban areas and therefore migrate unidirectionally from the country to cities. Instead, gay farmers’ migration patterns align with scholarship that queer people may vacillate between cities and the country in their queer identity formation (Annes and Redlin 2012; Gorman-Murray 2009).

Qualitative literature suggests that people at the intersections of patriarchy and heterosexism indeed acquire land in unique ways. Lesbians accessed land for self-provisioning in

the 1970s as part of the Lesbian Land Movement. Groups of lesbians pooled resources to collectively acquire and manage land. They did not farm these lands for market for the most part and were not reliant on farm income to pay mortgages (Anahita 2004; 2009). Second, Sachs et al. (2016) describe women farmers' pathways to land, comparing traditional (husband's land and income) and innovative models. The participants labeled as innovators were queer women, but the authors did not offer sexuality as an analytic lens. In other words, they did not examine why the queer women—who might lack access to a husband's farm or family inheritance—might have had to innovate beyond “traditional” models. In other words, “while sustainable farming may have opened up a space for women to farm, it's a space most available for a very particular kind of women: white, well-educated, heterosexual, and married,” (Pilgeram 2019:15).

Some recent research analyzes how sexual relations may impact agriculture careers (Cramer 2020; Hoffelmeyer 2019, 2020, 2021; Leslie 2017, 2019; Wypler 2019). Contemporary New England queer farmers name their gender and sexuality identities as factors contributing to their ability to access land and their desire to farm. For example, participants find farming enticing due to gender-inclusive clothing, the seclusion to safely process coming out, and the opportunity to develop skills generally given to cisgender men (Leslie 2017). Similarly, a small sample of lesbian sustainable farmers in Missouri finds that farming supported the farmers' gender expression; one participant notes:

I think that as a lesbian who kind of embodies some of these masculine qualities, being strong and kind of burly, calloused and dirty, but also being a woman that appreciates and respects and wants to nurture the land, [market vegetable farming] is kind of the best of both worlds in that way. You're farming but you're also doing something that is nurturing. (Cramer 2020:173)

In these accounts, farming offers queer people a reprieve from societal stigmas that may limit their self-expression or knowledge acquisition.

At the same time, farming presents challenges to queer people in the form of patriarchy and heterosexism. The same participant in Missouri experiences negative relationships with men in agriculture, feels that she has to prove herself as a woman in the field, and struggles to find like-minded people in rural conservative communities (Cramer 2020). These hurdles thwart some aspiring farmers in New England from entering the profession: “Just the perception, and not necessarily even the experience, of heterosexism might be enough to prevent queer people from farming,” (Leslie 2017:12). Taken together, queer identity both draws some queer people to farm and presents challenges in the career.

Though scholarship on women farmers demonstrates how patriarchy impedes women’s land access, it under-analyzes how sexuality impacts farming trajectories. As previously mentioned, women sustainable farmers primarily accessed land through a husband (Pilgeram and Amos 2015) to the extent that:

Embodying the family farm model – a combined business and sexual partnership – was typically a prerequisite for women’s land access. In other words, cisgender heterosexual women who were at a disadvantage in accessing farmland because they were women may have exerted their cisgender and heterosexual privilege to access land through a husband. (Leslie et al. 2019:865)

A husband as a pathway to farming, however, may not be available to LGBTQ farmers. Marriage equality only became available nationwide in 2015, and some queer people still choose not to pursue the heteronormative institution (Bernstein 2015). With or without a husband, queer people earn less on average than peers (Waite and Denier 2015), potentially limiting capital to start a farm. Some queer farmers attempt to access land through family, but their sexuality compromises their inheritance (Leslie 2017). Market failures in land access for small-scale farmers lead queer farmers in New England to rely instead on sexual partners to access land, labor, credit, and knowledge.

Yet queer farmers face heteronormative barriers in each situation, as queer people relying on stigmatized sexual connections (Leslie 2019).

Despite these heterosexist challenges, queer farmers develop alternative strategies to support their agricultural careers. For example, New England queer farmers resisted heterosexist barriers to accessing land, labor, credit, and knowledge by relying on queer networks for land access, mentorship, and reshaping the “family farm” (Leslie 2019). Other northeast farmers practice strategies to reduce heterosexism in farming by choosing to pursue alternative agriculture, embodying the “rural politics of recognition” (Gray 2009) to assert their sameness to gain acceptance, and outing themselves selectively (Hoffmeyer 2021). These studies reveal that heterosexism is baked into rural agriculture communities and that queer farmers may creatively engaged alternative models to the family farm in order to access resources and knowledge.

## **Methods**

I collected ethnographic and interview-based data in the Upper Midwest (Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin) beginning in 2014. I focused on lesbian, bisexual women, transgender, and queer women sustainable farmers in order to examine the understudied intersection of patriarchy with heterosexism and/or transphobia in agriculture. I also believed that my positionality as a queer person who previously worked on small sustainable farms would facilitate rapport with participants. The Midwest location allowed me to analyze these intersectional experiences in a region known for industrialized agriculture and conservative ideologies, rather than in coastal or liberal hubs (Leslie 2017, 2019) that may be more conducive to alternative farming practices and sexual and/or gender minorities.

I contacted farmers through network sampling at farmer conferences. My sample of Upper Midwest LGBTQ farmers includes 40 farmers representing 27 different sustainable farms. The farms



ranged from half-an-acre to 200 acres and produced vegetables, herbs, livestock, fruits, nuts, mushrooms, and value-added items such as jam, sauce, soap, tea, and chocolate. All farms relied on direct sales to consumers with the exception of one organic dairy. The farmers ranged from 22- to 70-years-old, with an average age of 43. The vast majority identified as white (37) and cisgender women (36); Black (1), biracial (1), Hispanic (1), and transgender farmers (4) constituted a small portion of the sample. I conducted supplemental interviews with LBTQ farmers in other regions as well as LBTQ farmers' family members and co-workers.

My fieldwork was multi-sited and intermittent. I assisted farmers in pulling weeds, hoeing vegetable beds, trellising tomatoes, and other daily tasks. We herded goats, chased escaped calves, and butchered chickens. I accompanied farmers to markets, on their CSA deliveries, and while running errands in town. During the fieldwork, I paid attention to how participants farm; when, where, with whom they interact; and the content of their conversations. I typed notes into my phone and/or audio recorded with the farmers' permission.

Due to spatial and temporal distance, I relied on phone calls, text messages, and emails as data in between visits. I contextualized and triangulated the observational data by conducting semi-structured interviews with the farmers about their sexualities and farming experiences. I asked farmers about their coming out stories and their pathways into farming. I asked them to describe their ideologies, beliefs, and values surrounding their sexuality and farming, and the intersections of the two. I asked about their relationships to rural communities, farming communities, and queer communities. I ended interviews by asking about demographics (age, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality), why they decided to participate in my project, and what they hope will come from the research – personally or generally. I audio-recorded and/or took handwritten notes during these interviews.

In my analysis, I draw on the career approach (Hughes 1997). Although I investigate individuals who belong to a loose group based on shared common characteristics—largely their gender, sexuality, occupation, and occupation ideologies—these individuals do not necessarily live near nor interact with each other. As such, some data derive from farmers’ retrospective accounts; I take these accounts as inscribed with social meaning in their own right (Mills 1940), but not in place of observed behavior (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). In my analysis, I unite dispersed interactions into the mechanisms, processes, and pathways that make up the “career” of being a lesbian or queer farmer in a rural community. I identify pathways to farm entry and exit from field notes and interview transcripts then compare these results to the literature. I focus on previously unstudied processes and trajectories into and out of farming, rather than percentages of farmers who used each strategy.

## **Findings**

In this section, I analyze the impacts of gender and sexuality upon a farmer’s entry into and exit from the career. First, I analyze how LBTQ farmers entered the career and argue that patriarchal gatekeepers limited entry and early career farm opportunities. Sexuality—both coming out and connections to lesbians on land—inspired LBTQ farmers to pursue farming and land. Next, I analyze farm exits to argue that gender and sexuality indirectly and directly influenced farmers’ pathways out of farming. Indirectly, farmers named financial challenges as contributing to exits, which I argue were tied to gender and sexuality oppression. Experienced and anticipated isolation as a queer person directly contributed to LBTQ farmers’ transitions away from the field.

### *Farm Entry*

Though dominant narratives about “family farms” depict individuals growing up on farms and directly becoming farmers, this trajectory does not necessarily apply in sustainable agriculture

(Ackoff et al. 2017) nor in my research. None of the LGBTQ people in my sample grew up on a farm and went directly into the occupation. While some farmers pursued agriculture as their first career through direct practice or formal education, most came into farming later in life. Some farmers began higher education in other fields but ceased their studies to enter agriculture. The pervasive pathway (30 of the 40 farmers) into farming, however, was non-linear – sometimes spanning several careers, states, and years. Farmers’ previous (or concurrent) occupations included: nurse, armed forces, massage therapist, sexual education advocate, librarian, teacher, professor, chef, HR manager, IT manager, carpenter, and artist. Farming was a secondary (or beyond) career after living and working in other cities or states from their eventual farms. This trajectory indicates that the LGBTQ farmers in this sample lacked a combination of farmland or farm knowledge through their families. Nevertheless, they were invested in sustainable agriculture to the extent that they were willing to leave other careers in order to farm later in life. Some farmers tapped into savings, crowdfunding, and grants to fund their farms.

For farmers with familial ties to farmland and agriculture, these connections played a complicated role in LGBTQ people’s pathways into farming. Some farmers gained land access directly through family land or acquired money to purchase land via living or deceased family members. The farmers in my sample who used this pathway were white; given the historical and on-going discrimination that people of color face in gaining access to land and capital, this pathway is likely more available to white farmers than to farmers of color. For the white LGBTQ farmers who used familial connections to access land, they confronted familial heteropatriarchal hurdles in the beginning of their farming careers. Below, I analyze how sexualized gender constrained LGBTQ farmers’ entry into the field.

*Heteropatriarchy: “We’re lesbian farmers underneath a patriarch.”*

LBTQ farmers in my sample experienced heteropatriarchy as they entered farming in ways not captured by scholarship that focuses on gender, but not sexuality. Women farmers experience patriarchy in the male-dominated profession (Sachs et al. 2016), yet straight women's sexuality and male partners may mediate some of the negative impacts described in the literature review. LBTQ farmers in my sample lacked these protective factors; familial patriarchs served as gatekeepers who created barriers that delayed LBTQ people's entry into farming or minimized their leadership on a family farm. Below, I describe how heteropatriarchal gatekeeping delayed LBTQ farmers' entries, exemplified by two farmers: Penny and Sarah.

Penny—white and 55—grew up on a farm and wanted to farm as a career, but her family denied her opportunities to gain skills and acquire land. One of seven siblings, Penny was the only child interested in farming and loved taking Future Farmers of America classes. Yet, her parents did not take her interest seriously. Penny's father, an industrial farmer, allowed his sons to help on the farm and only involved Penny when he needed a fourth person to plant cabbage. Penny's mother suggested that she become a florist, a career recommendation that Penny labeled as deriving from sexist beliefs. When she was 16, Penny's parents discussed selling the farm; none of the older sons were interested in taking over the farm and the younger sons were too young. Penny asked what about me? Her mom laughed and told her not to be silly. Penny went on to work in the printing industry for two decades, but switched to organic farming at 38-years-old. Her family was insulted by Penny's decision to farm organically; they perceived it as indicating that their industrial practices had been wrong. For Penny, her parent's patriarchal perspective on farming—both in terms of *who* is a farmer and *how* to farm—impacted her entry into the career. Penny delayed her farm entry for two decades and faced familial disappointment for her choice to farm organically. Penny's family's gendered perceptions on farming align with women farmers'

lack of legibility due to their gender (Keller 2014) and men farmers encountering masculinity barriers when transition from industrial to sustainable practices (Peter et al. 2010).

Sarah—white and 35—grew up in an agricultural family but purchased her own land to raise cattle; she wanted to farm organically, rather than industrially, like her grandfather. Raised in rural Wisconsin, Sarah spent time as a youth on her grandfather’s beef cattle farm. Though she attended two years of college, served in the Navy, and worked for a bus company, Sarah always farmed: ‘I was always working to support to my farming habit.’<sup>5</sup> She began farming with her grandfather in 2003, but they conflicted over farming practices. The grandfather farmed industrially and Sarah wanted to transition to organic production for the higher prices. ‘Well my Grandpa hated organic [because of the weeds]. That was a big part of our hiccup,’ she told me as we milked her 104-head of cattle. The grandfather had witnessed yields increase by transitioning from hand tools and horsepower to chemical sprays and machines; ‘I think he felt like I was going backwards. He saw me doing it all wrong.’ Due to this difference, Sarah began farming independently, first by renting 90 of her grandfather’s acres and then purchasing her own land. Though Sarah gained early exposure to agriculture through her grandfather, she had to acquire her own land in order to establish an organic dairy business.

In addition to patriarchal barriers into farming, patriarchal relations impacted how early career LBTQ farmers developed their farm businesses. Farming alongside fathers restricted LBTQ farmers’ opportunities to exercise leadership and make decisions on their farms. Below, I describe how patriarchal gatekeeping by fathers as farm business partners minimized LBTQ farmers’ early career leadership, exemplified on two farms: Julie and Abbi’s, and Nan’s.

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<sup>5</sup> Single quotations denote words captured in my notes. Double quotes notate words captured on audio recordings.

Julie and Abbi—white and in their 30s—farmed alongside Abbi’s straight parents on the parents’ land in Missouri. While this arrangement helped the married couple start their farm, it also presented constraints. Julie stated, “When you’re farming on someone else’s land, you can’t exactly do what you want to do when you want to do it. ... On the other hand, we have land and we have people helping us. There’s always trade-offs.” For example, only Abbi’s father—the only man involved in the farm—was allowed to drive the farm’s tractor, per his rules. If he was upset, he would refuse to work that day, which meant that no tractor work would be completed, thus delaying farm tasks. During my visit, Abbi and Julie looked over their shoulders when discussing issues with the father so as to not risk him becoming upset. Though the couple gained land access through Abbi’s parents, they become beholden to Abbi’s father’s preferences and temperament, which limited their ability to make decisions and operate their farm.

Nan—white and in her 50s—also experienced trade-offs farming a peach orchard alongside her father. Nan managed an urban CSA farm during the week in Wisconsin and traveled to Missouri periodically to care for 52 peach trees on her family’s land. I visited one weekend as Nan and her father, a retired professor, pruned and shaped trees. Nan deferred to her father or sought his approval as they pruned. She later explained to me:

My dad is a bit of a control freak. He’s professorial. He likes to teach. Everything is a teaching moment. Everything is very slow because he’s methodical. He has to be involved and approve of all decisions, even like what limbs to prune and how to do it. He’s very much old school. You have to learn the right way to do things or else you’re going to screw it up.

This dynamic is not new: “My dad and I had a very adversarial relationship growing up,” Nan told me, “He’s pretty critical.” Nan noticed that her father treats her cousin, a man who also helps on the family land, differently:

Dad assumes that I don’t know rather than ask if I do know. And I find that that’s kind of a male-female dynamic, rather than assuming that [the cousin] knows even

if he's never done it. [The cousin] might say 'I can figure it out,' and that's better than asking me if I know and I do know. So there's that gender thing.

Nan later emphasized the gender dynamics: "As women [Nan and her partner], we're always dancing around men. ... It's like a little oil and water sometimes." Nan's partner, a woman, exacerbated this patriarchal dynamic; she did not serve as a buffer to her farming partner in the way a man married to farming wife might. Nan concluded: "So when you talk about lesbian farmers, we're lesbian farmers underneath a patriarch, you know, so it's like what really are the dynamics here?" For Nan, farming on family land alongside her father equated to heteropatriarchal gender relations.

In sum, gender shaped LGBTQ people's entry into farming in the form of heteropatriarchal gatekeeping. Heteropatriarchal visions about who is a farmer and how farming should be done contributed to farmers delaying their entry into farming and seeking property away from family land. Farming alongside a patriarch contributed to LGBTQ farmers catering to father figures when making farm decisions and therefore minimized their own leadership. Patriarchy impacts women farmers' experiences broadly (Sachs et al. 2016); this data contributes to this scholarship by demonstrating that heteropatriarchy—not just patriarchy—impacts farm entry and early farm careers for LGBTQ people. In addition to being gender minorities, these farmers do not have a male partner—like some straight women farmers—to bring them into the career or land or to vouch for their farming desires and practices when facing patriarchal opposition.

*Sexuality: Coming out and lesbian land.*

While heteropatriarchy delayed LGBTQ farmers' entry into farming and minimized their early leadership opportunities, aspects of their sexuality attracted LGBTQ farmers to pursuing the career. Though some farmers came out while working on farms—notably on queer-operated farms—I focus on how queerness created avenues into farming for LGBT people in two main

ways: first, farmers sought farm jobs after coming out as queer in order to have time and space to process their identity; second, farmers developed desires to own land and farm after spending time on lesbian lands. Below, I describe farmers who exemplify these sexuality-based pathways into farming.

Although some scholarship argues for the reduced importance of coming out in the post-gay era (Savin-Williams 2006; Seidman 2002), it remains a pivotal moment and on-going process for many members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The metronormative (Halberstam 2005) narrative connects coming out and exodus from rural areas to urban centers. Scholarship, however, indicates that queer people often travel back and forth between urban and rural areas in their sexual identity formation (Annes and Redlin 2012; Gorman-Murray 2009). I focus on two farmers who sought farming opportunities in rural areas as part of their coming out processes.

I met Haley and Morgan while visiting a lesbian-owned farm in Missouri. Haley—white and 22—fell in love with her best friend, a woman, in college and realized that she was a lesbian. The experience “was super hard” and she decided to leave college: “I needed to take some time and breathe and figure shit out. So that was definitely a part of it [leaving college].” Similarly, her co-worker Morgan—white and 24—started coming out to friends in college but “panicked about coming out to my family.” She wanted to be distracted and have space to come into her sexuality, so she moved across the country to work on a farm in Maine. Five years later, she was still working on farms, including ones in Maine, Minnesota, and Missouri. For Haley and Morgan, farming provided distance from their usual lives and the space to come into their sexuality.

Though coming out pulled queer people into farming, some farms did not support queer employees and heterosexist experiences pushed LGBTQ farmers out of the career. Just as heteropatriarchal gatekeepers created barriers to farming for LGBTQ people, a key component that



differentiated queer farmers' early farm experiences was if they were the only queer person on the farm or if they worked for or among other queer people. Laura—white and 27—attended a liberal arts college in the Midwest and majored in music. She came out in college and began dating her first girlfriend. Upon graduation, the couple moved to Texas to intern on a farm. The farm asked the couple to keep their relationship a secret from their board members; as a result, Laura's girlfriend left in the middle of the season to work at a seed company in Iowa. Laura completed the season, then joined her partner in Iowa to also work at the seed company. The farm's requirement to be closeted drove Laura and her partner away from that farm. Though Laura eventually established her own farm, the partner did not reenter farming.

When they were the only queer person on first farm jobs, LBQT farmers experienced a mix of acceptance, hostility, and isolation. Morgan—who left college to farm as she was coming out—initially worked on a straight-owned farm in Maine. Morgan did not share her sexuality with her bosses during the interview, nor once she was an apprentice, because she worried it would negatively impact her chances of gaining and retaining the job. She did eventually tell the other apprentices, who were straight, and they accepted her. One employee, however, was “not okay with it” for religious reasons. Morgan perceived that gayness “grossed her [the co-worker] out” and the co-worker “did make an odd comment about how ‘you can’t steal me away from my husband.’” Devin also struggled as the only queer person on farms, even those owned by fellow women, and left farming as a result of burn out and queer isolation (Wypler 2019).

Conversely, farm employment with queer bosses or co-workers helped new LBTQ farmers find footholds in the field and buffered them against the kind of heterosexism that can contribute to farm exit. When Keo—white and 34—moved from Minneapolis to Maine, they only found one farm in a statewide agricultural job database that described itself as queer-friendly. Keo ended up

working on that farm—owned by a straight couple—alongside two other queer/gender queer employees. Keo commented that “It was great.” Penny—who grew up on her family’s farm but was denied the opportunity to farm it—trained on two different farms owned and operated by lesbians when she started farming. Other early-career LBTQ farmers described the sense of professional belonging they found while working for a queer boss and alongside queer employees early in their farm careers (Wypler 2019). While coming out is one pathway that pulled LBTQ people to farming, working in agriculture without queer supports exposed early career LBTQ farmers to heterosexism. The presence of other queer people, however, insulated farmers from heteropatriarchy and heterosexist forces that pulled others away from the field.

Sexuality attracted LBTQ people to farming through a second mechanism: the lesbian land movement (Anahita 2004, 2009). This movement inspired lesbians in my sample to purchase land and develop farms. An Iowa native, Helen—white and 61—first trained and practiced as a nurse, one of few career options approved by her parents. As an adult, Helen was in a motorcycle accident and spent several years in a wheelchair. During that time, she lived on Californian lesbian communal lands that inspired her dream to have her own property. At age 60, Helen found 40-acres of mostly wooded land with a large pasture in rural Iowa. She reached out to landyke and rural lesbian magazines and listservs, successfully crowdsourcing funds to purchase the land where she raised chickens and goats, gardened vegetables, and foraged for wild mushrooms. Rural queer social movements not only inspired Helen’s farming dreams, but also helped her overcome capital and land barriers to farmer entry by funding her land purchase.

Like Helen, the lesbian land movement catalyzed Tash’s search for land. Living and working in Minneapolis as a graphic designer, Tash—white and 68—and a lover spent a weekend visiting lesbians who lived two hours north of the city. Tash found running around topless and

making love outside to be “freeing” from societal norms and pressures. After this trip, the couple and several friends began organizing to jointly buy land where they could make art, hold events, and host other lesbians. The plan never coalesced among the group, but Tash and her partner purchased 80 acres northwest of Minneapolis. Tash began farming simply due to the circumstance of owning 80 acres and maintained off-farm income through art. From the beginning, Tash and her lover “always thought this would be communal land one way or another, a place for women to just be who they are,” and advertised camping on their land through an international lesbian magazine. The landyke movement attracted Tash to rural life with other queers, indicating that vibrant rural queer communities may draw queers to rural areas and that queer communities—beyond those who farm—may help sustain rural queer farmers.

To summarize farm entry, sexualized gender creates both barriers and pathways into farming. In terms of barriers, queer women and transgender people encounter heteropatriarchy and heterosexism when aspiring to become and becoming sustainable farmers. Like young farmers (Ackoff et al. 2017) and women farmers (Sachs et al. 2016) impeded from “traditional” pathways to land through paternal inheritance, the sample pursued alternative means to farm. Nevertheless, even the few farmers with family land or farming knowledge were forced to pursue non-family land—or minimize their leadership on family land—due to heteropatriarchal gatekeepers. These farmers become enmeshed in hetero-familial relations that that straight women farmers experience, but may minimize through their male partners. In terms of pathways, sexuality attracted LGBTQ people to rural farming. Some farmers sought rural farms to come out and into their queer identities; the presence of other queers—as co-workers, employers, and general community—helped sustain queer farmers in the face of heterosexism. LGBTQ farmers consciously and

unconsciously attempted to create and draw on queer rural and agrarian community in a prefigurative political experiment to buffer against oppressive agricultural heteropatriarchy.

### *Farm Exit*

Over the seven years I spent getting to know LGBTQ sustainable farmers in the Midwest, nearly half of the sample transitioned away from farming. I argue that farmers transitioned away from the occupation for reasons tied to gender and sexuality; I categorize these factors as indirectly or directly related to gender and sexuality based upon whether the farmers named gender and sexuality explicitly in their narratives. While land, capital, and partnerships impact farmers broadly, these factors often indirectly include heteropatriarchal and heterosexist challenges for LGBTQ people attempting to sustain themselves as farmers. Farmers directly named queer partnership and queer rural isolation—both experienced and anticipated—as factors contributing to their farm exits.

#### *Indirect: Money and land.*

Access to money and land present the largest challenges for today's aspiring and early career farmers (Ackoff et al. 2017). While all farmers may face financial challenges, they must be considered within the societal context in which queer women and LGBT people earn lower wages and face more financial precarity (Badgett et al. 2007; Martell 2019). In farming, women have faced federal farm loan discrimination (Alsgaard 2012) and queer farmers face discrimination in multiple aspects of the land access process (Leslie 2019). As a result, LGBTQ farmers likely hold higher financial burdens to acquire and pay off land.

Kelly—white and 34—spent several years gaining experience on farms before purchasing their own land to farm. Kelly began farming as an employee for another farm. The following year, they worked on a farm and began their own business on an incubator farm. Kelly and their wife—

who had an off-farm job—then purchased their own parcel of land in the suburbs outside Chicago. In addition to the wife’s job, Kelly earned off-farm income by working at a coffee shop. After two seasons on their own land and selling to farmers markets and CSA, Kelly emailed that they were done farming:

The farm barely made any profit this year and I decided I don't want to be working every day of my summer, spring, and fall. My body kinda hurt too, which isn't new! So this will be the end of the farm for now...we're going to develop the property and continue to grow food and focus more on building and reaching out the homesteading community here. I definitely feel sad, but also excited to have more time and I've pretty much never had weekends off before so that's gonna pretty fucking amazing! We're planning to start a family as well so I'm so happy to have more time for that too.

Kelly’s decision to leave farming was partly physical and partly economic; these are common issues for farmers who embody class (Bourdieu 1979, 1984) by working long hours in a low-paying job that compromises their physical health. Kelly’s economic reasons also connected to their queerness in that Kelly and their wife’s hope to have a child (a disproportionately expensive process for queer and trans people (Rudolph 2017)) may have influenced their decision to seek greater financial security.

Though Kelly did acquire their own land after working on other farms (which was possible due to their and their wife’s off-farm incomes), working on farms in and of itself can lead to precarious finances and subsequent farm exits. I spoke to Linden—white and 30—one evening after they finished caring for dairy cows on the farm where they worked and lived. A husband and wife couple owned and operated the farm; the wife identified as queer and at least one other live-in employee also identified as queer. Even with these queer supports, Linden informed me that they were stepping away from farming after a decade working on other people’s farm due to the financial instability. Though Linden named finances, their trajectory includes gender and sexuality factors, which can be difficult to see with brief snapshots. As such, I describe Linden’s trajectory

at length because diving deeply into one farmer's experiences more clearly reveals that farm exits associated with financial instability and land access connect to gender and sexuality.

In their early 20s, Linden moved to Colorado to work on a farm for the first time. "It was awful," Linden told me, describing issues with sick livestock and the straight couple owners going through a divorce. Linden then worked on an urban farm in Kansas City and fell in love with farming. While working on this farm—where a farm boss and a co-worker were queer—Linden discovered their own queerness. Linden and that co-worker, Lucy—32 and biracial Black and white—began to date. The next summer, Linden and Lucy worked on a farm owned by a straight interracial couple in rural Illinois. Although they got along with the farmer owners, they did not interact much with the community, home to a religiously-affiliated university. After one season, the couple returned to their home state of Missouri to live and farm on rented land. It was "great and horrible, and [I] learned a lot," Linden said. The first two years on that property witnessed historic heat waves and drought. Interpersonally, the landowner was a "narcissist egotistical guy" who did not help on the farm and provided unsolicited unhelpful advice. In their third season, the landowner:

basically demanded that we pay him lots and lots of money. It basically would have been maybe 75 to 80 percent of the profits that we had made that year. He came up with a three-page [expense] list of line by line of all of these different things, down to 'found a cattle panel out in the field and had to retrieve it' and his hours.

Linden decided to pay some of the requested thousands of dollars and leave the land at the end of the season. The couple moved to a college town where Lucy worked for the university and Linden spent a season as an edible landscaper for an urban agriculture non-profit: "It was a good sabbatical from farming in some ways, but then by the end of that year there, I was hungry to get back in it [farming]." Lucy remained in the college town, but Linden moved to manage a rural farm on a 300-acre property owned by restaurateurs:

It was a great employment situation. It was just at the end of that season, Lucy and I broke up, and I kind of felt like, ‘What do I want to do with life?’ And I had for a long time really wanted to get into livestock and I felt like this is my chance to start something else so I moved up here.

I spoke to Linden in the kitchen of their current farm job in Wisconsin, a vegetable, livestock, and cheese farm. While serving as the livestock manager on this farm, Linden met another farmworker in the area through a dating app; this was Linden’s only in-person date and the two became a couple. Linden’s girlfriend moved to a city several hours from the farm at the end of the season and they continued to date long distance.

As we had dinner with Linden’s co-workers, one of whom was also queer, Linden shared their intentions to leave farming in two months. Linden described how their vision of an agriculture future had shifted after renting land:

My goal was always to own my own farm but after the [renting land] thing, I don't know. Well, I'll say this, I was sort of hoping to do the cooperative thing and I was considering renting or something, but after [renting land], I don't know, I just felt burned on that and I wanted it to be more straightforward so I was like, okay, my goal is to own my own farm and not have connections with other people owning other parts of the business. Now, I'm an employee again which is good and I think I could continue to do this if I got paid money.

Though Linden enjoyed their job, they earned \$10/hour and worked year-round. Linden explained:

I know there are farm employment jobs that people have for their whole life and that works for them. But I'm just not finding things [farm jobs] that really seemed to suit my particular needs and that combined with falling in love with somebody that doesn't really want a farm; [my partner] could live rurally, but I think it might be a stretch.

Linden was not giving up farming forever, but imagining “a different approach” “once we save up some money and have a little bit more stable job to have the freedom,” potentially in retirement.

Linden stated that while young people see farming as “really romantic and exciting,” they:

know the flip side of that and see a lot of people struggling, a lot of people who have partners with off-farm jobs which is great and a lot of people getting out of farming because it’s not working. And I think part of the reason of not farming too

is that I don't want to farm by myself and I don't really see how to make owning my own farm work financially.

Though Linden named finances explicitly, their trajectory to leaving farming contains implicit elements related to gender and sexuality. Linden fell in love with a woman for the first time on a farm. Linden dreamed of a collective or cooperative farm but shifted visions after an older man landowner gave two younger tenants—who both identified as women at the time—unsolicited advice and expected them to pay him thousands of dollars. This experience, though non-familial, is reminiscent of patriarchal gatekeeping in agriculture described earlier.

Following a break-up with their partner of six years, Linden found themselves once again on a farm with a queer boss and queer co-worker. Linden desired sole farm ownership, but their tenure in farm jobs provided insufficient capital to buy land. Additionally, Linden wanted to farm with a partner, but their partner was a young queer woman who did not want to farm or live rurally at that point in her life. Given that Linden only had one date while living rurally, it is possible that Linden doubted the likelihood of finding a joint farming and romantic partner if they remained in their current rural farm job.

Though Linden named economic instability as the reason they were leaving rural farming to live in a city with their partner, their trajectory demonstrates that queer gender and sexual identities impacted their decision. Queerness exacerbated financial and land access challenges that many young farmers encounter (Ackoff et al. 2017) in the form of heteropatriarchal gatekeepers and few prospects for life and farming partnership.

*Direct: Family farms and queer isolation.*

While some LBTQ farmers' farm exits indirectly connected to their gender and sexuality, some farmers named their gender identity and sexual orientation as explicit factors in their farm exit. First, the "family farm" model ties romantic/sexual partnership to business partnership,



hinging farming on a life partner. Given this pervasive model and the previously described economic challenges associated with farming, LBTQ farmers faced choices between romantic love and their love for farming. While some farmers in the sample chose their farming careers and the expense of romantic partners, some LBTQ farmers prioritized partnership. They were unwilling to farm without a partner or queer community, driving them off rural farms and into cities.

The family farm model became the goal for Allie and Shannon—white and in their 30s—who met while attending graduate school for food systems and eventually purchased farmland in Wisconsin. Allie’s farm vision included “a beautiful lifestyle” beyond income encompassing doing something she loved, with someone she loved, and raising a family together. Once on land and actualizing this dream by raising food, “it crashed and burned ... it only took a couple of months,” Allie told me. The couple split and Shannon kept the farm; Allie felt burned in love, family, and farming. I spoke to Allie when she lived in city; she was not considering returning to farming:

farming alone is, I don’t think, possible. Not for the human psyche, not for your sanity, not for the human hours needing. Farming alone, I don’t think, is okay for one person on an operation to do by themselves. I think you would need a partner.

To Allie, farming blurs the line between love and work, which is “a blessing and a curse,” and the emotional stock to return to farming was “overwhelming.” Allie concluded, “I don’t think I’d ever farm without my life partner” and her partner at the time had not given farming any thought. “That’s not to say that I don’t still miss it and that I don’t still love it and want to be a part of it and I’m very much looking forward to and excited to be back on the land and working.” After we spoke, Allie moved to the East Coast and worked one season on a farm, then in farmer service provider roles. After losing the land she owned with her then-life partner Shannon, Allie have not yet returned to owning land nor operating a farm business.

While Allie was unwilling to farm without a partner, other LGBTQ farmers sought a greater queer community than available in rural communities. After working on a lesbian-owned farm, Devin—white and 31—worked on women-run farms in central Illinois, northern California, and Oregon. Though women-run, Devin was the only queer person on each subsequent farm. She said, “the people were fine, but it was a little isolating working for straight people.” She felt burnt out after consecutive farming seasons and took a break from the field to live in Oakland, California—flush with queer events, she noted—with her girlfriend (Wypler 2019).

Similarly, Ella decided to leave a rural farm to live in an area with greater access to queer community. Ella attended a high school with a farming program and moved to work on a farm in rural Massachusetts after graduation. At 22-years-old, Ella decided to leave the farm in favor of a larger town, “Motivated by loneliness and a feeling that there’s so much more to explore.” Ella’s decision mirrors that of other rural LGBT young adults who choose to live in cities, at least temporarily (Annes and Redlin 2012; Gorman-Murray 2009). In an email, Ella anticipated returning to rural life one day:

It doesn’t feel like a permanent decision, I expect rural living to be a part of my life always, but for now it feels like the right thing and I feel very excited about the adventures to come, and exploring other pieces of who I am, urban living, art community, banging a bunch of ladies, etc. (just kidding).

Ella’s loneliness may in part be due a low density of queer people in her rural community, and though jokingly, the prospect of a denser dating pool may have contributed to Ella’s move. After completing a radio broadcasting program in the bigger town, Ella moved to Minneapolis to further pursue the career. Two years later, Ella began her undergraduate career on the East Coast where she plans to study queer theory. She has yet to return to farming or rural life.

While Devin and Ella experienced isolation as queer people in rural communities, *anticipated* queer isolation prevented LGBTQ farmers from fully committing to rural farming. When

I met Nan, she was deciding if she was going to farm full time; she was working on an urban farm plot and periodically caring for a peach orchard on her family's land in rural Missouri. She and her partner worried about moving to the farm as liberal queers, perceiving the town to be "redneck." Nan explained, "I don't fit the politics and I don't know where our peeps would be." When we stopped at the town's gas station, for example, there was a man in confederate flag patterned shorts. Nan also worried about connecting to her family:

I have nothing in common with my cousins. They are wonderful people. They're very religious. We're just different. Probably Trump voters. ... We're very head-in-the-sand people to the extent that I've only told a couple of people [in the family] that I'm gay.

When I was visiting, Nan's cousin and aunt—neither of whom were aware of her queerness—came over for dinner; I put on long pants to cover my hairy legs and removed my rainbow socks, indicators of my queerness that could risk outing Nan by association. Months later, I received an update from Nan that she had ceased working on the urban farm plot and was still periodically visiting the orchard, but had taken a full-time job as the director of an urban LGBT center. She had decided not to become a full-time farmer. Nan's concern about finding community in rural Missouri aligns with other lesbian farmers' experiences in the state (Cramer 2020).

To summarize farm exit, LBTQ farmers—like many farmers—struggle with the economics of the profession. Economic factors must be considered within the societal context in which women, queer people, and especially trans people have less access to capital and land on average; as such, farming challenges related to money and land cannot be teased apart from gender identities and sexual orientations. For example, heteropatriarchal gatekeepers to land may create precarious farming contracts for LBTQ farmers. More explicitly, the family farm model is constructed on a heterosexual farm, baking heterosexism into agricultural communities. LBTQ people, at times,

chose romantic partners and queer community over farming in rural communities with fewer opportunities for love and community-building.

## **Conclusion**

LBTQ farmers, like young farmers (Ackoff et al. 2017), trace pathways into agriculture that are not based on family land and knowledge. The majority of participants entered farming later in life after pursuing higher education in other fields and/or other careers, demonstrating the multiplicity and non-linearity of the farm entry process. When LBTQ farmers did possess family farmland or farm knowledge, heteropatriarchy in the form of familial patriarchs delayed their entry or minimized their leadership in sustainable farming. Heteropatriarchy in agriculture followed farmers through their sustainable farming careers, accruing and contributing to farm exits over time. Though heteropatriarchy created barriers to enter and remain in farming, queer sexuality served a dual function to draw LBTQ people into and out of sustainable farming. Queer identity formation and landyke dreams ushered some LBTQ to the career, yet the search for queer community drew others away from rural farming communities. These findings demonstrate the central role that sexuality and sexualized gender play in farm entry and exit, and call scholars and policy makers to incorporate queer perspectives when analyzing the future of farming.

These findings deepen understandings about the future of farming, specifically socially marginalized farmers' prospects and longevity in the career. First, literature on women sustainable farmers emphasizes the role that patriarchy plays in these farmers' careers (Sachs et al. 2016). By analyzing queer women, I demonstrate that sexualized gender, not just gender, is a key factor in farmers' experiences as these farmers lack access to a male counterpart to facilitate land access, respect, or knowledge acquisition. Heteropatriarchy, not just patriarchy, presents obstacles for LBTQ farmers' entry and retention in sustainable farming. Second, some LBTQ farmers' tactics

in the face of heteropatriarchy and heterosexism resemble the community agency and collective resilience (CACR) strategies derived from Black farmers' experiences (White 2018). LGBTQ farmers demonstrated collective agency in their efforts to overcome patriarchal gatekeepers and drew on community resilience with other queers to enter farming, sustain themselves as in rural farming communities, and even leave farming to have stronger ties with queer community. While future scholarship may use CACR as a framework to analyze LGBTQ farmers' experiences, sexual oppression should not be equated to racial oppression and resistance.

Finally, the findings align with emerging queer farmer scholarship, demonstrating that queer sexuality and gender identity are both sources of marginalization and resistance in agriculture (Cramer 2020; Hoffelmeyer 2019, 2020, 2021; Leslie 2017, 2019). Heteropatriarchy and heterosexism indeed presented barriers in LGBTQ farmers' careers, yet sexuality was not solely a source of oppression. LGBTQ farmers used their sexuality as a source of inspiration to enter farming, material support in the career, and community solidarity as farmers and individuals. In other words, LGBTQ farmers demonstrated creative ways to enter farming, yet their identities and creative solutions also rendered them vulnerable to exit. Overall, these findings expand conversations about the future of farming by contributing in-depth longitudinal data on how a group of socially marginalized individuals resisted oppression to enter sustainable agriculture, factors that support their longevity, and challenges that lead them away from fields.

This chapter challenges the bifurcation of farm entry and farm exit. Though I studied entry and exit as distinct processes, I found that they are practices that often blur. Given that farming is built on the economic and ideological "family farm model," U.S. agriculture is grounded in heteropatriarchy and heterosexism. Being LGBTQ in sustainable agriculture was a daily process that rubbed against these forces, pushing queer farmers away from the profession. At the same time,

everyday queer community resistance in the form of ideological support, farm co-workers and bosses, and rural queer community helped sustain LGBTQ farmers. Farm entry and exit both depended on a balance of these forces—heteropatriarchy and queer resistance—and only occurred with an accumulation of experiences.

Given participants' exodus from sustainable farming and rural communities during this research, the impact of queerness in farm trajectories should be further studied. Though a normative part of career trajectories, the number of capable and dedicated farmers who left the field over five years is concerning if we wish to build resilient rural communities and sustainable food systems. Further research is especially important given that U.S.-born white cis women in the Midwest constituted the majority of my sample, missing racist, transphobic, xenophobic, and regionally specific experiences that may contribute additional pathways into and out of farming. A national-wide survey on queer aspiring, current, and former farmers similar to the National Young Farmer Coalition's 2017 survey (Ackoff et al. 2017) would help clarify these trends. The chapter calls for farm programs and policies to bolster LGBTQ farmers contributions to rural communities and sustainable farming.

## **Chapter 2: Lesbian and Queer Sustainable Farmer Networks in the Midwest**

Heteropatriarchy underpins contemporary U.S. agriculture, even within the alternative sector. This chapter builds on legacies of women farmers and farmers of color creating peer networks to circumvent heteropatriarchal hurdles by investigating how lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer women (LBTQ) sustainable farmers access human resources. If and how did the farmers encounter or resist heteropatriarchy in this process? Drawing on five years of ethnographic research with 40 LBTQ Midwest sustainable farmers, I argue that resources through government agencies, neighborhood farmers, and like-minded practitioners did not necessarily align with LBTQ farmers' sustainable practices or queer identities. LBTQ farmers convened with others at the intersections of their queerness and sustainable practices formally, informally, and through the labor market to access human resources removed from heteropatriarchal domination. I conclude that LBTQ farmer networks bolster human resources in sustainable agriculture and conservation practices.

*In the summer of 2014, Devin—white and 31-years-old—moved from Chicago to rural Illinois to live and work on a small-scale sustainable farm. She had previously helped on an urban vegetable farm and her step-mother’s rural raspberry farm, and was excited to pursue agriculture full-time. Six weeks into the season, the farmers asked Devin to leave. “I actually felt a sense of relief,” Devin told me. “I did have trouble feeling comfortable with everyone because I was the only non-straight person there.” She speculated on why she was fired:*

I think part of it was that they were uncomfortable about my queerness and how I am not a conventional woman. I felt like there were aspects of my personality and the way that I express myself that would not have been a big deal if I were a man. I say that partially because I have lived as a man in the past. I did transition and live as a man for almost ten years.

*Devin believed that her sexual orientation and gender performance, in part, led to her termination from this sustainable farm.*

Despite its ecological focus, the sustainable agriculture movement in the United States has under-prioritized social issues, contributing to the further marginalization of certain social groups in contemporary U.S. agriculture (Guthman 2004; Williams and Holt-Giménez 2017). Devin’s experience turns our attention toward heteronormativity and traditional gender norms—collectively known as heteropatriarchy—that marginalize queer and gender non-conforming people in sustainable agriculture. Heteropatriarchy is “social organization in which patriarchal power interlocks with power advantages for heterosexuality, upheld through norms and institutions,” (Bell et al. 2021:235). Heteropatriarchy is deeply intersectional, privileging those who are white, cisgender, men, and/or heterosexual and limiting human resources for those who do not and cannot fit these boxes. By paying attention to dimensions of social power like



heteropatriarchy, campaigns for sustainable agriculture can gain opportunities to incorporate marginalized individuals into the movement.

In this chapter, I broadly ask: are U.S. farmers dismantling or reifying heteropatriarchy as they practice sustainable agriculture? Specifically, I examine a marginalized subset of the agricultural community: lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer women (LBTQ) sustainable farmers. Heteropatriarchy impacts who has access to vital resources—such as land, capital, and knowledge—for a career in sustainable farming. For example, government agencies that offer resources to farmers often cater to industrial farming practices and discriminate against women and racial and ethnic minority farmers (Brewer and Stock 2016; Sachs 1983; Trauger et al. 2010; Tyler et al. 2014). In this chapter, I focus on human resources—knowledge, mentors, and skills—and seek to identify how and where LBTQ sustainable farmers acquire them. In this process, do LBTQ sustainable farmers encounter heteropatriarchy? If so, do they resist it? Do they create alternatives to access human resources that support their careers as intensive land managers?

I draw on five years of ethnographic and interview-based research with 40 LBTQ sustainable farmers in the Midwestern U.S. I argue that LBQT farmers utilized government agencies, neighborhood farmers, sustainable agriculture groups, and women farmer groups, yet these outlets did not necessarily align with their sustainable practices or queer identity. LBTQ farmers created alternatives to access human resources where they could avoid heteropatriarchal dominance: they convened with others at the intersections of queerness and sustainable practices formally, informally, and through labor markets. Formal gatherings at farming conferences provided launching pads for informal connections among farmers, through which they gleaned knowledge and income outlets. LBTQ employees directly accessed human resources when they worked on LBTQ-owned farms, gaining a sense of solidarity in agricultural at defining moments

in their careers. These formative environments contributed to LGBTQ employees' desires to pursue a future in sustainable farming. I conclude that LGBTQ farmer networks and labor market opportunities circumvent heteropatriarchal gatekeepers to human resources, providing LGBTQ farmers direct pathways to knowledge, skills, and social networks to bolster their success as sustainable land managers.

Research on LGBTQ farmers' networks contributes to knowledge about social power in agricultural systems. It extends work on women and racial and ethnic minority farmer networks and cooperatives (Reynolds 2002; Sachs et al. 2016; White 2018), emphasizing social networks as a significant channel for marginalized farmers to circumvent discriminatory structures and gain resources. I add to the food justice literature that addresses social power in agriculture related to race, indigeneity, gender, and citizenship (Alkon and Agyeman 2011) by focusing on a lesser-studied aspect: heteropatriarchy. For conservationists and policymakers looking to shift U.S. agriculture, this chapter speaks to the importance of diversifying both ecological and social practices. If the U.S. aims to conserve healthy and productive agricultural landscapes, we must address social power in sustainable agriculture.

## **Literature**

Human resources constitute a vital component of an individual's ability to enter and succeed in farming. Capital broadly refers to "a usable productive resource" (Šlaus and Garry 2011) and human capital is defined as "knowledge, skills, attitudes and capacities of individuals as well as the social and cultural endowments of the collective" (ibid:98). Human resources in agriculture, therefore, capture an individual's access to knowledge about resources, information about practices, mentors to learn skills, and jobs to gain experience. Systems of social powers have determined who has access to human resources in agriculture.

The heteropatriarchal founding of contemporary U.S. agriculture concentrated access to resources in the hands of white men. At a time when women lacked political or economic power, white settlers systematically seized 1.5 billion-acres of Native Americans' land (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). White settlers then captured and trafficked African farmers to work on plantations. Black and brown people performed the physical tasks to establish agriculture as a capitalist industry—predicated on receiving non-existent or minimal wages—yet were denied the right to purchase land. White men owned the land and therefore controlled production, capital, and the overall system (Holt-Giménez 2017). Unsurprisingly, when the federal government created services for farmers, they catered to the most powerful agricultural players: white men. Federal government agencies and extension services—farmers' historic outlet for human resources—therefore underserved socially marginalized farmers.

Government institutions and agencies have a long-history of racially segregated and racist services. Land grant universities were first established in 1862, in part to provide agricultural education, and only served white students; institutions for Black students did not open until 1890 (Ammons et al. 2018).<sup>6</sup> U.S. Cooperative Extension has largely ignored Native American lands—despite obligations extending to the 1700s—or offered underfunded programs (Brewer and Stock 2016). Although some extension agents sought to better serve vulnerable producers (Clark et al. 2017), Black farmers remained hesitant to seek government assistance due to historic racial discrimination and a lack of outreach (Beratan, Jackson, and Godette 2014; Tyler et al. 2014). Similarly, Hispanic farmers reported limited interactions with government agricultural agencies (Lopez Ariza 2007), reflecting a disconnect between the programs offered and the farmers' needs

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<sup>6</sup> Segregated agricultural education continues with the designation of tribally-controlled Land Grant institutions to serve Native American students in 1994 (Ramaswamy 2015) and USDA grants for Hispanic-Serving agricultural colleges and universities since 2008 (USDA N.d.c.).

(Santos and Castro-Escobar 2011). These barriers impeded racial and ethnic minority farmers' access to human resources and reinforced heteropatriarchal power relations in agriculture.

In a similar vein, government regulations and agencies historically repressed women's ability to thrive as farmers. Women lacked the right to own land under coverture until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Haney and Knowles 1988). The rise of industrial agriculture presented further hurdles for women. This system of agriculture necessitated substantial investment (Guthman 2004), yet women lacked access to capital and government loans (Feder and Cowan 2013) in comparison to men; women therefore struggled to purchase acreage on their own (Haney and Knowles 1988). Additionally, extension services historically herded women toward household domesticity rather than production and industrial agriculture (Sachs 1983). Contemporary extension agents also conceptualized authentic 'farmers' and 'farmers' needs' as masculine and industrial, hindering women farmers, especially those in sustainable agriculture (Trauger et al. 2010). Taken together, government agencies' focus on industrial agriculture became a heteropatriarchal tool that marginalized women in agriculture.

Advocates position sustainable food systems—defined as “environmentally benign” by using traditional methods, small-scales, and diversity (Forssell and Lankoski 2015)—in opposition to industrial agriculture. Yet these systems can nevertheless reproduce heteropatriarchal structures. First, sustainable food systems exist within rather than separate from the corporate paradigm; they are most accessible to those with capital and resources (Alkon and Guthman 2017). Conglomerate corporations increasingly control the organic food sector (Howard 2016), aligning big organic with capitalist and neoliberal agendas. Even smaller-scale efforts such as farmers' markets, urban farms, and community support agriculture often value profit over equitable access to land and food (Alkon and Guthman 2017), limiting resources to socially marginalized farmers. Additionally,

hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal gender relations—documented in industrial agriculture—also pervade sustainable farms and impact control over resources (Chiappe and Flora 1998; Peter et al. 2010). Without an explicit eye toward social power, aspects of the sustainable food movement have perpetuated heteropatriarchy in agriculture.

Pervasive heteropatriarchy across agricultural sectors is a story not just of discrimination, but of socially marginalized farmers' resistance strategies (White 2018). Though farmers have challenged the government's discriminatory policies through well-documented lawsuits (Feder and Cowan 2013), this chapter focuses on non-legal alternatives for farmers to glean human resources: farmer-to-farmer networks and exchanges.

In contrast to exclusionary government programs, farmer networks subvert discriminatory gatekeepers and place control into farmers' own hands. For example, peer networks have helped organic farmers develop reflexive practices in the Midwest (Stock 2007) and innovative techniques in New York (Kroma 2006). Networks and cooperatives played critical roles in Black farmers gaining access to land and markets (Reynolds 2002; White 2018) and in Latinx farmers bringing attention to labor abuses and helping some achieve better pay (Leslie and White 2018). Women farmers also turned to one another for resources—especially those around sustainability—when excluded and marginalized in male-oriented spaces (Hassanein 1999; Sachs 1983; Sachs et al. 2016). These networks empowered farmers to make changes in their communities such as transforming vacant Detroit lots into community gardens (White 2011) and advocating for sustainable practices and conservation in Iowa (Carter 2017). These literatures suggest that LBTQ farmers—another marginalized group—may too encounter heteropatriarchy while accessing human resources and turn to farmer networks as an alternative.

Literature on the lesbian land movement—comprised of lesbians collaborating for rural land projects—can help proximate how today’s LBTQ farmers might use networks to access human resources. Influenced by four movements in the 1970s—radical feminist, back-to-the-land, environmental, and commune—lesbians established small, land-based, and rural intentional communities. They cultivated rural skills and served as land stewards, largely using the land for self-provisioning rather than market-oriented agricultural production. Though some lesbian lands remain internationally, the majority dissipated as a result of declining membership and funds (Anahita 2004, 2009). This movement remains significant as a model for rural queer networks and collaboration around land. The emerging literature on queer farmers, for example, captured New England farmers’ desires for connections to other queer farmers (Leslie 2017) and how such connections assisted in their efforts to access land (Leslie 2019). I contribute to this scholarship by explicitly focusing on LBTQ farmers’ networks and labor market opportunities.

While information on sustainable queer farmers networks is new to academic pages, these groups have shared information about themselves online and in print. Sustainable queer farmers have collaborated for specific events or outcomes. For example, queer farmers in British Columbia and Melbourne came together to create calendars and zines, respectively, and then disbanded. California Bay Area queer farmers met several times a year for potlucks and seed exchanges (Underhill 2015), while those in New York gathered at an annual sustainable farmers conference. These networks largely concentrate in cities and along coasts, sparking questions about how queer farmers in dispersed rural areas connect to one another. Do they gather for events or collaborations, or more informally? Do their connections have longevity? Do they gain human resources from these connections?

Research on how marginalized farmers fare in agriculture is timely given the declining ranks of farmers. U.S. farmers are on average 5 years older than 20 years ago and the number of farm operators declined by 3.1% between 2007 and 2012 (USDA 2014a). The number of farms decreased from 2.48 million to 2.11 million between 1982 and 2012, reflecting both the decline of farmers and the consolidation of farmland (USDA 2014b). Despite these decreases, women and racial and ethnic minorities represent an increasing percentage of farmers. According to Census of Agriculture data, women farmers nearly tripled between 1978 and 2007 from 5% to 14% (Hoppe and Korb 2013)<sup>7</sup> with higher densities of women occupying the organic sector (NSAC 2014). Hispanic, American Indian, Black, and Asian principal operators expanded between 2007 and 2012, with Hispanic primary operators notably increasing by 21% (USDA 2014a). The simultaneous decrease in farmers with an uptick of marginalized farmers suggests an apt moment to address social inequities in agriculture.

In sum, human resources are critical to farmers' success, yet racist and heteropatriarchal structures limited marginalized groups access to them. These patterns continue in sustainable agriculture. To resist, marginalized farmers turn to farmer networks, and are also increasingly represented in agriculture. These literatures suggest that LGBTQ farmers may encounter heteropatriarchy in their efforts to gain human resources, using queer farmer networks to do so. Investigating queer farmer networks may thus further expose heteropatriarchy's role in sustainable agriculture as well as shed light on LGBTQ farmers strategies for establishing ecologically and socially resilient food systems

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<sup>7</sup> The recent rise of women farmers should consider that the USDA Census of Agriculture began collecting data on women in 1978 and it only permitted one operator per farm until 2002. Heterosexual couples likely marked the man as the sole operator, under-representing women operators. Additionally, women have struggled to claim the title "farmer" despite their agricultural contributions (Brasier et al. 2014).

## Fieldwork

I began this ethnographic and interview-based project on lesbian, bisexual women, transgender, and queer women sustainable farmers in 2014 in the following Midwestern states: Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin.<sup>8</sup> I chose this population in this region for several reasons. To start, I resided in the Midwest and believed that my positionality as a queer person who previously worked on farms would facilitate rapport with participants. Furthermore, the literature lacked research on this subset of the queer farming community compared to gay cisgender men (Fellows 1996; Shah 2011). Information on queer farmers has emerged from New England (Leslie 2017; 2019) and queer farmer collaborations mentioned in the previous section concentrated along liberal coasts and in cities. In contrast, my research on the rural Midwest lies in the heart of the Corn Belt, known for commodity crop agribusinesses and conservative ideologies. By analyzing the rural Midwest, I can document LGBTQ sustainable farmers' experiences in a region dominated by industrial agricultural and thus far lacking research on queer farmers.

I recruited farmers through network sampling. I attended sustainable farming conferences, women farmer potlucks, and other agriculture events where I posted flyers about my study and brought up my research in conversations. The resulting sample consisted of 40 farmers representing 27 different sustainable farms. The farms ranged from half-an-acre to 200 acres and produced vegetables, herbs, livestock, fruits, nuts, mushrooms, and value-added items such as jam, sauce, soap, tea, and chocolate. All farms relied on direct-sales to consumers with the exception of one organic dairy. As for the farmers, they hailed from a variety of backgrounds—artists,

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<sup>8</sup> Some farmers worked in other regions before or after our initial meeting. I retained accounts from other regions to inform farmers' background and trajectories, but centered their Midwestern experiences.



veterans, musicians, students, and librarians—before entering agriculture. They ranged from 22- to 70-years-old, with an average age of 43. The vast majority identified as white (37) and cisgender women (36); Black (1), biracial (1), Hispanic (1), and transgender farmers (4) constituted a small portion of the sample. I intentionally oversampled cisgender women, small-scale, and sustainable producers. Five of the farmers exclusively worked on others' land; the remainder currently or formerly operated a farm. All farmers worked on rural land in their careers, though some transitioned to urban and suburban plots or left agricultural all together.

My field work was multi-sited and intermittent. Given that the farmers lived across low-density rural counties, I could not reach data saturation by embedding myself in any one community. I therefore travelled to different counties across several states to reach saturation. My interactions with farmers included afternoon visits, several consecutive days on a farm, or weekly sessions at a market. During the field work, I assisted farmers in daily tasks and accompanied them on deliveries or while running errands. I typed notes into my phone and/or audio recorded with the farmers' permission. Due to spatial and temporal distance, I relied on phone calls, text messages, and emails as data in between visits. I contextualized and triangulated the observational data by conducting semi-structured interviews about the farmers' sexuality and farming experiences. I audio recorded and/or took handwritten notes during these interviews. In my analysis, I identified emergent themes in field notes and interviews, then sorted and compiled the data into themes. In this process, I attended to my social position as a queer former farmer employee. Rather than attempt to speak for participants, I center their experiences and seek to maintain a participant-driven ethnography (Cobb and Hoang 2015).

## **Findings**

As LGBTQ farmers shared their experiences in agriculture, they addressed barriers and pathways to accessing human resources. These narratives were particularly salient for farmers in defining moments of their careers: as they entered the field or transitioned to new land or production methods. The farmers went to federal agencies, farmer neighbors, sustainable farmers groups, and women farmer groups to gain human resources to bolster their farming practices. While these outlets provided resources, they orientated toward industrial agriculture and heteronormativity. Farmers shared stories of circumventing these heteropatriarchal outlets by connecting with other LGBTQ farmers. Farmers directly accessed the human resources necessary to establish themselves as intensive land managers in part through networks—formal and informal—and labor market opportunities with other queer farmers.

#### *Encountering Heteropatriarchy*

Though government agencies, neighboring farmers, and like-minded practitioners provided LGBTQ farmers with support and resources, these outlets did not necessarily recognize or cater to their circumstances as queer sustainable farmers. For example, a government agent denied Erika—single, 30-years-old, and in her second-year farming for herself—a Farm Service Agency (FSA) loan. The agent claimed that Erika’s income projections and business plan were unrealistic based on his estimations of commodity pork prices and a budget for a family of four; he ignored that Erika raised higher price heritage pork and did not have a traditional heteronormative family, supporting only herself. Erika critiqued the agent’s decision as counter to FSA’s mission: ‘The whole point of the [FSA] plan is to help people who have been historically discriminated. Woman, poor, Hispanic, queer: [you] get points for all of those things and I am [them].’<sup>9</sup> She wondered if

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<sup>9</sup> While Erika believed that FSA’s mission encompassed supporting queer individuals, the FSA’s definition of “historically underserved farmers and ranchers” listed the following groups:

her gender played a role in the FSA agent's decision: 'I don't know if it would have been different if I was a man or whatever.' Without the loan, Erika struggled financially and delayed projects to promote sustainable practices such as permanent fencing for rotational grazing. In this instance, the FSA agent denied Erika based on heteropatriarchal assumptions about agricultural practices and family farms, compromising Erika's ability to manage her land more intensively and sustainably.

In addition to government agencies, the farmers utilized neighboring farmers for support. In the rural Midwest, industrial farmers constituted the bread and butter of participants' daily farmer networks. Shannon—a 36-year-old white farmer in rural Wisconsin—stated, "The running joke is that I'm basically surrounded by retired white men who are all wonderful and really helpful." These men helped cut Shannon's hay, but they did not understand her values around intensive land management. Shannon's relationships to the men in her neighborhood derived from proximity and necessity, but did not further her knowledge or skills as a sustainable land manager.

Though networking among sustainable farmers provided access to human resources related to conservation and sustainability, these opportunities varied in their support for queer farmers. For example, Laura—a 27-year-old white sustainable vegetable farmer based in Minnesota—felt at odds as the sole queer person among the sustainable farmers at the farmers' market. She told me, "My queer community is not my farming community and my farming community is not my queer community." Laura felt as if she had to pick one of her main identities: farmer or queer. This choice, in part, contributed to other participants leaving sustainable agriculture. In contrast, a young sustainable farmer group in Missouri was founded by three queer farmers. The group met

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women, African-Americans, Alaskan Natives, American Indians, Hispanic, Asian, and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (FSA n.d.).

on members' plots for potlucks and knowledge sharing. I joined a meeting alongside Mel—an organic vegetable farmer, lesbian, and one of the group's founders—during which she answered new farmers' questions about tomato trellising and selling to restaurants. The leadership by, concentration of, and respect for queer farmers in this Missouri group was not a given in the sustainable agriculture community.

Additionally, the farmers connected to human resources through women sustainable farmer groups. Approximately 40% of the farmers attended potlucks, workshops, conferences, or other events geared toward women sustainable farmers. Though these groups offered beneficial resources, members' farming scale and heteropatriarchal sentiments deterred some LGBTQ farmers from participating. First, Sarah and Vicky—a white married couple in their thirties who ran an organic dairy farm—never joined the women farmer group in their community due to scale, size, and income differences between their farm and group members' farms. Sarah critiqued the women in the group as operating 'hobby farms' of 'four sheep, three acres' who 'don't make a living on the farm.' Sarah did not perceive others in the group to be operating 'real farms,' perhaps reflecting an internalized heteropatriarchal definition of farming. As the dominant model of U.S. agriculture, heteropatriarchy may inform the ways in which lesbian organic farmers view other women farmers even though the power structure systematically disadvantages women across sexual identity.

Second, Liza, a 56-year-old white organic vegetable farmer, noticed that participants attending a women farmer conference discussed feeding cattle, cleaning the stalls, and milking heifers, yet saw their role on the farm in relation to their husbands. They referred to themselves as 'farmer's wives,' not 'farmers.' Liza branded the conferences 'too heterosexual and too dairy' for her and she ceased attending. Notably, Liza rejoined the conference after years of absence in order to attend a lesbian and queer farmer meet up in which she presented on lesbian lands history.

Similarly, Beth and Billy Jo, a white married couple in their 50's who ran a bed and breakfast on their farm, participated in a women farmer group that held seasonal potlucks. They chose not to attend the group's annual summer potluck that included members' male partners. Instead, they invited another lesbian farmer in the group and her lesbian intern over for dinner, terming it the 'satellite lesbian potluck.' The four lesbian farmers spent the evening discussing their sustainable farming practices.

Internalized and embedded heteropatriarchy at times deterred Sarah, Vicky, Liza, Beth, and Billy Jo from participating in women sustainable farmer groups. The farmers ostensibly missed out on resources—like skills and knowledge related to intensive management practices—that women sustainable farmers derived from engaging with one another. Their experiences demonstrated that lesbian farmers can hold heteropatriarchal views of agriculture and that women farmer groups—likely created to resist patriarchy and sexism—can nevertheless marginalize queer women. These farmers also demonstrated that they recognized the importance of connecting to other farmers: Liza rejoined the women farmer conference in order to attend the lesbian and queer farmer meet-up and Beth and Billy Jo held the satellite lesbian potluck. In doing so, they avoided heteropatriarchal dominance by establishing formal and informal LGBTQ networks to access human resources for their sustainable farms.

### *Resisting Through Queer Networks*

Some LGBTQ farmers resisted heteropatriarchy in spaces where farmers accessed human resources. They created formal and informal networks with other queer farmers as pathways to gain human resources—knowledge, income, and mentors—that helped them enter, maintain, and imagine careers in sustainable agriculture.

Formal queer farmer meet-ups at Midwestern farming conferences provided an opportunity for queer farmers to convene and create personal connections.<sup>10</sup> During the once-a-year formal meet-ups, attendees introduced themselves and offered or asked for resources. Attendees expressed gratitude for this queer space, feeling uncomfortable at times within the predominantly heterosexual family farm environment. Nan—white and in her 50s—attended a meet-up in the early stages of her farming career and became acquainted with two other sustainable farmers. She gained knowledge about their practices by subsequently touring each of their farms and serving on a LGBT agriculturist panel with them. Nan reported that she used this information when she made decisions about her land and farm business. Formal meet-ups not only provided solidarity at heteronormative farming conferences, but also launched informal networks.

Informal networks emerged as the dominant way in which LBTQ farmers drew on each other for human resources. Appearing as friendships, informal networks offered farmers knowledge and income opportunities: essential ingredients for a small sustainable farm's success. The relationship between two lesbian couples in Wisconsin demonstrated these elements. Beth and Billy Jo moved to Wisconsin in 2012, bought land, and opened a bed and breakfast on their farm where they raised chickens, goats, and hogs. Some of their first guests included Cate and Katie, a white lesbian couple in their 60s and 40s, respectively, who wanted to buy rural land to expand their urban garlic farm. Cate and Katie's connection to Beth and Billy Jo informed their search for land and the type of farm that they eventually established.

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<sup>10</sup> Approximately 45% of the farmers attended a queer farmer meet-up or topical session at a farmer conference. This number is likely higher than the average queer farmer for two reasons. First, I met participants through farmer conferences so attendees were both more likely to be in my sample and to attend queer-related conference events than those not present. Second, I responded to farmers' desire for queer farmer networking by organizing spaces at conferences for farmers to gather; therefore, farmers in my network were more likely to know about these events. Some of these spaces continued and expanded even when I did not organize them.

First, Cate and Katie become familiar with southwest Wisconsin by staying with Beth and Billy Jo, who then introduced them to other people—queer and heterosexual—in the area.

Katie: We stayed there [at the bed and breakfast] three times total. So yeah, they were a part of it [where we decided to look for land]. Every time we came back, it was them, but it was everybody. We were just like, ‘these are our peeps.’

Cate: It was Beth and Billy Jo.

Katie: It just feels right here.

Connections to “some of the dykes and some of the not” in the area solidified their decision to look for land in southwest Wisconsin. Second, they learned from Beth and Billy Jo’s arduous experience maintaining a large property with a deteriorating barn that they wanted a smaller plot without such a barn. Third, the couple helped Billy Jo tend to her animals, learning the labor, time, and cost associated with animal husbandry. They decided against raising animals, which further informed their specifications when searching for land. In 2014, Cate and Katie purchased a seven-acre property with a small barn just nine miles from Beth and Billy Jo’s farm; they planted garlic and did not raise animals. This informal relationship between lesbian farming couples informed the region in Wisconsin where Cate and Katie looked for land, the type of land they wanted, and the kind of farm they established.

Cate and Katie also gained income outlets through their relationship to Beth and Billy Jo. In 2014, Beth and Billy Jo opened a farm-to-table restaurant that provided at least three income pathways to Cate and Katie. First, the restaurant sourced garlic from Cate and Katie, becoming their top purchaser. Second, the two couples discussed plans for Cate to make garlic powder—a higher price value-added item—in the restaurant’s certified kitchen. Finally, Katie worked at the restaurant twice a week, bringing additional off-farm income to the household. The informal

network between these two couples provided Cate and Katie with human resources that facilitated them expanding their sustainable farming business.

Not all queer farmers knew others in their area or formed such connections; sharing a sexual identity failed to guarantee a relationship—let alone a beneficial one—between LBTQ farmers. Yet I highlight connections between queer farmers because they provided access to human resources for farmers' sustainable farming businesses. Though queer farmers formally convened at annual sustainable farming conferences, the bulk of the networking occurred informally. Informal connections provided farmers with knowledge and income outlets to build sustainable farming businesses.

### *Resisting Through Labor Market Opportunities*

In addition to networks, LBTQ farmers used labor market opportunities<sup>11</sup> to resist heteropatriarchy in agriculture. I spent time with sustainable farm owners or operators (4) as well as farm employees (7) who respectively employed or worked for other queer people. The employees accessed human resources to learn how to farm sustainably in an environment that embraced their queerness, contributing to their visions for a future farming career.

Some lesbian farmers had sought to work with other lesbians since the 1990s. During that time, the non-profit Lesbian Natural Resources (LNR) issued grants to help lesbian farm owners offer stipends to lesbian apprentices. Liza, an organic vegetable farmer in Wisconsin, offered apprenticeships under the program and continued to prioritize hiring lesbians once the grants ceased. Penny, a white 55-year-old, worked on Liza's farm and then started her own farm. Penny told me, 'I am biased,' in her hiring practices: she prioritized lesbians first, then straight women,

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<sup>11</sup> I broadly refer to internships, apprenticeships, and traditional employment as labor market opportunities.



and finally ‘nice men.’ However, she did not explicitly advertise her preferences due to legal concerns. Tash, the 68-year-old white co-founder of LNR, however, openly recruited lesbian applicants. She posted flyers at a farming conference for aspiring farmers to “Learn/Earn” on her farm, stating, “Lesbians especially encouraged to apply.” Neither Penny or Tash trained lesbians or queer people in the time that I knew them.

Rather than owner preference or recruitment, the LBTQ employees that I met on queer farms ended up there by happenstance. In 2017, I visited Mel—a white 41-year-old—on her organic vegetable farm in Missouri where she employed three lesbians for the season: Christina, Haley, and Morgan.<sup>12</sup> Mel did not seek lesbian employees and none of the three workers sought a queer-owned farm. Christina—27-years-old and white—however, did intentionally apply to organic farms anticipating that they would be more accepting of her sexuality and gender:

When I think organic growers, I think of people who are more socially conscious and who will probably be more friendly to someone who is gay or even having a woman on a farm because not everyone is very receptive about that. I think that was partly what interested me about it [Mel’s farm].

Christina did find an enthusiastic reception on Mel’s farm. She recounted one of her first days at work: “She [Mel] asked me, ‘Are you a lesbian?’ and I was like, ‘Yeah,’ and she was like, ‘DYKES, YEAH!’ and was screaming in the field, so excited about it. It was pretty welcoming.”

In this welcoming environment, Christina, Haley, and Morgan found queer solidarity and role models, a space to proudly and unconsciously be themselves. Chatting in the barn, I asked Haley—white and 22-years-old—and Morgan—white and 24-years-old—what it was like to work for Mel, for someone with whom they did not have to hide their queerness as I had once done as a farm employee. Morgan previously worked on heterosexual farms in Maine and did not disclose

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<sup>12</sup> All of Mel’s previous employees had been heterosexual, with the exception of one person.

her sexuality to the owners. Haley had only worked on Mel's farm and was in her second season.

Morgan: I mean it's great working for Mel. Mel is a really great boss.

Haley: I mean, even outside of

Morgan: Being gay

Haley: Being gay. She's good.

Morgan: It's really nice to not, I don't know. It's just kind of comfortable.

Haley: Yeah, 'cause it can be kind of exhausting to just always be around straight people. But the fact that there are so many gay people here.

Morgan: So many gay people.

Haley: It's like, what the heck? (laughs)

Morgan: I say, 'That's what she said,' a lot and I make little dirty jokes, and if they're gay, not everyone is like

Haley: 'Wait, are you gay??'

Morgan: It's just like 'OH!' It's just without even noticing.

They discussed feeling exhausted when around heterosexuals, but comfortable on the farm with Mel and the concentration of other queer employees. In this space, they could assume that people would understand them, a taken-for-granted privilege that heterosexuals have in most spaces.

Additionally, the employees' comfort on the farm derived from finding a role model in Mel. Haley came to work and live on Mel's farm after a series of events the previous year: she fell in love with her best female friend, realized that she was a lesbian, and dropped out of college to "take some time and breathe and figure shit out." She felt "just lucky" that she ended up working on a "lesbian's commune farm" in this moment of self-discovery. At the end of her first season, Haley said, "I wrote a letter to Mel that I never gave to Mel. In it, I was like 'Thanks for being a good role model, you and Annie [Mel's wife]. This is really great.'" Haley was not out to her family, but planned to share her sexuality with them in the near future.

Similarly, Christina had waited ten years to disclose her sexuality to her family: “I’m not super comfortable being out and being gay, and it’s not something I’ve been particularly vocal or proud about.” In contrast, Mel provided Christina an example of someone who embraced her queerness:

She’s [Mel’s] so proud and she is who she is and she’s a role model for me, where I can be like, ‘Oh, it is fine to be this person. Look how successful she is and she doesn’t give a fuck and you should not give a fuck too.’ Sorry for cursing.

Mel lived on the farm with her wife and their child, interweaving her personal life and farm business. Her organic farm therefore provided queer farm employees an opportunity to see a queer employer’s home life in a manner that would have been inaccessible in many other occupations. With Mel as a role model, Haley and Christina felt greater comfort and pride in their own sexualities.

Supportive queer environments contributed to beginning farmers’ desire to pursue careers in sustainable agriculture. Christina, Haley, and Morgan each reported that they love their jobs and plan to remain in farming. Most recently, Christina switched from part- to full-time on the farm and moved from the city to the country to be closer to her job. In a trajectory of young people leaving rural communities and farming, Christina dove in.

The benefits that queer people gleaned from working on queer-owned farms speak louder when compared to their experiences on heterosexual farms. Devin (from the opening field note) scrambled to find a new farm job after heterosexual employers fired her six weeks into the season. She found employment on a queer-owned organic farm in Wisconsin where she worked alongside her boss, two other queer workers, and met other lesbian farmers in the area. Devin was a year into detransitioning from living as a transman and reported that being around other masculine-presenting lesbians was “a really positive aspect of the summer.” She elaborated: “It’s been really

good for me to know people who can reflect something back to me. It helps my own sense of self.”

These connections also helped Devin escape restrictive notions about women’s physically abilities:

Being around [queer people], you just don’t have to deal with some bullshit expectations that you might get from all the people who have more traditional ideas of gender or what a woman is, not having lesser expectations of what you can do physically. You just don’t have to deal with that. It’s great.

After a heterosexual-owned farm thwarted Devin’s desire to work in sustainable farming, she gained human resources on a queer-owned farm. Like the employees on Mel’s farm, Devin accessed queer role models, queer farmer social networks, and comfort in her gender and sexuality in agriculture. She, too, wanted to remain in sustainable agriculture.

Three years later, Devin had worked on three women-run sustainable farms in Illinois, California, and Oregon. She told me, “The people were fine, but it was a little isolating working for straight people,” as the only queer person on each farm. She felt burnt out and she was taking a break from farming to live with her girlfriend in California’s Bay Area, which was flush with queer events, she noted. Looking back on her time on the queer-owned farm in Wisconsin, Devin said, “It was really good for me to work for another butch dyke who is around my age. I feel really lucky. It helped that the first person I worked for was another lesbian.” Devin wanted to return to farming and deemed an opportunity on women’s land in Oregon as the most realistic because, “at least I would be hanging out with other dykes.” In contrast to Christina who farmed full-time with Mel and moved rurally to do so, Devin parted with sustainable farming in favor of urban queer life until she could work in agricultural with other queer people.

Labor market opportunities on queer-owned sustainable farms provided queer employees direct access to human resources. Queer camaraderie, role models, and social networks in these jobs helped employees to proudly and unconsciously be themselves in an agricultural community, something they lacked on other farms or their life in general. In these havens from

heteropatriarchy, they did not have to pick; their queer community and their farming community could be one in the same. Working in queer agricultural environments at defining moments in their careers contributed to LBTQ farmers' desires to pursue a future in sustainable agriculture.

### **Conclusion**

Heteropatriarchy dominates agriculture in the U.S., creating barriers when marginalized farmers attempt to access human resources. I investigated the human resource outlets available to LBTQ people, where they encounter heteropatriarchal hurdles, and their strategies to circumvent these barriers in their efforts to thrive as sustainable farmers. My research spotlights LBTQ farmers in the rural Midwest, a region known for industrial farming and lacking research on queerness in agriculture. In the Midwest, government agencies, neighborhood farmers, sustainable agriculture groups, and women farmer groups did not necessarily align with LBTQ sustainable farmers' practices or sexuality. While these outlets provided human resources, they at times thwarted and deterred queer sustainable farmers. Some LBTQ sustainable farmers turned to one another as alternative routes to human resources. They connected formally at annual conference meet-ups where some launched informal connections. LBTQ farmers used these informal connections to access knowledge and income outlets for their sustainable farms. Additionally, LBTQ employees gained solidarity, role models, and social networks while working on LBTQ-run farms, contributing to their desires to remain in sustainable farming. These findings suggest that queer farmer networks and labor market opportunities can help LBTQ individuals circumvent heteropatriarchal barriers and directly access human resources, facilitating their entry and success in sustainable agriculture.

These findings contribute to literatures on social power in agriculture. First, the findings further demonstrate that government agencies are not necessarily trained or equipped to

successfully serve socially marginalized farmers (Beratan, Jackson, and Godette 2014; Brewer and Stock 2016; Santos and Castro-Escobar 2011; Lopez Ariza 2007; Santos and Castro-Escobar 2011; Trauger et al. 2010; Tyler et al. 2014). Heteropatriarchal understandings of farm practices and the family farm can compromise queer sustainable farmers' contributions to land conservation and restoration.

Second, the findings demonstrate areas of improvement for women farmer groups. These groups were founded in part to counter patriarchy in agriculture and they provide vital resources to women farmers (Carter 2017; Hassanein 1999; Sachs et al. 2016). However, their events and discourses may nevertheless embed heteropatriarchy and deter LBTQ farmers from participating.

Third, the findings add queer farmers to the ranks of other marginalized farmers who use networks to subvert exclusionary heteropatriarchal systems and gain access to human resources (Carter 2017; Hassanein 1999; Leslie and White 2018; Reynolds 2002; Sachs 1983; Sachs et al. 2016; White 2011, 2018). Queer sustainable farmers used formal opportunities like conferences as well as informal relationships to build their knowledge and skills as farmers.

Finally, the data uniquely demonstrate the importance of labor market opportunities for and by LBTQ farmers. These jobs allowed queer farmers to embrace their sexuality and gender identity at the same time as their agricultural dreams, establishing future desires for agricultural work and potentially rural living.

There is much work still to be done about heteropatriarchy in agriculture across populations and geographies. U.S.-born white cisgender women constituted the majority of my sample, missing racist, transphobic, and xenophobic dimensions of heteropatriarchal power in sustainable agriculture. Future research is necessary to investigate how queer Indigenous farmers, queer farmers of color, queer immigrant—documented and undocumented—farmers, and transgender

farmers access human resources. Additionally, the Midwest setting begins to fill geographic gaps in queer farmer research, yet each region carries its own agricultural priorities and demographics. Research on other regions would help identify the human resources available to queer farmers more broadly and the various conditions under which queer sustainable farmer networks develop. A national quantitative survey would be particularly useful for gauging the breadth and scope of my qualitative findings in the queer sustainable farming community.

Heteropatriarchy's dominance in post-settler U.S. agriculture concentrated power in the hands of few at cost to natural resources. One pathway to protect and conserve resources would be to equitably provide land and human resources to a greater diversity of farmers in local communities. Racial and ethnic minority and women farmers have paved these roads by creating networks and cooperatives to gain human resources that advance their sustainable practices. This work urges government agencies, farmer organizations, and farm owners to instate policies that similarly help queer farmers access resources through queer farmer networks and labor market opportunities. These outlets can help bring LBTQ farmers into sustainable agriculture and support their continued involvement in intensive land management. Such policies are crucial for bolstering queer farmers' contributions to transitioning the U.S. toward a more ecologically and socially just agricultural system that supports rural communities.

### **Chapter 3: Land Allyship: The Promises and Limitations of Rural Solidarities**

The quintessential image of a U.S. farmer—an older, white man—obscures the experiences of queer sustainable farmers in rural communities. Queer farmers live alongside neighbors who practice industrial agriculture and whose religion may teach them that queerness is morally unacceptable. However, over five years of ethnographic research with queer farmers in the rural U.S., I observed symbiotic and respectful relationships between queer farmers and their rural neighbors. How do people build bonds across difference, especially in a moment of intense polarization? I theorize a mechanism of *land allyship*: a commitment to a shared threatened value of rural agrarianism. Land allyship presents a mechanism to bridge diverse populations in which differences and stigma remain. Queerness need not be accepted for queer people to thrive in rural areas; rather, the perception of queer people as hardworking farmers becomes their master status, a master status that reframes them as moral. Land allyship encounters limitations when queer farmers' other identities threaten rural neighbors' gender and racial privileges. This work contributes insights into how people negotiate difference, find common ground, and mutually thrive in a particularly divisive historical moment.



At least 2.9-3.8 million people living in the rural United States identify as LGBT (MAP 2019). This statistic may surprise readers who associate queerness with urban areas, a common tendency known as metronormativity (Halberstam 2005). While rural areas offer fewer resources to queer people than urban areas, the majority of rural residents—though more likely to vote Republican or oppose pro-LGBT legislation—support nondiscrimination policies for queer people (62% compared to 72% of urban residents) (MAP 2019). Queer people have a rich history of rural inhabitation (Anahita 2004, 2009; Fellows 1998; Howard 1999; Johnson 2008; Johnson 2013; Shah 2011) and many foreground their identity as a rural person (MAP 2019). In this chapter, I seek to move beyond the mere existence of queer people in rural areas to examine their identity management strategies (Goffman 1959), particularly their interactions and relationships with rural neighbors.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars demarcated eras of queer experience that moved from “closeting” before World War II to “coming out,” shifting to today’s “post-gay” era beginning in 1998 (Seidman 2002). According to this periodization, in the post-gay era individuals have more liberty to choose the role of sexuality in their lives. Scholars argue that two main features define this era: increased internal diversity within the LGBTQ community and increased assimilation of LGBTQ people into mainstream society (Seidman 2002). Acknowledging that privileged members of the queer community may more easily find a foothold in mainstream society (Ghaziani 2011), the notion of queer assimilation raises points of tension around queer people’s different experiences with mainstream institutions (Bernstein 2005; Duggan 2002; Ward 2008) and the queer identity management strategies they use in engaging with those institutions (Orne 2011, 2013). Scholars debate the relative efficacy of queer communities critiquing mainstream society in order to change institutions (a politics of difference), versus participating in those institutions to

create change from the inside (a politics of similarity). In delineating these approaches, scholars outline the ways queer people may disclose or conceal their sexuality, debating the imperative to be out (Guittar and Rayburn 2016; Orne 2011, 2013; Savin-Williams 2006; Seidman 2002).

I take up these debates in the rural United States to deepen understandings of how rural queers manage their identities and build relationship in the post-gay era. Previous research demonstrates that rural lesbians and gay men may find belonging in rural communities by conforming to notions of rurality (Kazyak 2011, 2012; Silva 2017) or may carve out physical and online spaces to express their non-normativity (Gray 2009). These approaches would appear to fit a pattern of queer assimilation. And yet, these strategies are not available to all. For example, neither of these options were feasible for Black lesbians in the contemporary South who struggled to find belonging at the intersections of their identities (Eaves 2016). Given that the ability to employ assimilation strategies varies for individuals whose queerness intersects with other categories of difference, and given the varied nature of rural communities, I ask: when and how do queer people conform to rural ideologies, carve out spaces to express their queerness, or engage in other processes? In interactions with rural neighbors, how do queer people manage their identities and account for these connections? More broadly, how do these negotiations inform our understanding of both queer experience and rurality in the post-gay United States?

In this chapter, I analyze lesbian, bisexual women, transgender or genderqueer, and queer women (LBTQ) sustainable farmers' interactions and relationships in their rural Midwestern communities. Specifically, I examine their interactions with neighbors—people who live in close proximity and have somewhat regular interactions with participants. These queer farmers exist in a zone of tension. While their farming practice aligns with the economic, social, and cultural significance of agriculture in rural Midwestern communities, their gender identities and specific

farming practices place them outside of norms in the region where cis men and commodity production dominate. As such, LBTQ sustainable farmers straddle the line between similarity and difference in their rural communities, offering theoretically rich grounds to analyze rural queer identity management and assimilation.

Drawing on five years of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with 40 LBTQ farmers across the Midwest, I argue that the LBTQ farmers I studied combined a politics of difference and a politics of similarity to build bonds with rural farming neighbors through a process that I term *land allyship*: a commitment to a shared threatened value of rural agrarianism. Some participants found belonging in their rural communities through their connection to land and agriculture. In a moment of threat to small- and medium-sized farms, ‘farmer’ became a more salient identity that they ascribed to themselves and others. Likewise, neighbors foregrounded participants’ farmer identity—an identity connected to sacred and moral work. As such, LBTQ farmers transcended stark divides between embracing similarity or declaring difference; they found belonging in rural communities as farmers even if their sexuality was not centered nor fully accepted. Participants demonstrated a variety of identity management techniques as they bonded with neighbors through land allyship. While land allyship offered a pathway for farmers to bridge some differences, it did not apply when rural neighbors’ gender and racial privileges were at stake. In short, land allyship was more available to white LBTQ farmers than to farmers of color or gay cisgender men.

This chapter theorizes a mechanism for rural queer assimilation that interweaves a politics of difference and a politics of similarity through a dedication to a shared threat: rural agrarianism. It deepens rural scholarship within queer studies by nuancing previous articulations of rural queer assimilation. This work demonstrates that queerness need not be accepted or hidden in order for queer individuals to find belonging in rural communities. Broadly, this chapter shows that

threatened values may shift the salience of identities, building alliances while maintaining differences.

## **Literature**

### *Post-Gay Era*

Scholars describe the current era—beginning in 1998—as post-gay: a period in which individuals have more options than the “stark choices” of either being in or out of the closet (Seidman 2002). In this era, “as individuals live outside the closet, they have more latitude in defining themselves and the place of homosexuality in their lives” (Seidman 2002: 88). These choices, however, occur within a context of larger macro-structural dynamics such as neoliberalism (Duggan 2002) and normalizing politics (Seidman and Meeks 2011). The micro-level also impacts queer individuals’ choices in this era; queer people report facing stigma related to their sexuality (Orne 2013) and use identity management strategies to navigate disclosure (Orne 2011). Research on how queer people define the place of their sexuality has focused on urban areas (Orne 2011, 2013) and workplaces (Adkins 2000; Compton and Dougherty 2017; Dellinger and Williams 2002; Giuffre et al. 2008; Hearn and Parkin 1995; Lerum 2004; Raeburn 2004; Ueno et al. 2018; Ward 2004; Williams et al. 2009; Yoshino 2006). This project shifts attention to rural communities and interactions with neighbors, rather than strangers, co-workers, or family.

Three points of tension emerge regarding the post-gay era. First, activists and academics debate the efficacy of a politics of similarity versus a politics of difference. The former emphasizes commonalities between gay and straight people’s values and goals, while the latter challenges heteropatriarchal systems. Mainstream LGBTQ+ campaigns have increasingly adopted a politics of similarity by focusing on rights-based activism such as marriage equality (Seidman 2002). Rights-based approaches lean toward assimilation in that lesbians and gays, for example, may seek

the ability to get married rather than undo oppressions associated with the institution. Some scholars argue that these campaigns embed neoliberalism and capitalism in their ideologies, which benefit those who have the most to gain in the queer community (Duggan 2002; Ward 2008). As such, privileged and “respectable” members of the LGBTQ+ community may have greater opportunities to choose the place of sexuality in their lives during the post-gay era. Other scholars, however, argue that a focus on marriage equality could pave pathways for new LGBTQ+ political agendas (Bernstein 2015). Participants grappled with this tension between similarity and difference as they discussed their relationships with rural neighbors, emphasizing commonalities with straight farming neighbors while also maintaining strong personal queer identities.

A second debate in the post-gay era surrounds the necessity of queer identity management. Some scholars argue that coming out as queer in the post-gay era no longer requires identity management (Savin-Williams 2006; Seidman 2002). However, Guittar and Rayburn (2016:346) assert that, “The management of one’s identity—affirming it, deciding when to speak of it, when to deflect, when to compartmentalize—is all central to coming out.” Orne (2013:242) finds that when facing uncertain receptions (rather than clear acceptance or rejection) to their sexuality, queer young adults engaged in three management techniques: they *take* (“absorb the hostility directed toward them” in order to “improve future conditions for other queer people,”), *deflect* (claim a less stigmatized identity like ‘bisexual’ rather than ‘pansexual’), or *dodge* (disengage from the interaction) stigma in their interactions. In addition, young gay men used management techniques to reveal, or not, their sexuality through strategic outness: “the continual contextual management of sexual identity” (Orne 2011:682). Based on their interactional partner and the social context, participants shifted between four strategizes: *direct disclosure* (“I’m gay”), *clues* (indirectly hinting at their sexuality), *concealment* (explicitly manipulating behavior to hide

sexuality), and *speculation* (putting the onus on others to ask about their sexuality). I apply Orne's (2011, 2013) typologies—derived from interviews—in my analysis of queer farmers' interactions and accounts of interactions with rural neighbors.

These identity management techniques trigger a third debate in the post-gay era: is concealing queerness problematic in the post-gay era? In the workplace, Yoshino (2006) argued that lesbians and gays “covering” their sexuality was only problematic when the employer required it, not if the employee chose it themselves. Some employees echoed this sentiment—reporting that self-silencing and self-monitoring afforded protections and would not detract from their sexual orientation (Compton and Dougherty 2017; Ueno et al. 2018). Williams et al. (2009:43), however, argues that these perspectives derive from “a rather static understanding of identity and difference, a problem inherent in many rights-based approaches to challenging social inequality.” In this chapter, I shift from workplace interactions to those among rural neighbors. I avoid moralizing a queer person's chose to disclose their sexuality; rather, I aim to document the salience of queer identities among an array of other identities and values.

I contribute to the sexualities scholarship by focusing on queer people's identity management techniques in three ways. First, I analyze interactions and relationships between people who know each other, rather than between strangers. Second, these individuals interact as neighbors, rather than in workplaces or family units in which additional factors just as compensation or housing may impact identity management techniques. Finally, I shift away from analyzing queerneess in urban areas to examine queer identity management in rural settings. The following section reviews the rural queer scholarship, focusing on assimilation and identity management.

### *Rural Queerness*

As previously mentioned, one main assumption of the post-gay era is that queer people have assimilated into mainstream society (Ghaziani 2011). Research specifically on queer assimilation foregrounds geographic assimilation by examining residence. Whereas queer people were associated with urban residential enclaves—such as the Castro—in previous eras, studies document the decline and transformation of gayborhoods (Ghaziani 2014; Orne 2017; Oswin 2008) and queer people living in small cities and suburbs (Brown-Saracino 2018; Ghaziani 2015). Research, however, on queer assimilation and identity management in rural communities presents mixed findings.

Cultural notions ranging from research topics to political speeches paint queerness and rurality as antithetical. Studies depict queer white people comfortably living in cityscapes flush with queer events (Ghaziani 2014; Orne 2017) and city mayors encouraging rural youth to migrate to urban areas. In 1977, Harvey Milk, America's first openly gay elected public official, encouraged young rural gay men contemplating suicide to migrate to San Francisco: "My name is Harvey Milk—and I want to recruit you." More recently, Mayor Michael Bloomberg responded to LGBTQ youth experiencing bullying and committing suicide by echoing Milk's recruitment: "New York City wants you. New York has always been the place where anyone can go and be who they are supposed to be" (Stapel 2013). This urban-rural queer divide presents a false dichotomy derived from *metronormativity*—framing urban queer experiences as the norm and urban residence as the sole pathway to a thriving life for a queer person (Halberstam 2005). While LGBTQ people indeed moved to metropolitan areas in the 1970s and early 1980s in the "Great Gay Migration," some felt isolated or out-of-place upon arrival, exposing the urban-rural dichotomy as a "gay imaginary" (Weston 1998).

Further dissolving belief in the incompatibility of rurality and queerness, sexual minorities have long lived in rural areas. While some chose to leave rural areas after childhood, others remained in the country or returned to rural inhabitation later in life (Fellows 1998), challenging metronormative understandings that queer migration exclusively occurs from the country to a city. Historic research on rural queer experiences predominately focuses on men, depicting sexual intimacy between transient men working on farms (Johnson 2013; Shah 2011), in everyday southern institutions (Howard 1999; Johnson 2008), and in rural Midwestern communities (Fellows 1996). Rural communities accommodated queer men by ignoring difference, what Howard (2001) terms the “heterosexual-will-to-not-know.” Non-heterosexual rural experiences diverged, however, based on race (Johnson 2008; Shah 2011)—discussed later in this section.

Although sexual minority women outnumber sexual minority men in non-urban areas (Ghaziani 2015), sparse historical literature focuses on their experiences. Historical accounts explicitly document queer women living rurally and communally beginning in the 1970s. At that time, four movements—radical feminism, back-to-the-land movement, environmentalism, and the commune movement—coalesced to influence lesbians to establish intentional communities in the lesbian land, or landyke, movement (Anahita 2004). These communities were often small, land-based, and rural—located on less desirable, and therefore less expensive, land (Anahita 2009). Women in the movement aimed to create a space free from and in resistance to patriarchy, sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism (Anahita 2004). They sought to serve as land stewards, cultivate rural skills, and empower themselves as women; landyke communities became a means and end to activism (Anahita 2004). Although relatively few women lived on the land, many came for temporary visits, weekend retreats, or the annual Landyke Gathering (Anahita 2009). These



communities existed relatively removed from surrounding communities, offering isolation as a mechanism for queer people to make a life in rural communities.

Rather than examine interactions among rural queers, my analysis focuses on how rural queer farmers interact with neighbors who may or may not be queer. Orienting to the contemporary moment, quantitative research finds that 62 million people live rurally in the U.S. and 2.9-3.8 million identify as LGBT (MAP 2019). Rural areas in general face declining populations, limited job prospects, and few healthcare options; these challenges may be accentuated for queer residents due to increased visibility, fewer alternatives, less structural support, less supportive political landscape, fewer legal and policy protections, and less political power (ibid). Yet, “LGBT people in urban and rural areas report similar levels of subjective well-being, health, and satisfaction. In discussions with LGBT people living in rural communities, researchers find that for many LGBT people in rural areas, living in a rural area may be just as important to who they are as being LGBT” (ibid). This quantitative data suggests a more complex picture of rural life for queer people beyond discrimination and forced migration.

Qualitative research deepens our understanding of queer rural livelihoods, demonstrating that rural queer experiences may differ based on gender, age, and race. In terms of gender, studies indicate that rural gays and lesbians found belonging in their communities by conforming to notions of rurality (Kazyak 2011, 2012; Silva 2017). U.S. society constructs rurality as masculine and in opposition to urbanity; rural areas are places of hard labor, farm work, and rugged individuals (Kazyak 2011, 2012). Rural queer interview participants coded gay men as urban and effeminate, and reported that community members disapproved of or harassed effeminate men. Whereas stereotypes about gay men undermined rural masculinity, “female masculinity, so long as it was entangled with the country rather than the city, further strengthened women’s ability to

assert belonging in small towns” (Kazyak 2012:17). Given the stigma around men’s same-sex desires, rural straight-identified men who shared sexual intimacy with other men verbally distanced themselves from stereotypic notions of gay men. In fact, they redefined their sexual practices as normative and aligned with rural masculinity (Silva 2017).

In terms of age, queer youth took an alternative approach to find social supports in rural areas. Whereas lesbian and gay adults may conform to notions of rurality to find belonging, queer rural youth embraced their non-normativity; they carved out public spaces and online platforms to express their queer identities (Gray 2009). It is important to note that these findings—on both gender and age differences—draw on data from predominately white participants. Queer people of color report different experiences and outcomes when finding belonging in the rural U.S.

While white queer individuals report conforming to rurality or carving out spaces for themselves in rural communities, these pathways may be less available to queer people of color. Though we lack demographic data on the number of queer people of color in the rural U.S., data indicates that 1 in 5 rural residents is a person of color, 2 in 5 LGBT adults are people of color, and nearly half of transgender adults are people of color (MAP 2019). Queer people of color in rural communities may face compounded racial and sexual discrimination, and their race may be a more salient identity than their sexuality (ibid). While the "queer of color" critique emphasizes the intersections of sexuality and race (Manalansan 2018), less research focuses on the experiences of queer people of color in rural areas. In terms of finding belonging in rural communities, neither conforming nor carving out were options for Black queer women in the contemporary south (Eaves 2016). Participants struggled to find “visibility and affirmation of their full selves” in public spaces, encountering heteronormativity within black churches and racism within LGBTQ spaces

(Eaves 2016:150). In other words, assimilation pathways for white queer people may not be afforded to queers of color in rural communities.

Given these mixed findings on queers in rural spaces—communities with fewer queer resources and less public support—the processes through which queer people manage their identities and establish community bonds in the rural United States remains unclear. Do queer people conform to rurality ideologies, carve out spaces to express their queerness, or other processes? In these interactions, which identities become salient?

### **Fieldwork**

I collected ethnographic and interview-based data from farmers in the Upper Midwest (Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin) beginning in 2014. I focused on farmers given agriculture's historic, social, and economic importance in rural communities. Rural farming also typically binds a person to a specific and visible place, differing from jobs that require commuting to an off-site location or working from home on a computer; for example, visitors to the land may witness the products of the farmer's labor in more obvious ways than the labor of an IT assistant who works from home. Not only are farmers connected to place, but they play a key role in food systems. As such, they may engage with other people at feed stores, farmers markets, equipment suppliers, or the like. Though it is important not to conflate spatial proximity with social connectedness (Dupuis and Goodman 2005; Hinrichs 2000), farmers may regularly interact with an interdependent web of farmers, local business owners, and customers. As such, sampling from this occupation allows me to analyze individuals who likely connected to rural land and were known and/or visible to others in their rural communities due to their farming work.

Among farmers, I focused on lesbian, bisexual women, transgender, and queer women sustainable farmers in order to examine the understudied intersection of patriarchy with

heterosexism and/or transphobia in agriculture. I also believed that my positionality as a queer person who previously worked on small sustainable farms would facilitate rapport with participants. The Midwest location facilitated analyzing these queer farmers' experiences in a region known for industrialized agriculture and conservative ideologies, rather than in coastal or liberal hubs (Leslie 2017, 2019) that may be more receptive to alternative farming practices and sexual and/or gender minorities. In this vein, I focused on sustainable farmers because commodity farming dominates Midwest agriculture; I was curious how individuals practicing less common agricultural methods fared in their rural communities. While I specifically sampled for queer farmers who use sustainable practices, it is important not to conflate these two categories; queer farmers do not necessarily practice sustainable techniques and sustainable practitioners are not necessarily queer (Dentzman et al. 2021). Together, this population allowed me to analyze people who are multiply othered *and* active participants in their rural communities.

I contacted farmers through network sampling at farmer conferences. My sample of Upper Midwest LBTQ farmers includes 40 farmers and represents 27 different sustainable farms. The farms ranged from half-an-acre to 200 acres, with the vast majority 40 acres and under. The farms produced vegetables, herbs, livestock, fruits, nuts, mushrooms, and value-added items such as jam, sauce, soap, tea, and chocolate. All farms relied on direct sales to consumers with the exception of one organic dairy. Over the course of the research, all farms except one relied on off-farm income through other jobs or their partner's off-farm income.

The farmers ranged from 22- to 70-years-old, with an average age of 43. The vast majority identified as white (37) and women (36); Black (1), biracial (1), Hispanic (1), and transgender farmers (4) constituted a small portion of the sample. The sample is younger and more racially diverse than the average Midwestern farm operator. For this analysis, it is important to note the

farmers' relationship to rural communities. All farmers had farmed or were currently farming in rural communities over the course of the fieldwork. Of the 40 farmers, 8 grew up with farms in their families: 5 grew up on a farm and 3 spent time on their grandparents' or extended families' farm. Of these 8, 4 farmed family land: one retired from farming yet remained on the land, one stopped farming for market and remained living on the one-acre property, one did not live on the land, and one lived and farmed on her family's land. Of the 4 remaining farmers, one farmed in the community—but not on her family's land—where she grew up. The other 3 farmers lived and farmed in communities different from their upbringing. For the 32 farmers who did not grow up farming, they moved to rural areas to have a connection to land, to work on farms, or to start their own farms. As such, the sample countered metronormative depictions of queers migrating away from rural areas permanently; this sample contains people who remained in rural areas, returned to rural areas, or moved to rural communities. The sample also largely consists of newcomers to the rural community in which they live and farm. Though the farmers live or farm rurally, they lack generational ties to communities, ties that are common among neighbors.

As previously noted, rural does not equate to straight nor to industrial farming practices. The farmers in the research often knew other queer people and other sustainable growers in their broader communities; however, their immediate and closest neighbors were predominately straight and practiced industrial agriculture. There was a notable exception in which two lesbian farming couples each purchased a parcel of another queer farmer's land over the course of the research.

My fieldwork was multi-sited and longitudinal. My interactions with farmers included afternoon visits, several consecutive days on a farm, or weekly sessions at a market. During the field work, I assisted farmers in daily tasks and accompanied them on deliveries. I typed notes into my phone and/or audio recorded with the farmers' permission. Due to spatial and temporal

distance, I relied on phone calls, text messages, and emails to collect data in between visits. I contextualized and triangulated the observational data by conducting semi-structured interviews about the farmers' sexuality and farming experiences. I audio recorded and/or took handwritten notes during these interviews. I conducted supplemental interviews with LBTQ farmers in other regions as well as LBTQ farmers' family members and co-workers. In my analysis, I identified emergent themes in field notes and interviews, then sorted and compiled the data into themes.

### **Findings**

Metronormative understandings foreground negative experiences between rural queers and their neighbors. Though negativity did not dominate queer people's interactions with neighbors, I must acknowledge that these moments did occur for queer farmers. For example, Kathy lives on a farm 20 miles from a Midwestern city with her partner Dawn and their dogs, cats, and horses; a neighbor threatened to kill Kathy & Dawn's animals. Dawn believed that the neighbor made the threat, in part, because he did not support their "lifestyle" – code for their sexuality.

While tense and negative moments occurred with strangers in rural communities, two other farmers recounted instances in which they experienced or perceived threats from neighbors. In one case, a neighboring farmer—a straight man—entered a lesbian farming couple's house while they were sleeping. They believed that the neighbor's behavior was directed at them as two women; in other words, he would not have come into a house where a man lived. In another instance, a farmer in Minnesota perceived her neighbors—a man and his children—to be giving her hostile stares aimed to intimidate her as a lesbian when she first moved to her land 35 years ago. Since then, the farmer slowly befriended these neighbors and she believes that the wife voted in favor of gay marriage in the state as a result of their friendship. These interactions demonstrate that negative

interactions for queer farmers may occur with their neighbors, but for women in this sample, they were not pervasive, and these relationships may change over time.

Rather than negative interactions with neighbors, most of the queer farmers I interviewed spoke of their symbiotic and largely positive experiences with neighbors. Lean and sturdy at 5'7", Sarah—white and 35 years old—wore low loose jeans, work boots, and a yellow shirt that read “America’s Dairyland” with statistics on the amount of money each Wisconsin dairy cow contributes to the state’s economy. Her blue eyes lit up passionately when she pointed out her favorite young cows across the pasture and introduced me to her tractors. Sarah began farming beef cattle conventionally with her grandfather—working supplemental jobs to support her farming—and then bought her own land in 2010. ‘It was a big year,’ she told me. ‘Got a girlfriend, bought a farm.’ Although she and her wife Vicki graduated high school together in 2000, they connected romantically ten years later and married in 2015. They transitioned the farm to organic production in 2017, raising organic crops for cattle feed and 104 Jersey cows on their 200 acres.

Sarah observed, ‘The kind of farming we do is so male-dominated.’ Other than her farm, she could only name one woman in the area who runs a dairy operation. When I joined the couple to milk 50 of their cows one evening, Sarah and Vicki’s stories about farm support and friendship featured local straight people, especially men who farm: ‘Primarily we hang out with straight people.’ Sarah told me about Mike, a ‘farming friend.’ ‘We go back and forth on equipment,’ she said, by loaning each other farm implements and tools. She described him as a ‘huge redneck’ who takes her to shoot guns in the winter. In terms of her sexuality, ‘I think he [Mike] would probably punch someone if he said something [about my sexuality].’ Sarah and Vicki’s cordial relationship with their neighbors was quite common among research participants. The farmers were integrated

into their rural farming communities and maintained friendships with straight men in farming, commonly by borrowing equipment or helping each other with projects.

Yet, these relationships were not without tension or complexity. Below, I interrogate how farmers manage their queer identity with rural neighbors. I demonstrate that LBTQ farmers may occasionally rely on concealment or speculation (Orne 2011) in order to preserve their connections to rural farming neighbors. In subsequent sections, I analyze the farmers' accounts of their identity management techniques.

### *Navigating Belonging: Concealment and Speculation*

Though queer people in the post-gay era have greater possibilities to define the role of their sexuality in their lives than in previous eras, external relationships and context still influence the queer people's choices and decisions (Orne 2011, 2013). An individual's queerness may create gaps between the person and members of important—and largely straight—groups in their life. In my research, I found that lesbian farmers sometimes manage their queer identities through concealment or speculation (Orne 2011) when interacting with rural farmers and neighbors.

Helen—a white 61-year-old farmer in Iowa—selectively discloses her sexual identity based upon her audience. Helen shares her sexuality with trusted friends in town: straight coworkers at her part-time job and a lesbian couple. However, Helen appeared to conceal her sexuality with local men in agriculture, indicated in a fieldnote from my time on her farm:

Mere minutes from the 350-person town's center, Helen's property felt remote and isolated as I pulled off the dirt road bordered by pasture and woodlands, parking in her gravel driveway. That evening, a large tree snapped, propelling trunk, limbs, and leaves across the driveway and barricading my vehicle from accessing the road. The next day, Helen and I cut off branches with handsaws and tree loppers. As we worked, Helen enthusiastically referred to my outfit—baggy work pants, an A-style grey tank top revealing unshaved armpits, and a baseball cap—as “butch,” a term and identity embraced by some masculine-of-center lesbians. She also applauded my “lumberjac’ing” skills—a play on my name, Jac. Helen called a 70-year-old man from town to help cut the large trunk and haul it into the woods; she permits



him to grow potatoes in her garden in exchange for help on the farm at times like these. When he arrived at the top of the driveway with his four-wheeler and chainsaw, Helen asked me to put a long-sleeved shirt on over my tank top. She later explained that he is “modest” and thought that my tank top would make him uncomfortable. She then introduced me to him as “Jackie”—a name I have never used—and referred to me that way for the remainder of his stay.

When the man from town arrived, Helen’s property transformed from a lesbian-centric place to an arena that minimizes lesbian cues. I had the distinct impression that Helen asked me to cover my armpits and feminized my name in an effort to reduce the chance that the neighbor might read me as a lesbian, and then assign Helen’s sexuality by association. This dynamic not only speaks to Helen’s identity management techniques, but also to patterns between researchers and rural queer participants. When conducting interviews with Black southern gay men, E. Patrick Johnson (2008) found that participants preferred to meet him in private or in public places away from their own communities. Johnson (2008) believed that closeted—or selectively out—participants perceived that his queerness could risk revealing their sexuality.

Rather than intentionally conceal her identity, Laura—a white 27-year-old vegetable farmer—allowed her sexuality to go unmentioned in her community. In other words, Laura did not directly disclose or conceal her identity; she placed the onus on others to speculate about her sexuality (Orne 2011). When I visited Laura, she was farming vegetables on two-acres of a straight couple’s livestock farm in rural Minnesota. Previously, Laura and her then-partner worked together on a Texas farm where the owners asked the couple to hide their relationship in front of board members. Laura’s partner left the job early, partially due to the stress of concealing the relationship and the ambiguity of when, where, and with whom they could be out. On her current farm in Minnesota, Laura ate lunch inside the farmhouse with the farming couple, their six children, a babysitter, and an employee several days a week. Laura suspected that the farm couple was aware of her sexuality, but did not want to talk about it. Laura did not bring up the topic; when

I spent time on the farm, Laura and I ate lunch outside away from the family. She did not introduce me or explain the purpose of my visit to anyone present that day.

Laura struggled with the fact that the farm family and local farmers were not aware of her sexuality. After two years, she confided, she expected that the farming community would know that she was queer. She attributed their lack of awareness to the fact that she was single; she hadn't figured out how to communicate her sexuality without a partner whose mere presence would signal her queerness. As such, Laura felt at odds as a queer farmer: 'My queer community is not my farming community and my farming community is not my queer community.' She felt as if she had to pick one. At the time, she chose the farming community, feeling awkward about introducing her sexuality into conversations about carrots and pest management with fellow farmers at the market.

Laura and Helen found belonging in rural agriculture communities by selectively concealing their queerness or allowing others to speculate about it. Previous research has documented that queers in the post-gay era sometimes use codeswitching techniques in their interactions (Orne 2011, 2013); these stakes may feel higher for rural farmers who have fewer resources and protections in their communities (MAP 2019) and rely on interpersonal networks for land access and crucial farm tasks. While this situation stressed Laura, research indicates that for some individuals, being out or embraced as queer is not essential to a full and satisfying life (MAP 2019). In an age of identity politics and authenticity, it may seem counterintuitive that some queer people may not center their queerness and may not feel compelled to ever do so. As such, I was curious to understand salient identities and values for queer farmers as they interacted with rural neighbors. How did these farmers understand their ties to rural agricultural neighbors with whom they did not fully express or embrace their queerness? In the next section, I argue that

participants' identities as farmers and values around land—especially in a moment of rural agrarian precarity—bond them to neighbors.

### *Shared Threat in the Agrarian Context*

Agriculture concentration has increasingly threatened small-and-midsize family farms' existence and livelihoods. A confluence of factors—including government incentive, global trade, farm debt, and chemical inputs—have contributed to declining numbers of farms and farmers in the U.S. (Howard 2016). For example, the number of farms in the U.S. decreased from 2.48 million in 1982 (USDA 2014b) to 2.02 million farms 2019 (USDA 2020b). From 2007 to 2012 alone, the number of farm operators declined by 3.1% (USDA 2014a). Despite the decline in farms and farmers, the amount of land under agricultural production remained stable. In other words, farmland has been swallowed up by large industrial and corporate farms. Corporatization pushed small- and medium-sized farms out of business or into precarity, eroding social and economic vibrancy in rural communities. Industrial farming contributes to air, land, and water pollution, and exacerbates climate change, which may contribute to reduced production and jeopardize food security (Howard 2016).

These challenges impact tenured and beginning farmers differently. The average U.S. farm operator is 57.5 years old (USDA 2019c); farmers over 55 manage almost two-thirds of U.S. farmland (Ackoff, Bahrenburg, and Shute 2017), yet struggle to remain in the fields. Changes in technology, government, and climate create an agricultural landscape in which aging and experienced farmers struggle to maintain a viable business, pass along their farm to successors, or remain on their land in retirement. Their “failure” provides opportunities for large landowners to expand operations, contributing to increasing consolidation in agriculture (Semuels 2019).

At a time when the number of farms in the country is decreasing, the number of young farmers is increasing. While the number of farmers 35- to 64 years-old decreased 2%, young farmers (less than 35-years-old) increased by 11% (USDA 2020a). Young farmers are more likely to have less than 10 years of experience and are also more likely to work off the farm for income (ibid). Young farmers name access to land, student loan debt, labor, and health insurance as their largest challenges to establishing and remaining in agriculture (Ackoff et al. 2017). Despite some cohort differences, both groups struggle with the intertwined issues of land access and financial solvency that are necessary for creating, maintaining, or retiring from a farm business.

I argue that the precarious state of rural agrarianism is a shared threat facing queer farmers and their rural neighbors. The concept of shared threat derives from social psychology, particularly an experiment known as Robber's Cave. In these experiments, Sherif (1961) divided boys—notably white boys—into two groups at a summer camp. The two groups, the Rattlers and the Eagles, initially competed against each other and developed strong in-group preferences and out-group biases. When the research team created a situation—a shortage in the water supply—that threatened both groups, the two groups worked together cooperatively to solve the challenge. After collaborating, each group reported less outgroup bias toward the other. I use shared threats to theorize relationships between queer farmers and their rural neighbors, specifically examining the state of rural agrarianism in the United States. This threat poses economic and social risks and appears to unite neighbors to face this challenge despite their different—and often oppositional—farming practices and identities. Below, I argue that white LGBTQ farmers are able to integrate into local communities in part due to shared values around land and hard work at a time when agriculture faces numerous threats. I used the term *land allyship* to designate this land-based mechanism to establish bonds across differences.

*Interdependence Around a Shared Threatened Value*

LBTQ farmers in my research were often surrounded by neighbors growing corn and soybeans who used pesticides and large machinery to do so. The farmers in my research remained committed to their sustainable practices and belief that their practices were better for the health of communities and the environment. They acknowledged these practical and ideological differences with their neighbors, a politics of difference, yet they oriented themselves toward two things when describing their connections to their small- and medium-sized farming neighbors: threats to rural farming and interdependence. In this section, I focus on these accounts from two different perspectives: 1) a perspective that sees rural farming at large as under threat, represented by farming couple Keo and Oke, and 2) a perspective that sees beginning farmers as experiencing heightened precarity, captured by Ella.

In contrast to the straight flat roads that traverse much of the Upper Midwest, the roads leading to Keo and Oke's Wisconsin farm curved up and down over the terrain. I arrived at their property, identifiable from the gravel road due to the hoop house and vegetable fields, as the sun was rising on a cool September morning. I pulled into the gravel driveway—passing their house on the right and their chickens and the sheep (including Cher and Lady Baba) on the left—and parked by the barn at the bottom of the driveway.

Keo and Oke—white and 34 and 41 respectively—moved into the property the preceding March. The previous owners were two straight couples who raised vegetables together. Keo and Oke were married themselves and both genderqueer; Keo used he/him pronouns at the time (now they/them) and Oke used they/them. Keo and Oke share their queerness on social media, but have not explicitly come out to their neighbors as queer or genderqueer; they managed their queer identities through speculation (Orne 2011). According to Keo and Oke, neighbors appeared to

register that the couple is non-normative. For example, one neighbor referred to them as a “non-traditional couple.” At a neighborhood barbeque, Keo told me that people were calling Keo “she” and Oke “he” at first, but ended by calling both of them “she.” Keo said:

I’m not really that interested in having a coming out to a neighbor. You know? I just don’t foresee it happening soon, and maybe it will, we will know them for a long time. ... That may change, and I may come out to my neighbors, but in this moment, I feel fine in being seen as not something that may put me in danger.

In the first year of living on the land, Keo did not feel compelled to share that they are queer or transgender with neighbors. Keo oriented toward the likely long-term relationships with neighbors, and did not feel it was necessary in the short term to “come out” as transgender person, an identity that could put them in “danger.” Like Laura and Helen, Keo and Oke chose not to foreground their queerness among rural agricultural neighbors, but instead focused on connections to land, a politics of similarity.

In their neighborhood, Keo emphasized the importance of supporting other people on land. Keo elaborated by describing their relationship with a dairy farmer across the street; the neighbor was the same age, father to three children, and plowed and cut hay for the couple, but:

We have really different practices. His wife has a vegetable garden, and he’s said, ‘If there were Roundup Ready vegetables, I would buy them. That’s what I would plant. These weeds are annoying.’ And we are just going to have to agree to disagree. The thing is that it really doesn’t matter, maybe we will have that conversation later. We are going to be the same age forever, and if all goes well, we will do that within a mile of one another, being almost the closest neighbors. My intention is to be here long enough to see their kids grow up. His 4-year-old wants to be a goat farmer. Their success is the most important thing to me, not that spraying herbicides and pesticides *isn’t* important—it is—but we cannot have the discussion on herbicides and pesticides right now. There is no security right now, the way that the milk market is, he’s gotta figure out a way to make his farm viable, so that he can pay his mortgage, so that he can continue to be there. I gotta support that, even though he wants to grow Roundup Ready vegetables, we have got to put that aside for a minute and move on. We have to be allies for each other on the basics first. I think that’s important.

In this quote, Keo acknowledged the differences with the dairy neighbor, but felt that they were more connected as farmers who face challenges to staying in agriculture. Keo named factors—such as milk prices and mortgage payments—that may threaten the neighbor’s ability to continue farming. Keo supported the dairy farmer’s ability to farm first and foremost before addressing differences in farming practices like the use of pesticides.

While concerned for the vibrancy of the agriculture community, Keo’s desire for the dairy neighbor to succeed is also self-interested. According to Keo, if the dairy farmer failed to establish a viable farm business, he would most likely sell the land to a family with 10,000 acres who raised seed potatoes; Keo alleged that seed potatoes are often heavily sprayed with pesticides tied to brain cancer. Keo concluded:

Now we are playing a little game. We have to make sure that whoever is living in that house continues to live there so that it doesn’t turn into a storage shed for all these semis that are bringing seed potatoes back and forth.

Keo preferred neighbors running a conventional dairy with 100 cows to those who grow a heavily toxic crop.

In other words, Keo found common ground with dairy farmer by orienting toward long-term land use and farm continuity. Keo was willing to put aside conversations about identity and pesticides now in order to establish a vibrant farm community with many nodes:

We are not looking for independence. We are looking for interdependence. I want that in the neighbors that surround me and in the greater sense. I want to be able to depend on this network. If you do everything yourself, and you break yourself, you can’t do everything.

The vision for interdependence was becoming a reality for Keo:

I do feel like the three closest neighbors, and then [neighbor], who is the best friend of the guy at the end of the road, those are all people that I would absolutely go to for help if I needed help. That is really important. We are far from a hospital, it’s far, 10-20 minutes from the nearest town. It’s kind of isolated. It feels like a big

relief that we know who our neighbors are. You can't really know until you get to know them. So that feels really exciting.

Keo felt supported in their neighborhood, a relief for newcomers to an isolated rural community. This support and connection around land, especially given the threats facing farmers' continued existence—transcended differences in how Keo and their neighbors worked the land or whether neighbors used the correct pronouns to refer to Keo and Oke.

Ella—white and 22-years-old and a newcomer to farming— shared this sense of relief at being a part of an interdependent rural farming community, but also grappled with her differences in this community as a queer woman. Ella participated in a farming program during high school and then worked on a farm in rural Massachusetts.<sup>13</sup> She left the farm to live among “radical queers” in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, and then returned to agriculture by working on a farm— owned by a straight couple—in rural Massachusetts. I connected to Ella through an article that she wrote for a queer women's blog about her experiences as a rural queer farmer; like Keo and Oke, Ella presented herself as queer online.

The farm was nestled in a town of 1200 people between Northampton (“a really lesbian town”) and the Berkshires (“a wealthy resort town”). The town was an “economically depressed” area known for agriculture, but with farming practices that differed from Ella's sustainable farm. Most of the farms were “much more conventional ag,” which was initially a struggle for Ella. Ella discussed how she came to appreciate connections to conventional farming neighbors:

I think for me, another big learning thing about moving to [this town] was not to write these people off. To not feel like ‘They're not doing the farming that I want,

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<sup>13</sup> Ella became part my sample because of her time in Minnesota; several farmers lived in different states and regions prior to my research. Though Ella reflected on her time in Massachusetts in these quotes, these dynamics illustrate larger patterns for LGBTQ sustainable farmers.



they're not down on the politics that I want, they don't have anything to offer.' But in fact, they've been on this land for generations. And they just know how shit goes.

Like Keo, Ella acknowledged differences with neighbors, but did not dismiss them; she recognized that the neighbors were knowledgeable about the land and that this knowledge was valuable for her as a new young farmer.

Ella connected to conventional farming neighbors through their common work on the land; these connections provided material support to Ella's farm as well as camaraderie:

It's been really nice. There's been a lot of relationship-building. We'll have the guy, they do the corn around us, and they'll come and do tractor work for us if we need it. And the excavator, we can trade for potatoes and that kind of thing. So it feels like there are total overlaps. And also, we'll be hanging out with them, and we'll be like, 'Oh, you want kale?' And they're like 'What the fuck is kale?' So you learn what you can connect on and what you can't connect on. And we took apart the barn this year, because we got a grant to build a new one, and we reused all the wood. And this couple who also kind of doesn't really get a lot of what we're doing... they were over drinking beer, and were like, 'That is so cool!' They come in their tractor, they don't get out of their tractor, they come over with beer, and pass the beer and everyone just stands there. [laughing] But they thought it was so cool that we were reusing the wood. That was so meaningful to them.

Living in this community, Ella developed relationships with neighbors by prioritizing the values that they both shared—like reusing wood—and tuning into the other farmers' knowledge.

As a young person in farming, Ella stated that these connections were crucial for farm success:

It's just hugely correlated with success in farming. You need those relationships, it's such a collaborative [career]... there's so much necessity for having extra hands, and being able to barter, and calling people to ask for help... I think it's vital for community and personal health, but also from a business perspective.

Whereas Keo highlighted dairy industry precarity for their neighbor, Ella emphasized the threatened position that new farmers like herself hold in agriculture. She needed help and mentorship from experienced neighbors in order to establish personal and community health, and business success as a beginning farmer.

While Ella acknowledged that farmer-to-farmer mentorship was crucial for beginning farmers, women and queer women may face challenges in establishing these connections:

I think farming mentorships are really important, more than other jobs, because there isn't a university or formal educational system set up. And it's something that's consistently been harder for women, and specifically queer women, in finding those mentorships. Because I think a lot of those avenues are cut off, or feel cut off, for me. I'm sure other people are able to navigate more gracefully than I have. But it's harder for me to [ask] a misogynistic 40-year-old white dude, 'How do you do this?' [when I'd rather say], 'Okay, don't fucking tell me what to do.'

In this quote, Ella conveys that she struggled to accept mentorship from older men in agriculture, anticipating that the men would hold misogynistic perspectives. Similarly, Ella recounted that she did not feel comfortable asking co-workers—men in their mid-30s—for help when she worked on a nearby dairy farm:

And I just didn't—in that environment—really feel comfortable, saying 'I need help, what's going on.' Because of this sexuality and gender dynamic that I felt that I always had to prove something.

She elaborated:

Personally, as a queer woman, I'm used to posturing. It's hard for me to be vulnerable, because I feel like I have something to prove a lot of the time. So learning how to do that with men in their 60s, who aren't really going to be respectful, and who are misogynists. So that feels like a big thing that I'm still trying to navigate.

Ella was in an on-going process of allowing herself to be open to connections with neighboring farmers. In her perspective, these older men held valuable knowledge and could contribute to her farm career, but receiving their help challenged her ideologies as a queer woman.

In this section, I discussed how LGBTQ farmers justified connections to neighbors with small- and medium-sized non-sustainable farms. Participants acknowledged farming differences with their neighbors and the challenges as LGBTQ people in heteropatriarchal communities. Yet, participants oriented toward interdependence around a shared threatened value—one with social

and economic consequences—to establish bonds with neighbors. These findings show that queer farmers engaged in both a politics of difference and politics of similarity, foregrounding agriculture and farmer identities. Below, I shift perspective from the queer farmers to their rural neighbors to establish an assimilation pathway for rural queers that I term land allyship.

### *Land-Based Work Ethic*

In this section, I examine the ways that rural neighbors perceive their queer farmer neighbors. Due to IRB protocols, I did not interview neighbors directly; I observed interactions and elicited farmers' memories about interactions. A theme that reoccurred in these stories was the perception that neighbors respected the farmers for their hard work. I was particularly interested in farmers who were known to be queer in these communities, rather than those who may have concealed or left their identity to speculation. As such, this section focuses on Mel, an organic vegetable farmer who is married and has a child.

I met Mel—white and 41 years old—in a parking lot off the highway so that we could travel together to a young farmer monthly meeting. Her Subaru contained two bumper stickers: her organic vegetable farm's logo and a Human Rights Campaign logo known to symbolize LGBTQ rights. Mel wore a shirt that read "MO Farms. MO Food," jeans (never shorts, she told me), Teva sandals, and an orange hat with her farm's logo. She had a tattoo of a garlic plant on her right forearm and a filigree design on her left ring finger to signify her marriage to her partner, Annie.

Though Mel spent time once a month with other young farmers in the state, she primarily interacted with farmers in her neighborhood. Mel lived and farmed on land at the end of a mile-long dirt road 45 minutes from the nearby city. Though a Missouri native, Mel did not grow up in this community: she moved here after dropping out of graduate school to pursue a career in

agriculture. In comparison, many of her neighbors descended from families with over a hundred years in the community. One such neighbor was Ned, a heterosexual farmer and retired school bus driver in his 70s; his family used to own the property where Mel farmed organic vegetables, flowers, and laying hens.

When I visited Mel, she shared stories of Ned helping change the tire on her manure spreader, cutting down trees on her property, and cultivating her fields with a tractor. Mel gave Ned and his wives tomato plants, and they canned tomatoes for Mel and Annie. Mel referred to Ned and his wife as her adopted grandparents. Though the two couples connected over farming and its edible byproducts, Ned remained confused by Mel's organic farming practices. According to Mel, conventional practices were the norm in the community and organic practices were generally regarded as economically unfeasible.

The two also did not see eye-to-eye on religion and queerness. Ned belonged to a church that does not support homosexuality. When Mel and Annie invited Ned and his wife to their commitment ceremony—a form of direct disclosure (Orne 2011)—Ned came to her field, crying, to say that he would not attend because of his religion. Mel summarized the relationship:

Even though [Ned] and I do encounter certain limits to our relationship – [Ned] didn't attend [Annie's] and my commitment ceremony and despite his invitation I chose not to attend his church – our friendship remains strong because it is based on respect for each other, for hard work, for caring for the land, and for nurturing friends and family.

In this quote, Mel acknowledged differences with Ned in terms of religion and sexuality, particularly how his religion perceived queerness. Despite these tensions, Mel highlighted how the two bonded over respect for each other's hard work to care for land.

In this community, hard work on land not only garnered respect, but also acceptance. Mel wrote: "As [Ned] often says to his neighbors, 'Any two women who work as hard as they do are

okay in my book.” Other community members shared this perspective. Mel recounted a conversation in the town’s diner in which Mel’s friend overheard two men gossiping about the farming lesbians who had a baby. The one man told the other that he heard the farmer is a real hard worker, so they are probably okay. In these exchanges, heterosexual neighbors appeared to wrestle with Mel’s queerness, and ultimately deemed her acceptable due to her work ethic as a farmer.

Durkheim (1915) discussed the division between the sacred and the profane, and Orne (2017) applied this divide in sexualities: straightness aligns with the sacred while queerness falls into profanity, in part for non-procreative sex. Though I cannot say without speaking directly to these neighbors, research has shown that rural residents are less supportive of pro-LGBT policies than urbanites, on average (MAP 2019). But in these communities, farming was sacred; it marked legacy, identity, and notably hard work.

Work ethic, according to classic (Weber 1905) and contemporary (Shklar 1991) sociologists, has a moralizing quality to it. While dominant groups have branded subordinate groups as lazy to demarcate moral failings and to justify discrimination against them, it appears that people may use hard work to justify a member of a profane group as a morally acceptable individual. My data suggest that in these rural farming communities, where rural agrarianism is under threat, queerness may be less important than being a hardworking farmer. In other words, Mel’s work ethic as a farmer appeared to be more salient to members of her local community than her sexual identity or her farming practices.

As previously noted, the queer assimilation literature largely presents two paths toward queerness in rural spaces: 1) queer people may conform to rural culture, a politics of similarity, or 2) queer people may carve out spaces to center their queer identities, a politics of difference. Each of these pathways may encompass multiple identity management techniques. Based on my data, I

argue for a more nuanced pathway that I term land allyship. Some queer farmers found belonging in their rural communities through their connection to land and agriculture. In a moment of threat to small- and medium-sized farms, ‘farmer’ became the most salient identity that they ascribed to themselves and others. Likewise, others foregrounded participants’ farmer identity, an identity connect to sacred and moral work. As such, queer farmers transcended stark divides between embracing similarity or declaring difference; they found belonging in rural communities as farmers even if their sexuality was neither centered nor accepted.

### *Land Allyship Meets Social Power*

While land allyship is a mechanism to help explain relationships between LBTQ farmers and their rural neighbors, land allyship cannot form bridges across all identities. Rural agrarianism is just one of many values in rural communities and land allyship is challenged when it meets competing values that threaten neighbors’ gender and racial privileges. In this section, I revisit Sarah and Vicki to demonstrate heteropatriarchal challenges to land allyship, and tell the story of a Black lesbian farmer, Mo, to demonstrate racial barriers.

Sarah and Vicki, the dairy farmers discussed earlier, maintain close relationships with heterosexual farming neighbors in their community. Sarah especially spoke about her friendship with Mike—the two shared tools and equipment and went to the shooting range together. Mike’s wife, however, did not approve of his friendship with Sarah and Vicki; according to Sarah and Vicki, Mike’s wife believed that something sexual occurred between them and Mike.

Like Mike’s wife, other local men sexualized Sarah and Vicki. The men ‘just want to get between us,’ they told me. Vicki nonchalantly observed that, ‘They think of us as their porn fantasy.’ Standing at 5’3” with curly chin length hair in a half ponytail, laced up brown boots,

fitted jeans, and a green shirt, Vicki—who and earned her MBA before farming full-time—stated, ‘We’re just things.’

As indicated in the rural queerness literature (Kazyak 2011, 2012; Silva 2017), Sarah and Vicki’s community also demonstrated contradictions in their receptiveness to queer women versus queer men. For example, Sarah told me about Jamie, a married farmer who was also transitioning his dairy farm to organic production. Sarah and Jamie helped each other with milking and talked on the phone, but did not spend much time socializing in person. Jamie’s wife recently asked him to apologize to Sarah; as he had recounted an interaction to Sarah and Vicki, he had demeaned a person in the encounter by calling him ‘a fag.’ Sarah told me that she had not noticed Jamie’s word choice because ‘he’s not like that.’ Sarah described him as ‘nice’ and Vicki corroborated by calling him a ‘nice man.’ Beyond derogatory words, Jamie and other men in their community recently cut ties with another a farmer, a man, who came out as gay.

Among my participants, Sarah and Vicki were relatively distinct in that they grew up and remained in the community where they farmed. Though well integrated into the farming community, their friends included straight people who hypersexualized them and ostracized gay men. Vicki’s comments suggest that lesbians did not threaten men’s social dominance if they are still framed as subordinate women, especially as sex objects for the male gaze. In contrast, men’s queerness was policed for challenging the gender order, a form of gendered homophobia (Pascoe 2007). While Sarah and Vicki acknowledged the sexualizing, they did not explicitly mention that their acceptance in the community may have been contingent on being queer women rather than queer men. Land allyship was a mechanism for LGBTQ farmers to establish bonds with rural neighbors, but this pathway appeared more available to women: objects of male gaze, who did not challenge men’s dominance in heteropatriarchy.

A second challenge to land allyship involves race. Most of my sample was white and unreflective about the role of their race in their majority white rural farming communities. Farmers of color had different perspectives.

On land seven-miles from the St. Louis arch, Mo—Black and 59-years-old—farmed flowers. We sat outside in the summer sun next to her greenhouse as she recounted how she became a farmer. Mo had worked in New York City as a social worker and traveled to Missouri to attend her mother’s wedding. During the honeymoon, Mo house-sat her mother’s property—complete with a greenhouse and rose beds—and fell in love with flowers. She quit her job and left New York City to pursue soil and horticulture degrees in Missouri. She then purchased land to start a flower farm in rural Missouri. She described the area:

It was like four intersections with a stop sign, I mean it was very rural. And I guess I could say I was closeted. I mean I wasn’t really closeted. If you got to know me, you immediately would know that I was a lesbian because I didn’t hide it, but you had the yahoos who lived on the street and I didn’t have a relationship with them. It just doesn’t come up. The issue for me was more around race.

I asked Mo to elaborate on how race played a role. She explained:

Well I mean you know they’re [white conventionally farming neighbors] like, ‘Okay, who’s that Black girl? What was she doing? What? She bought a tractor?’ They were watching all the time and then as people got to know me, they would drive down the driveway: ‘So what you doing now? You’re planting flowers? Well you can’t eat flowers, what are you going to do with those?’

Living in the country as a single Black lesbian woman, Mo felt that her race was more salient than her sexuality. She felt surveilled by the white men who farmed in the community, men who would drive down her driveway unannounced and question her farming practices.

In addition to these dynamics, Mo lacked connections to people similar to her. She did not know other Black people or people of color in the area, nor other lesbians. While she did eventually connect with Mel—a white lesbian farmer 50 minutes away—Mo’s community centered around



other farmers at the farmers' market in St. Louis. Eventually, Mo stopped farming on her rural land and moved to St. Louis. She remained involved in the farming community as a cooperative extension agent. When her now-wife wanted to farm together on Mo's rural land, Mo declined: "I like being in the city, I like going to the movies. I like the activities of the city. I LOVE being in the urban core. I don't want to go back out there." The couple found land in the city and now farm in a neighborhood where Mo is far from the only Black person.

At the end of our conversation, Mo concluded that race was the most salient aspect of her experience in rural Missouri:

So yeah, the race was more of a thing. I felt like there was more discrimination going on, there was just more on my P's and Q's, you know, everybody had a gun and I did not have a gun.

Mo's experiences highlight that racial dominance was another value that exposed the limits of land allyship. While white LGBTQ farmers accepted "stop-in" culture from their white neighbors, stopping in and questioning take on a different meaning at the intersections of patriarchy and racism. The surveillance and discrimination that Mo felt as a Black woman in these interactions was heightened by the white men's gun ownership.

These narratives suggest that while land allyship may offer a pathway for people to bridge some differences, it may not apply when extreme forms of heteropatriarchy or racial dominance are at stake. These social power structures in rural communities may remain unchallenged by the presence of white queer women and non-binary people.

## **Discussion**

The relationships and interactions between LGBTQ sustainable farmers and their rural neighbors provide fertile ground to theorize a mechanism for rural queer assimilation. In this chapter, I suggest that land allyship—a shared commitment through hard work to the threatened

value of rural agrarianism—offers a pathway for queer individuals to find belonging in rural communities. This pathway fuses a politics of difference with a politics of similarity, demonstrating that queerness need not be accepted or hidden in order for queer individuals to thrive in the rural United States. Broadly, this chapter shows that threatened values may shift the salience of identities, building alliances while maintaining differences. Below, I discuss how these findings contribute to existing literature.

First, the findings describe a mechanism to bridge diverse groups that is not considered by dominant theories on assimilation. Contact theories are built on different ethnic groups in dense urban areas (Park and Burgess 1925; Thomas and Znaniecki 1927) and therefore may fall short of theorizing experiences in dispersed rural areas or those of queer people. I suggest that social psychological concepts—specifically the role of shared common threat—help understand these dynamics. Whereas shared threats may typically be examined in experimental conditions or natural disasters, my case is unique in that it analyzes people who, in their daily lives, experience a threat from their position in the larger political economic context and who navigate long term and on-going relationships. Land allyship offers a mechanism to engage in dialogue across difference, one that acknowledges on-going difference and nevertheless allows parties to connect over a larger shared value. This mechanism is not ignoring or avoiding difference; it is not predicated on acceptance, symbiosis, or unconditional love.

The two groups in this chapter provide different justifications for their allyship. For the conventional farmer neighbors, they value the tradition and work ethic of agriculture. They know the work; they bodily understand its wear and tear, visibly see it, and possess metrics to evaluate it. Work ethic—especially in the iconic conception of U.S. agriculture—becomes equated with moral worth. Rural neighbors use work ethic to justify allyship with a person possessing other

possible moral pitfalls, i.e. queerness. Farming work ethic may imbue LBTQ farmers with scared, moral, and agrarian value in their communities.

For LBTQ sustainable farmers, their justifications for the allyship focus on the legacy and the future of the land. Often, they are relatively new to agriculture and to their rural communities. Though they farm in markedly different ways than their neighbors, they value the decades—if not generations—of accrued agricultural skills and knowledge in their communities. The LBTQ farmers also orient toward the future; they believe that an interdependent community of small- and medium-sized farms bolsters their own farming success. A community of farmers, even if conventional, provides mentorship, assistance on projects, and less noxious neighbors than industrial farms. In this sense, LBTQ farmers' allyship with conventional farming neighbors is self-beneficial, but it comes with contingencies and limits.

Second, the chapter offers a more nuanced understanding of rural queer life in the United States in the post-gay era. The post-gay literature asserts that queer people choose the role of homosexuality in their lives (Seidman 2002), highlighting the importance of social context in identity management (Orne 2011, 2013). However, the literature centers urban—and largely men's—experiences and may not apply to rural queerness, especially to the experiences of queer women and transgender people. This chapter demonstrates that rural LBTQ sustainable farmers may use a variety of identity management strategies (direct disclosure, concealment, and speculation) (Orne 2011) in their interactions with rural farming neighbors. These techniques tie into a broader identity strategy in which "farmer" became the salient identity in these interactions and relationships. Some participants demonstrated a pathway to rural assimilation as queers that differs from previous literature on conforming to rurality (Kazyak 2011, 2012; Silva 2017) or carving out spaces to express their queerness (Gray 2009); instead, the farmers adopted a combined

politics of difference and politics of similarity in order to contribute to rural agrarianism. This pathway provided support and resources, as well as challenges related to queer identities.

Third, the findings suggest a deeper look into rural life in a moment when rhetoric about farmers and fields have strong political pull (Lewis-Beck 1977). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, cultural images and academic pieces depict rural communities as seemingly hostile places for queer people, a hostility that heightened under the Trump administration. I suggest that a perception of shared threat may be one pathway for socially marginalized others to establish dialogues, bonds, and community in the rural United States.

However, land allyship did not eradicate systems of power and privilege in rural communities. White LBTQ farmers recounted instances of heteropatriarchy while interacting with their rural neighbors such as men questioning female-bodied people's business decisions and sexualizing a married lesbian couple. Additionally, land allyship does not counter a legacy of colonial and racist land access. White LBTQ farmers created bonds with their white conventional neighbors, bonds were predicated on shared whiteness. For Black LBTQ farmers—minorities in rural communities due to systematic racism—white rural neighbors' behavior paralleled white populations hyper-surveilling and questioning Black people. Rather than binding, these behaviors resonated as discriminatory. Just as privileged members of the LGBTQ community have more ability to define the role of sexuality in their lives in the post-gay era, white LBTQ farmers appear to have leverage to practice land allyship than farmers of color.

## **Conclusion**

The research speaks to a larger shared problem of shifting demographics. Farming is in crisis from industrial agriculture and climate change. I analyze farmers who present a demographic shift to who we usually do not consider to be farmers. To paraphrase Massey (2008): out queer

farmers are newly visible faces in new places. In agricultural communities built on social capital and commonalities, how can these communities incorporate different people who may have initially be seen as socially or economically threatening? In this way, land allyship presents a particular manifestation of a larger concept that may travel to where there are divides, about how people come together when they have a sense of interdependence around a shared threatened value. What other values and identities can take on master status and reframe stigmatized people?

These findings draw from a relatively homogenous sample of mostly white cisgender lesbians in the Upper Midwest. Though limiting, the general principles of land allyship may transfer to other communities with the following conditions: a sense of insecurity around a shared value, low direct competition, and recognition of an outgroup's contribution to the shared value. If the parties have low direct competition with another during this moment of threat and recognize an outgroup's contribution to the shared value, they may develop a functional allyship. The groups may still disagree with each other's beliefs and practices, but they focus on their commonalities and loose interdependence around the shared threatened value. Though different identities or practices take on less significance in the face of a threatened shared value, social power dynamics of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy remain in these connections. This chapter challenges metronormativity in queer studies and orients toward hard work and shared values in a deeply divisive moment. Queerness and rurality are neither mutually exclusive nor fully aligned; they co-exist, intertwine, and create possibility for future collaborative growth.

## Conclusion

Sexuality plays a key organizing principle in contemporary United States agriculture, even though it is not explicitly recognized as such. The family farm model bakes romantic partnership into a farm business, embedding the assumption that farming is heterosexual. Gender and sexuality shaped LBTQ farmers' pathways into agriculture and their longevity in the field. Across a farmers' trajectory, queerness acted as a force that brought farmers into the career and generated barriers to entry; created rifts with other agriculturalists and bonded them to follow queer farmers; and drew them away from rural farming. As LBTQ sustainable farmers in the Midwest experienced sexism and heterosexism in their efforts to contribute to sustainable agriculture, they leveraged their identities and connections to land to access resources for their careers and personal wellbeing.

Like young farmers and women farmers, the majority of LBTQ farmers lacked land access and farming knowledge through their families, which necessitated farm entry through education or later in life. For the few individuals with farming in their families, they encountered heteropatriarchal barriers that precluded land access or positions of influence on the farm. Queerness drew farmers into agriculture and supported their early careers. Some LBTQ farmers chose to leave farming, and those choices were indirectly or directly connected to their gendered sexuality. Overall, Chapter One, "Coming out and Burning Out: Farming Entry and Exit for Lesbian and Queer Agriculturalists," argued that the career of a LBTQ person in sustainable agriculture is a daily practice involving queer resistance to heteropatriarchal oppression.

Once in agriculture, LBTQ farmers did not necessarily feel fully supported in sustainable agriculture or women farmer spaces. Queer farmer networks and jobs provided queer farmers access to resources, supports, and knowledge to bolster their farming careers. Chapter Two, "Lesbian and Queer Sustainable Farmer Networks in the Midwest," demonstrated queer resistance

to agricultural heteropatriarchy when LBTQ farmers created and participated in queer farmer networks.

Beyond support within queer communities, LBTQ farmers drew on rural straight neighbors for support in their fields and in their communities. Even though participants and neighbors bonded across differences to support each other as farmers, whiteness and perceived femininity facilitated these connections. Chapter Three, “Land Allyship: The Promises and Limitations of Rural Solidarities,” argued that queer resistance and heteropatriarchy are not mutually exclusive; neighbors united over their shared commitments to rural agrarianism rather than divided over their differences in gender, sexuality, or farming practices.

This dissertation embeds bias based in my own whiteness and my predominately white farming networks. Though I attempted to take a critical approach to whiteness to demonstrate the ways that whiteness and queerness intersect to impact farmers’ trajectories, this dissertation is inherently limited.

Sexuality bares relevance to the overall agricultural landscape and impacts key decisions and trajectories in LBTQ farmers’ careers. The research identified both barriers and supports for LBTQ farmers entering and contributing to sustainable agriculture, engaging with timely concerns about small farms’ economic viability and rural communities’ social sustainability. The work demonstrates that centering feminist and queer perspectives enriches environmental analyses by providing a more thorough picture of social and economic life.

### **Queering Agriculture**

At the end of my time with each farmer, I asked what they would like to see come from my research, personally and in the world. Their responses indicated an interest in knowing other queer farmers and showing aspiring queer farmers that a rural agrarian lifestyle is feasible. These

asks did not surprise me as farmers spent much of our time together asking *me* questions, questions about the other queers I had met through my research – their location, agricultural practices, markets, pricing, labor, romantic relationships. Busy on their farms and geographically isolated, the farmers did not necessarily know or frequently interact with other queer farmers, whereas I spent my time on queer farmers’ lands. To conclude this dissertation, I note changes to the landscape of queer farmers—in both academia and activism—based on my own experiences rather than data from farmers.

When I began graduate school in 2013, queerness in agriculture seemed to exist in pockets and within personal connections. Though broader queer farmer organizing occurred during University of California – Santa Cruz’s queer farmer field days and the Bay Area-based Rainbow Chard Alliance’s potlucks and seed swaps, these sorts of gatherings did not happen in the in the Midwest. Based on farmers’ desires to know other queer farmers, I began (co-)organizing events for queer aspiring, current, and former farmers in the region. In 2014, I presented at the Women in Food and Agriculture (WFAN) annual conference in Iowa on “Herstory of Women on the Land and Intentional Communities” alongside two participants, Helen and Tash, who I met at previous farm conferences. With the conference momentum and new contacts, Tash revitalized her non-profit Lesbian Natural Resources (LNR) to support lesbians on land.

In 2015, I invited Jonah Mossberg—former Rainbow Chard Alliance member—to Wisconsin to screen his documentary *Out Here* (2013) that profiles queer sustainable farmers across the United States. The first screening occurred at UW-Madison, followed by a panel with four Wisconsin queer farmers and Mossberg. The second screening occurred in La Crosse at the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Services (MOSES) conference—the largest sustainable agriculture gathering in the Midwest. Following the screening, I hosted MOSES’s first



queer farmer meet-up. This meet-up generated an email listserv and the queer farmer meet ups have continued every year since.

In 2016, I traveled to Portland, Oregon for the Women in Sustainable Agriculture's (WISA) conference – an event that occurs every three years. I presented my research alongside a panel of three midwestern farmers, all on the Lesbian Natural Resources Board. Through the LNR table, I connected with local queer farmers for interviews and a future conference.

In 2017, the WFAN conference occurred in Madison, Wisconsin and included several queer farmers events: Tash organized a LNR meet-up, I presented my research alongside two Missouri farmers, and three participants presented on their mechanisms to build relationships in rural farming communities.

In 2018, I split the year between Australia and the United States. Piqued by two queer farmer zines out of Australia, I spent six months in the country interviewing queer farmers. I discovered that the farmer who created the zine had been inspired by queer farmers in the Pacific Northwest. Accordingly, I found myself back in Oregon later that year co-organizing a mini conference on rural queerness. The mini-conference included queer farmer presentations, panels, and a field trip to queer farms I had met during the 2016 WISA conference. Continuing east, I co-organized the Queer Farm Convergence in Iowa with Laura – the farmer who felt like she had to choose between her queer identity and her farming identity. She relocated from Minnesota to Iowa, still felt isolated as a queer person, and decided to bring queer farmers to her. That year, the event gathered 35 largely Midwestern queer farmers for a weekend of workshops, connections, and meals. Inspired by the Australian queer farm zines that I brought to the event, attendees created a zine that we later posted online and circulated physically at the next MOSES conference.

In 2019, Laura and I presented at the MOSES conference on queering agriculture – the first time that the conference had a queer workshop, not just a meet-up. Over 80 people attended and 60 people came to the queer meet-up that evening. That year, Isaac Leslie, Michael Bell, and I co-edited a special issue in *Society & Natural Resources* on gender and sexuality in agriculture. That summer, Ike and I were invited to speak at the journal’s conference about sexuality in agriculture research. Again, I co-organized the second Queer Farmer Convergence and helped create a calendar to raise funds for the next event. In the fall, Ike and I presented alongside Micheala Hoffelmeyer on a webinar about queer farmers and queering agriculture. I also launched a nationwide LGBTQIA+ farmer survey online with the help of a farmer advisory board containing participants now living in Florida, Oregon, Vermont, and Wisconsin.

In 2020, queer farmer events paused due to COVID-19. Instead, several journal articles and book chapters were published on queer farmers (Cramer 2020; Dentzman 2021; Hoffelmeyer 2020, 2021; Wypler and Hoffelmeyer 2020). The Queer Farmer Network email listerv grew to over 500 people. As people connected digitally, I learned about participants’ life transitions: Sarah and Vicki had sold off their dairy herd and were selling their land. Sarah was done with farming, and happy to be working in excavating where she finally made an earning. Kelly had previously stopped farming due to the physical toll and financial constraints, especially when considering family planning. Kelly and their partner welcomed a baby into their family. Linden—who left farming to live in a city with their partner—bought a farm in rural Wisconsin to launch a tree business. Linden and their partner are expecting a baby at the end of this year.

Over seven years of graduate school, I have tracked shifting queer farming landscapes for individuals, for social movements, and for academia. Across these different levels, each share a high level of interconnection and cross pollination. Rather than iconic images of a solitary

individualist farmers alone in fields tending to GMO seeds that cannot be saved nor bred, queer farming relies on the collective and building with and upon each other's efforts. In doing this work, I am struck over and over by people coming together to make something larger than themselves. By examining LBTQ farmers, this dissertation highlights the often taken-for-granted or ignored ways that sexuality permeates agriculture. It centers social identities and bonds in farming, brightening the role that sexuality plays in food systems.

### **Field of Dreams**

At the end of lectures and talks, I often play a spoken word piece from Nikiko Masumoto's "Reigniting the Soul of Farming" TedX talk. A generational peach farmer who identifies as biracial and queer, Nikiko imagines a "Field of Dreams" with a National Farming League in which farmers are respected and compensated, and justice is central:

The NFL [National Farming League] hall of fame would be overwhelmingly composed of immigrant names, Native people, pictures of good-hearted working class white folk, rooted people of color who have fed us for generations. Whole histories of marginalized people on the land would no longer be silent, they would be revered. ...

My NFL would be a feminist one, bodies of all shapes and sizes and colors would be champions and there would be plenty of room on the land for my transgender brothers and sisters too. ... It would be a revolution in immigration, race, gender, food policy. We might even have a food warrior president of the United States ...

I want the people who work the land, the people who feed us, to be valued. And as so many people have said today, I can't do this alone. Let's do something radical with our lives. I'll go back home and continue to learn how to farm and I'll be waiting for you in our field of dreams. (Masumoto 2015)

As I conclude, I ask myself my final interview question: what do I want to see come of this research? What is my field of dreams?

To echo Judith Butler (2004), I would like farmers' lives to be more livable. I could name more equitable policies, data collection, and Farm Bill allocations to better support BIPOC

farmers, migrant farmers, small scale sustainable farmers, cooperative farmers, and those who identify as queer in each group. Yet top-down agricultural systems largely perpetuate racism, colonialism, xenophobia, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. Broad structural and ideological revolutions in food systems are necessary, not just small incremental shifts that may improve livelihoods, but these changes risk perpetuating the same systems through inertia and placation.

Taking a queer approach to agricultural reform brings these larger agricultural systems and beliefs into question. Queer perspectives open space for “non-traditional” food system models that consider non-familial entry points, identity-based support networks, and resilient community building. Queer farmers offer insights that may radically reshape the overall landscape of U.S. farming, creating a future with sustainable food systems and resilient agrarian communities.

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