Under-stories of perennial agriculture:

emerging narratives among upper-Midwestern perennial farmers

By

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Abstract

Dominant narratives of agriculture, or what I call over-stories, have shaped our vision of agriculture in the Midwest as well as the practices implemented on the land. Supported by exclusionary systems of power such as neoliberal capitalism, these depictions of agriculture have shaded and silenced under-stories of agriculture such as the practice of agroforestry and other perennial practices. This dissertation highlights some of these under-stories through the use of participatory methodologies and the use of storytelling. In Chapter 1, I present the results of a research project aiming to identify non-economic motivations for the practice of agroforestry in the Driftless Area of Wisconsin. In Chapter 2, I discuss a study I conducted with women farming perennial crops in the Midwest regarding their land access stories and the role of networks in supporting them. In Chapter 3, I propose and test a process for co-authoring with farmers narrative pieces inspired by their experiences. All three chapters offer a look into processes that support the emergence of alternative narratives of agriculture based on under-stories of perennial practices.

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Contents

Introduction

"Future generations will look back at the time we are living in now. The kind of future they look from, and the story they tell about our period, will be shaped by choices we make in our lifetimes. The most telling choice of all may well be the story we live from and see ourselves participating in. It sets the context of our lives in a way that influences all our other decisions.

In choosing our story, we not only cast our vote of influence over the kind of world future generations inherit, but we also affect our own lives in the here and now. When we find a good story and fully give ourselves to it, that story can act through us, breathing new life into everything we do. When we move in a direction that touches our heart, we add to the momentum of deeper purpose that makes us feel more alive. A great story and a satisfying life share a vital element: a compelling plot that moves toward meaningful goals, where what is at stake is far larger than our personal gains and losses."

— Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone[1]

[1] Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (New World Library, 2012).

My first week as a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin back in 2016, I joined a weekend field trip that took me and the rest of my cohort all across the state. This tour of the state was meant to familiarize us with our environment and our fellow graduate students. I had lived in Wisconsin before but hadn't really left Madison so most of it was new to me. We walked through a cranberry bog—I was amazed to learn about the harvesting process for this traditional American crop, and the picture I took of the local wildlife and colorful fruits stayed on the wallpaper of my computer for years after that. We shivered in our shorts and t-shirts as we followed a potato farmer into his huge, refrigerated room. We got distracted petting young calves as a dairy farmer explained to us the measures he had set in place to make his confined operation the most comfortable possible for his animals. We watched in delight as cattle ran to a paddock of fresh grass on a farm where the farmers were practicing rotational grazing and moving the animals around multiple times a day. We clapped in awe as a fourteen-year-old picked up a bale of hay with a tractor with incredible skill and ease. The organizers of this trip had designed the tour to reflect the main agricultural practices in the state.[2]

During these conversations, an emphasis was put on production, what made a good farmer, and the impacts of agricultural practices on the land and health of the communities. Animal welfare, water pollution, soil erosion, and a changing climate were some of the topics that these farmers brought up, clearly illustrating the challenges of acting as stewards of the land while also producing food to feed the world.[3] Their passion for farming and clear concern for the

[2] Wisconsin's main production is cheese and other dairy products, but the state is also known for its beef, corn, soybeans, potatoes, canning vegetables, and hogs, and ranks first in the country for cranberries.
[3] Druschke (2018) explains that in the 1970s Borlaug introduced a rhetoric that framed agricultural innovations as weapons available to farmers as an "army of hunger fighters" and that was very successful as it tapped into American farmer's heroism and pre-existing motivations and desires. This rhetoric, however, tends to put some farmers in a rhetorical bind as it contradicts the values of stewardship with which they also align.

land echoed that of Aldo Leopold whose Land Ethic has long been a foundation for agriculture in Wisconsin.[4]

As we drove through the southwestern edge of the state, the landscape evolved. After the flat and plowed fields of the rest of Wisconsin, the forested hills of the Driftless Area came as a surprise. Our guides had explained the phenomenon of glaciation that had leveled out most of the midwestern area while avoiding this corner of the state, but it wasn't until we were driving on the meandering roads, following the relief of the landscape that their explanation started to make sense.[5] There, there were few large fields of corn or soybeans as the steep hillsides wouldn't allow for the implementation of such practices. Instead, we saw cattle grazing on the side of the road and under trees, large apple orchards, and overall, more diverse and perennial practices adapted to the topography of the area.

Our next stop took us to the Kickapoo Valley Reserve where we hiked the trails up to the dam tower and learned about the 149 farmers who had lost their land to a proposed dam project that was started but never completed.[6] The land had, however, been acquired by the federal government and decades later turned over to local, state, and tribal agencies to manage as undeveloped and protected land. The area was now home to an incredible diversity of birds and amphibians and our cohort talked about coming back someday to canoe down the river or explore the trails further. This look into a small bit of the history of Wisconsin also introduced us to some of its native and Indigenous past. On an early morning, we walked up a hill to learn about some of the Native American effigy mounds that were still standing and the symbols they represented for the people who inhabited the land before the European settlers had arrived. Bird,

[4] Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic invites us to think about what is good or bad for our community and to include the land itself, the animals, the plants, and the soil in our definition of community.
[5] Citation about Driftless Area
[6] https://wi101.wisc.edu/2020/09/09/object-history-a-dam-tower-in-the-kickapoo-valley-reserve/

bear, spirits– all told stories about the seasons, the large community of beings on the land, and of the plants that had sustained the early stewards of the land.[7] Standing atop the hill, we were invited to look out to the land below and imagine what it might have looked like hundreds of years ago.

Although this tour of the state clearly emphasized the importance of agriculture, conservation, and history in Wisconsin and how our future studies could participate in the growth and future of the state, it did not critically discuss the connections between these areas, the complexity of these practices, the limited history lessons of the most recent past, and how all these interacted with people living on and using the land.

The stories that we were told about Wisconsin, its history, and the practices implemented on the land are what I will call "over-stories" throughout this dissertation. As opposed to "under-stories" that don't always get acknowledged, over-stories are dominant narratives that tend to take the forefront in conversations and as a result shade and silence under-stories. The over-stories shared with us during that field trip put an emphasis on production and mechanization, gave prominence to large farm organizations, and rarely, if ever, acknowledged the violent history that allowed for land access and industrial production in the United States. Similarly, while the stories of Indigenous communities and their management of the landscape were discussed through the example of effigy mounds, this over-story obscured the connection between the capitalist agriculture now dominating the land and the history of the Indigenous communities that used to inhabit the land.

[7] "Effigy Mounds Culture," Wisconsin Historical Society, August 3, 2012, https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS383.

Some of the under-stories of agriculture in the US

These under-stories are sometimes also referred to as "counter narratives"[8] and focusing our attention on some of the stories that have been overlooked can help identify how some exclusionary and unjust systems have been shaping the dominant narrative of agriculture in the US and the over-stories that are commonly shared as a result.

Before the settlers ever came to the continent, the landscape of the Midwest was starkly different from the one we visited in our tour bus. Wisconsin, now defined by its contrasting farmland and forests, used to be predominantly an oak savanna. Huge oak trees were present across the landscape, brush, forbs, and tall grasses growing in their shade. The health of the ecosystem was directly dependent on fires and large grazing animals that would walk the land.[9] And the inhabitants of the land at the time had perfected its management, planning the burning of the prairies and following the herds.[10]

The arrival of European settlers drastically changed the picture. Extremely violent methods were employed to remove Indigenous communities from the land and make room for the European settlers who had come to the continent with a widely different understanding of land and what good management of it looked like.[11] All over the Northern American continent, the

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[8] Miller, Liu, and Ball (2020) explain that in education research, they are also called "counter-narratives," "counter stories," or "critical storytelling" and are grounded in critical race theory and discourse theory. These counter-stories are defined as the reality experienced by subordinate groups rather than those in power and can challenge dominant beliefs and discourses.

[9] "Oak Savanna Restoration Ties UW Arboretum to Madison Neighborhood | Research | UW–Madison," accessed May 24, 2021, https://research.wisc.edu/oak-savanna-restoration-ties-uw-arboretum-to-madison-neighborhood/.

[10] Stephen J. Tulowiecki, David Robertson, and Chris P. S. Larsen, "Oak Savannas in Western New York State, Circa 1795: Synthesizing Predictive Spatial Models and Historical Accounts to Understand Environmental and Native American Influences," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 110, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 184–204, https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2019.1629871.

[11] The discussion in Chapter 2 addresses the widely different visions of land that to the setters taking control of millions of acres.

eradication of the bison,[12] the creation of multiple treaties that were later ignored, wars, diseases, and forceful relocation of the remaining Indigenous populations were some of the tools used by the colonizers to take control of the land. Centuries later, as we visited the land that was once an oak savanna managed by local Indigenous communities, their management of the land was only acknowledged for its spiritual components. As they overlooked the history of the land before settler colonialism, the over-stories we heard on that field trip failed to mention how the violent removal of the previous land stewards had allowed for settlers to access land and made these farmers' successes possible.

Unfortunately, this retelling of the American farm story is one that is dominant and widely accepted. Finding information about the history of American agriculture that acknowledges the violent genocide of Indigenous communities is a lot harder than it should be and key players in today's agricultural system, such as the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), continue to promote this incomplete and therefore false narrative.[13] However, I believe that it's impossible for us to properly understand the current state of agriculture in the Midwest without considering some of the under-stories of the US agricultural system.

Holt-Giménez reminds us that every agricultural revolution orchestrated in Western countries so far has been violent.[14] The agricultural revolution that took place in Europe in the second half of the 1700s happened through the privatization of the commons and the uprooting of peasants

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[12] Maywa Montenegro de Wit et al., "Agrarian Origins of Authoritarian Populism in the United States: What Can We Learn from 20th-Century Struggles in California and the Midwest?," *Journal of Rural Studies* 82 (February 2021): 518–30, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.12.003.

[13] The USDA's website shares a link to a timeline of American agriculture that starts the 1600s completely disregarding thousands of years of land stewardship and management by indigenous communities and barely acknowledges the role of slavery in setting up the system we know today. https://growinganation.org/content/show-content/the_seeds_of_change/

[14] Eric Holt-Giménez, "Agrarian Questions and the Struggle for Land Justice in the United States," in *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons*, ed. Justine M Williams and Eric Holt-Giménez (Food First Books, 2017), xviii.

from their land. This in turn provided an opportunity for the industrialization of Europe and immigration of farmers to the New World. Later, the conquest and colonization of land in the US by European settlers was supported by the idea of a Manifest Destiny which argued that the expansion of the United States and its values of democracy and capitalism was ordered by God.[15] This expansion happened through the forceful removal of Indigenous communities all over the country and allowed settlers to take control of over 1.5 billion acres of land.[16] These over-stories also rarely discuss how this nationwide productivist narrative is directly linked to the country's history of slavery which allowed the system to reach incredible levels of production.

As used in education research, counter-narratives are grounded in critical race theory and work to bring forward the voices of students of color to improve the education system by addressing its racist roots.[17] Similarly, paying attention to the under-story of land grab and slavery in the US can shed light on some of the key elements that allowed for the American agricultural system to become one of the most productive and technologically advanced in the world.[18] When learning about the American agricultural system, the focus is often on over-stories of incredible technological development that led to increased production while the story of the violence that made its successes possible is disregarded. In her essay for *Land Justice*, Redmond summarizes this under-story quite clearly: "Free labor on stolen land built the wealth of the New World."[19]

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[15] Montenegro de Wit et al., "Agrarian Origins of Authoritarian Populism in the United States."
[16] Holt-Giménez, "Agrarian Questions and the Struggle for Land Justice."
[17] Richard Miller, Katrina Liu, and Arnetha F. Ball, "Critical Counter-Narrative as Transformative Methodology for Educational Equity," *Review of Research in Education* 44, no. 1 (March 2020): 269–300, https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X20908501.
[18] Along with China, India, and Brazil, the US is one of the top food producers in the worlds. Unlike the other three however, a significant part of the production is sold on the international market and exported. Sean Ross, "4 Countries That Produce the Most Food," Investopedia, accessed May 25, 2021, https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/100615/4-countries-produce-most-food.asp.
[19] LaDonna Redmond, "The Land Is Contested," in *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons*, ed. Justine M Williams and Eric Holt-Giménez (Food First Books, 2017), xviii.

Paying attention to the under-stories of land loss and accumulation in the US also highlights the role that systemic issues such as racism play in defining which narratives will gain traction and what over-stories will be commonly shared. Although slavery was illegal in Wisconsin and officially abolished in the rest of the United States in 1863,[20] the exploitation of Black and Indigenous communities continued all over the country for centuries. Despite the Homestead Act, which allowed land access for European immigrants but denied it to free African Americans,[21] by 1910 African American farmers had still managed to accumulate over 15 million acres of farmland. However, the Jim Crow laws passed in the following decades led to African American farmers losing most the land accumulated.[22] Similarly, laws continued to target free African Americans and their descendants to maintain free labor despite the legal end of slavery.[23] Simultaneously, Indigenous communities continued to see their land seized by the descendants of the European colonizers. Winnona LaDuke, who addressed this long history of land appropriation in the U.S. in her contribution to *Land Justice,* explains that well into the 1990s this pattern of land appropriation continued, this time through denied loans that forced Indigenous farmers to sell their land to non-natives.[24] Similarly, many farmers have had to face instances of racism and sexism from the USDA who discriminated against Indigenous farmers, Black farmers, and women when approving farm loans.[25] For centuries, the exploitation of these communities persisted through their exclusion from land access opportunities, discrimination

[20] "Slavery in Wisconsin," Wisconsin Historical Society, August 3, 2012, https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS1784.
[21] Redmond, "The Land Is Contested."
[22] Holt-Giménez, "Agrarian Questions and the Struggle for Land Justice."
[23] Redmond, "The Land Is Contested."
[24] Winona LaDuke, "Recovering Our Land to Decolonize Our Food," in *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons,* ed. Justine M Williams and Eric Holt-Giménez (Food First Books, 2017), xviii.
[25] See *Seagull vs. USDA, Love vs. Vilsack*, etc., cases discussed by Carter (2017), Kivirist (2016), and Bell et al. (2021).

enacted by official funding organizations, and continued exploitation to provide free labor to the capitalist agricultural system that had risen.[26]

Taking these under-stories of agriculture into consideration allows us to clearly recognize how oppressive and exclusionary systems such as colonialism and racism have influenced which stories would be highlighted and become common over-stories and which would instead become under-stories silenced by dominant narratives. The under-stories that emerged from the research I conducted with perennial farmers in the Midwest actively questioned and contested over-stories of agriculture that normalized the pollution of our environment, supported a system that makes it hard for farmers to make ends meet, and lauded the commodification of land through narratives of accumulation and speculation. Their under-stories also challenged the dominant narrative of individualism in agriculture and of profit as the ultimate goal.

As such, these understories were informed by what Anderson explains is the application of a neoliberal narrative to agriculture. This approach to capitalism indeed takes the form of the commodification of food and land, the externalization of pollution, increasingly low wages, and increased speculation, echoing the observations of the farmers I interviewed. Anderson adds that a neoliberal approach to the agricultural system encourages the privatization of food production to make it more efficient and suggests that decision making should only be controlled by the free market.[27] In essence, neoliberalism is often discussed in academia as a framework that emerged after the Cold War as an evolution from the liberal movement that defended people's rights and became a new version of it (hence the neo-) where people are free *from* the influence of the state.

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[26] Redmond, "The Land Is Contested."
[27] Molly Anderson, "Food System Transformation: What Is Necessary and Why?" (SAGE's Weston Roundtable, University of Wisconsin-Madison, March 1, 2018), https://mediasite.engr.wisc.edu/Mediasite/Play/48416553e81d496b94b3a9652e0681671d?catalog=7b399ee9-5a21-4574-91e9-21a3fe66a51b.

In practice, a neoliberalist would argue that the government is ill suited to guide social interactions while the market and rational thoughts have the ability to serve people's interests and lead to gain. With this approach, economic growth is perceived as the greatest good for society.[28] Montenegro de Wit et al. argue that the American culture of "bootstrap individualism"[29] and meritocracy inherited by early Protestantism have facilitated the spread of a neoliberal narrative of agriculture in the US.[30]

Bell et al. suggest that the individualist and productivist values that supported the spread of capitalist agriculture in the US are partially inherited from European Protestantism.[31] They discuss the beliefs that led early Protestants to work incredibly hard as a show of success and moral value.[32] They add that the same ideas still fuel our capitalist economic life to this day although the religious framework has mostly been dropped. The hard work of early Protestants led to the accumulation of wealth and, since absolution could not be bought, the money was reinvested leading to increasing amounts of wealth. Bell et al. explain that enough people adopted this doctrine to force other people to join them on the treadmill even if they were not Protestant. These values later spread to America as Europeans colonized the continent and to the rest of the world as religion was no longer a driving force of capitalism. Bell et al. also discuss the early Christian doctrine that stated that God had given humans "dominion" over the rest of the world, allowing for the exploitation of resources and other species.[33]

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[28] Patricia Ventura, *Neoliberal Culture: Living with American Neoliberalism* (Routledge, 2016).
[29] Conrad (2021) explains that the "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps" narrative is built upon in the idea that people should take personal responsibility and work harder to escape hunger and poverty.
work harder to get out of hunger and poverty.
[30] Montenegro de Wit et al., "Agrarian Origins of Authoritarian Populism in the United States."
[31] Montenegro de Wit et al. (2021) remind us that most of the European settlers who came to the Midwest were of German and Scandinavian ancestry.
[32] And therefore present themselves as worthy of going to Heaven.
[33] Michael M. Bell et al., *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA, and London, UK: Sage., 2021).

Conrad whose work centers around white dominant narratives in food access policy and food movements acknowledges that narratives of capitalism and neoliberalism have merged in the food space. She indeed states that "neoliberalism is rooted in American ideals of personal responsibility and hard work as the solution to hunger and that it is the responsibility of communities to care for those in need, not government."[34] Ventura concurs and argues in her book *Neoliberal Culture* that this neoliberal vision has now penetrated many spheres of life and the larger American culture. Thus, she argues that economic wealth is associated with hard work, strong values, and virtue, while economic failure is perceived as inseparable from laziness, low morals, and a lack of virtue. In this system that also puts an emphasis on individual choice as freedom, economic success is seen as an individual choice.[35]

As observed by the perennial farmers I interviewed, despite the fact that the American agricultural system remains heavily subsidized and therefore does not actually embody these neoliberal ideals, this neoliberal capitalist narrative has shaped the agricultural system and the over-stories shared about the Midwest. Today, the phrase "Midwestern Corn Belt" is used to describe the region encompassing Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin where more than 75 percent of the agricultural land is growing corn and soybeans[36] and where farmers who grow other crops can sometimes feel really isolated.[37]

The under-stories of contestation and collaboration that emerged from the interviews I conducted are in line with the history of the Midwest documented by Montenegro de Wit et al..[38] The authors who researched the agrarian origins of authoritarian populism in the US remind us

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[34] Alison Conrad, "Identifying and Countering White Supremacy Culture in Food Systems" (Durham, N.C.: Duke Sanford World Food Policy Center, September 2020).
[35] Ventura, *Neoliberal Culture*.
[36] Montenegro de Wit et al., "Agrarian Origins of Authoritarian Populism in the United States."
[37] See the conversations I had with agroforesters of the Driftless Area of Wisconsin in Chapter 1.
[38] Montenegro de Wit et al., "Agrarian Origins of Authoritarian Populism in the United States."

that the Midwest has a long history of farmers coming together and building alliances to contest the power of large agribusinesses. Montenegro de Wit et al. however argue that the over-story of the Midwest has been rewritten as stories of the Green Revolution, thus actively erasing its progressive past.[39]

Despite our increased understanding of the consequences that this neoliberal narrative of agriculture has, a large majority of agriculture in the US still adheres to this capitalist agenda. But the world isn't divided between the capitalist farmers and those who know better. As Naylor reminds us in his contribution to *Land Justice,*[40] farmers grow commodity crops in part because the current agricultural system built upon capitalist and colonial bases doesn't easily allow for anything else. By design, the capitalist system makes profit by reducing costs and ends up weakening the resources on which it relies.[41] In the case of the agricultural system, such collapse is only prevented by the payments that farmers receive from the government to keep it going. With the system set up as it is, smaller sustainable farms are just unable to compete. [42]

Farming differently in this context

As discussed earlier, this way of thinking has led to the increased use technologies from the Green Revolution such as pesticides and fertilizers to increase yields, reliance on tools consuming high levels of fossil fuels, and overall implementation of practices that have had a clear impact on the environment. Over the years, farmers and researchers have worked to develop agricultural practices that would limit the negative impacts that farming has had on the environment and the communities. Today many options are available to farmers, including more

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[39] Montenegro de Wit et al.
[40] George Naylor, "Agricultural Parity for Land De-Commodification," in *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons*, ed. Justine M Williams and Eric Holt-Giménez (Food First Books, 2017), xviii.
[41] Paul Robbins, John Hintz, and Sarah A. Moore, *Environment and Society: A Critical Introduction*, Second edition (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).
[42] Naylor, "Agricultural Parity."

sustainable practices that work to balance the concerns about the environment, the economy, and the communities; agroecological practices inspired by natural systems; and practices centered around the use of perennial crops such as agroforestry. The capitalist system in which we all live can make the implementation of some of these practices challenging, however, suggesting the need to challenge our understanding of what makes for good farming.

In an attempt to improve the state of the environment and increase the attention placed on our natural resources, the concept of ecosystem services was developed to help value natural systems and later applied to managed systems, highlighting the cost of some of these practices. Ecosystem services are defined as positive externalities produced by a land use such as agriculture and are organized in four categories: supporting services (like the creation of wildlife habitat), provisioning services (such as food production), regulating services (like water purification), and cultural services (such as recreational or spiritual experiences).[43] The neoliberal approach that now dominates in our society has indeed allowed the commodification of most aspects of the environment such as wildlife habitat, biodiversity, or water quality. As commodities, these ecosystem services can be given a monetary value and farmers be offered payments for ecosystem services.

This approach to environmental benefits has been used to promote sustainable agricultural practices to farmers. Sustainable agriculture is widely accepted as a holistic approach that promotes environmental, economic, and social health across scales and generations.[44] Although the definition of sustainability is regularly discussed and debated, it is often depicted as a three-

[43] Carla Barbieri and Corinne Valdivia, "Recreation and Agroforestry: Examining New Dimensions of Multifunctionality in Family Farms," *Journal of Rural Studies* 26, no. 4 (October 1, 2010): 465–73, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2010.07.001.
[44] Carl G. Herndl et al., "Talking Sustainability: Identification and Division in an Iowa Community," *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture* 35, no. 4 (2011): 436–61.

legged stool where an equal focus on people, planet, and profit is necessary to keep things balanced.

Perennial systems, including agroforestry, have therefore long been considered as a subset of sustainable practices relying on the inclusion of trees, bushes, and other perennial crops to agricultural systems. As they have the potential to mitigate the impacts of intensive agriculture and to increase food security,[45] they present an opportunity to address our current challenges, especially when discussed using the idea of ecosystem services. The USDA recognizes and encourages the implementation of five types of agroforestry systems: silvopasture, alley cropping, riparian forest buffers, forest farming, and windbreaks.[46,47]

Many researchers have used the concept of ecosystem services to try and show the value of agroforestry and other perennial and sustainable agricultural practices. Their many environmental benefits especially are often presented in terms of ecosystem services. For example, agroforestry has the ability to provide habitat for wildlife and to regulate soil and water quality.[48,49] Similarly, farmers who adopt silvopasture practices do so mainly for the shade that trees provide to livestock during the hot summer months and the benefits to animal health they observe as a result.[50] The economic value of this practice can therefore be compared to the cost

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[45] Jules Reynolds et al., "An Agroecological Vision of Perennial Agriculture," *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, April 21, 2021, 1–10, https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2021.1918313.
[46] "Agroforestry," accessed May 22, 2021, https://www.usda.gov/topics/forestry/agroforestry.
[47] While all of these practices involve the intentional inclusion and management of trees, they all represent different designs and serve different purposes. Silvopasture refers to the intentional management of trees, forage, and livestock in a multilayered system. Alley cropping involve the planting of trees along rows separated by rows of other crops, usually annuals. Riparian forest buffers require the planting of trees and bushes along waterways. Forest farming is the practice of growing high value crops under the canopy of trees and windbreaks are rows of trees planted at the border of fields to intercepts winds.
[48] Firesenai Sereke et al., "Swiss Farmers Don't Adopt Agroforestry Because They Fear for Their Reputation," *Agroforestry Systems* 90, no. 3 (2016): 385–94; Thad R. Rhodes et al., *Factors Influencing the Adoption of Riparian Forest Buffers in the Tuttle Creek Reservoir Watershed of Kansas, USA*, *Agroforestry Systems*, 2016..
[49] Rhodes et al., *Factors Influencing the Adoption of Riparian Forest Buffers*.
[50] Joseph Orefice et al., "Silvopasture Practices and Perspectives in the Northeastern United States," *Agroforestry Systems* 91, no. 1 (2017): 149–60.

of putting up structures that would shade the animals in similar ways. Agroforestry and other perennial practices also have attractive carbon sequestrating abilities which make them powerful tools to mitigate the impacts of climate change.[51] In addition to the many ecosystem services they provide, perennial systems offer direct economic benefits. Indeed, as the crops need to be seeded only once, farmers only pay to establish the crops once, and the amount of labor required every year is largely reduced. However, when primarily considering the economic benefit and costs of perennial agriculture and agroforestry, the cost of establishment and the time it takes for trees and other perennial crops to offer a return on investment are strong barriers to the adoption of these practices.[52] While the popularity of these practices is growing, the lack of established markets for the products of agroforestry and perennial agriculture is another barrier to the adoption of these practices.[53]

This focus on the economic valuation of environmental benefits through the concept of ecosystem services also makes the valuation of social benefits difficult. Indeed, agroforestry offers cultural benefits[54] and opportunities for education and spirituality,[55] as well as improved nutrition and aesthetic benefits[56] which are all very difficult to measure in monetary terms. It is therefore unsurprising that the literature on the social benefits of agroforestry practices is very limited. This omission however participates in supporting a narrative where economic aspects remain at the center of the conversation.

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[51] Reynolds et al., "An Agroecological Vision of Perennial Agriculture."
[52] Rhodes et al., *Factors Influencing the Adoption of Riparian Forest Buffers*.
[53] Chloe M. Mattia, Sarah Lovell, and Adam Davis, *Identifying Barriers and Motivators for Adoption of Multifunctional Perennial Cropping Systems by Landowners in the Upper Sangamon River Watershed, Illinois*, *Agroforestry Systems*, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10457-016-0053-6.
[54] Sereke et al., "Swiss Farmers Fear for Their Reputation."
[55] Barbieri and Valdivia, "Recreation and Agroforestry."
[56] Corinne Valdivia and Christine Poulos, "Factors Affecting Farm Operators' Interest in Incorporating Riparian Buffers and Forest Farming Practices in Northeast and Southeast Missouri," *Agroforestry Systems* 75, no. 1 (2009): 61–71.

In addition, some scholars argue that this commodification of natural and cultural benefits can have negative consequences due in part to some flawed assumptions of the model. Indeed, on top of leading to the displacement of communities living in places deemed valuable or to the prioritization of some aspects of the natural environment over others, payments for ecosystem services can be counterproductive in that they give a monetary value to services performed by individuals for free (management of wildlife through hunting, for example). These ecosystem services are then less likely to be performed as the money available to support the payment for ecosystem services has to be spread out more.[57] Martinez-Alier, Munda, and O'Neill argue that the mere concept of payment for ecosystem services is flawed as it tries to assign a financial value to all types of services.[58] This assumed commensurability is inaccurate, as some things (like the beauty of a landscape) are extremely difficult to measure in monetary terms. Similarly, concepts like "public good" cannot be successfully measured on a monetary scale and tend to get left behind as they appear to have no value in the neoliberal system that brought the idea of payments for ecosystem services.

Although the concept of sustainability has been incredibly helpful to many, it is important to remember that it was developed in the context of a capitalist society that has come to consider profit and economic growth as the ultimate measurements of success. Therefore, sustainable practices that have a focus on environmental health or community vibrancy rather than on profit can be difficult to adopt and justify. As a result, practices such as agroforestry and perennial agriculture which can be expensive to establish and don't focus primarily on creating profit for the farm are seen as less desirable and less viable. Additionally, some farmers are uncomfortable

[57] Kerstin K Zander et al., "Rewards for Providing Environmental Services—Where Indigenous Australians' and Western Perspectives Collide," *Ecological Economics* 87 (2013): 145–54.
[58] Joan Martinez-Alier, "The Environmentalism of the Poor," *Geoforum* 54 (2014): 239–41.

with the term which they perceive as a buzzword and avoid it when describing what they believe to be ideal farming practices.[59]

As the neoliberal narrative and its focus on the financial components imbalanced this concept of sustainability, researchers turned back to the concept of agroecology that had been first proposed in the late 1920s.[60] As a hybrid of "agro" and "ecology," it originally referred to "the application of ecological principles to agriculture."[61] It was reintroduced in 2009 as "a science, a movement, and a practice" all at once by Wezel et al.[62] This understanding of agroecology is one that reduces the influence of economic factors and recognizes the importance of politics and power under the idea of a "movement." Altieri and others began using this modern version of the term in the early 1990s .[63]

Reynolds et al. make use of agroecology as a framework to understand perennial agriculture in this neoliberal context. By definition, agroforestry systems are perennial systems where trees and bushes are included and intentionally managed, ultimately designed to optimize the biophysical, economic, and social benefits of agriculture.[64] While perennial agriculture could simply be described as relying on the cultivation of perennial crops instead of annual crops, the authors acknowledge the existence of many definitions and suggest that the practices and outcomes can end up being quite different. They encourage us to think about the social aspects of perennial agriculture as they see social justice as "inseparable from food production and ecological health" and the long-term viability of perennial systems.[65] Although these systems

[59] Herndl et al., "Talking Sustainability."
[60] Michael M. Bell and Barbara Decré, "Agroécologie et La Troisième Position," in *La Transition Agroécologique Quelles Perspectives En France ?* (Académie d'Agriculture de France, Presse des Mines, 2021).
[61] Bell and Decré.
[62] See how Bell and Decré discuss Wezel et al.'s (2009) paper.
[63] Bell and Decré, "Agroécologie et La Troisième Position."
[64] Valdivia and Poulos, "Factors Affecting Interest in Riparian Buffers and Forest Farming Practices."
[65] Reynolds et al., "An Agroecological Vision of Perennial Agriculture."

involve the intentional management of perennial crops including trees, Reynolds et al. warn that not all perennial systems are ecologically or socially sound but that "an agroecological conception of perennial agriculture must be."[66]

While researchers have recently been encouraged to pay attention to the social components of perennial systems, the amount of information available regarding the benefits of agroforestry, the emphasis on the economic constraint, and the challenge to measuring social benefits with a neoliberal framework, have impacted farmers' decisions. The neoliberal narrative of farming has indeed shaped the types of practices that farmers choose to implement on their land and made agroforestry and perennial agriculture seem less valuable.

Additionally, despite the growing interest for perennial practices and agroforestry, trees have historically carried a negative image in agriculture, especially in the more conventional farming circles. For many, trees just get in the way of increased mechanization and productivity and are therefore more of an issue than a solution.[67] These negative attitudes towards trees have been clear barriers to the implementation of agroforestry practices.[68]

How do we imagine a different agricultural system?

As discussed previously, the under-stories that emerged from my conversations with perennial farmers in the Midwest identified some of the dominant narratives that actively exclude some farmers from accessing land and make the implementation of some practices more difficult. Through conversations, alternative narratives that would support the implementation of more regenerative practices can emerge. However, for these counter narratives to effectively challenge the over-stories, it is necessary to be aware of the oppressive systems that support

[66] Reynolds et al.
[67] Rhodes et al., *Factors Influencing the Adoption of Riparian Forest Buffers*.
[68] Barbieri and Valdivia, "Recreation and Agroforestry."

these over-stories and make sure that the new narratives that emerge don't inadvertently perpetrate the same inequalities. Although many forces influence the practice of agriculture in the US, addressing the ones identified by the farmers I interviewed represents a first step toward building more inclusive and just narratives.

Individualism and the dialogue of solidarities

As discussed earlier, my conversations with farmers revealed their opposition to narratives of individualism.[69] Bell et al. explain that some Christian beliefs can be associated with the rise of capitalism, the values that it perpetrates, and the damage to the environment it has engendered.[70] More generally, they associate the idea of human domination over the world with western philosophy rather than to Christianity alone.[71] The same beliefs that separate us from the rest of the environment also allow us to separate ourselves from each other and to approach the world with a very individualistic mindset.

Bell however reminds us that as individualistic as our society has grown to be, people still make decisions that often do not benefit them directly, particularly when they benefit someone else that we care about. Where many authors have explained the decision-making process as a rational process based solely on personal interest and argued that the shared management of common resources, for example, is impossible, Bell counters that people are in fact motivated by two things: interests and sentiments. He suggests that it is impossible to fully understand the range of human decisions without considering the two, particularly when it comes to making decisions in community. A 'solidarity of interest' keeps us working together towards the same

[69] See the result sections from both Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.
[70] They however discuss it in greater detail in their chapter and acknowledge the ways in which Christianism also encourages a good stewardship of the land.
[71] Bell et al., *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*.

goal while a 'solidarity of sentiment' keeps us working together on the basis of shared feelings.[72] The dialogue between the two, which Bell refers to as the 'dialogue of solidarities', creates trust which strengthens relationships and allows people to overcome the challenges of being part of a community.[73] I will make use of this idea of a dialogue of solidarities throughout this dissertation as it will allow me to show the importance of non-economic motivations for farmers who practice agroforestry,[74] better understand the collaboration and support that women receive from the alternative networks they partake in,[75] and to understand the depth of relationship that is built when co-authoring narratives.[76]

Heteropatriarchy, ecofeminism, and queer ecology

The under-stories that farmers shared with me also illustrated the impact of the heteropatriarchy on our understanding of the agricultural system.[77] Bell et al. define heteropatriarchy as the "social organization in which patriarchal power interlocks with power advantages for heterosexuality, upheld through both norms and institutions."[78] Ecofeminism[79] and ecowomanism pay particular attention to the ways patriarchal and gendered assumptions have impacted agriculture and the environment, the second taking a particularly intersectional look at these issues. These approaches help us see for example that women farmers are less likely than men farmer to actually feel comfortable calling themselves "farmers." Bell et al. use these approaches to shed light on the additional labor that women farmers are expected to

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[72] Good or bad, Bell suggests that it doesn't matter as long as the feelings are shared.
[73] For example,
[74] See Chapter 1.
[75] See Chapter 2.
[76] See Chapter 3.
[77] See the Results section from Chapter 2.
[78] Bell et al., *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*.
[79] Early ecofeminism was criticized for its essentialist approach as it associated women with nature to explain the domination and exploitation of both. It risked perpetuating some of the issues particularly for communities already marginalized and abused. This is criticism ecofeminist have since then addressed. For more on this, see Chapter 7 of Bell et al. (2021).

perform to run the family farm once the day on the farm has ended, including cooking, cleaning, and raising the children.[80] They also explain that these approaches help us recognize how women have most often been perceived as more caring for the environment and expected to farm accordingly. They also help shed light on the opposite expectations thrown onto men that have perhaps made it difficult for them to move away from extractive agricultural practices. Similarly, queer ecology, which questions our categories of sex and gender, can help understand some of the challenges that all farmers face no matter their gender or sexuality. It can for example illuminate the experiences of farmers whose family farm doesn't match the heteronormative structure of a family or who have not been able to depend on the support of a sexual partner.[81,82]

I found this consideration of the impacts of the heteropatriarchy to be particularly important as I interviewed women farmers in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. These approaches revealed some of the challenges they faced as women in agriculture including their struggle to balance farming with their parental responsibilities.

Colonialism and decolonization

Many of the under-stories I collected throughout this dissertation research also suggest that perennial farmers share concerns associated with the impact of settler colonialism on our practice of agriculture.[83]

Tuck and Yang identify three types of colonialism that can be addressed: external, internal, and settler. Although all are entangled, the authors pay particular attention to settler colonialism

[80] They refer to this labor as women's "second shift", using Hochschild's concept (1989.)
[81] Isaac Sohn Leslie, "Queer Farmland: Land Access Strategies for Small-Scale Agriculture," *Society & Natural Resources* 32, no. 8 (August 3, 2019): 928–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2018.1561964.
[82] Here Leslie (2019) makes the point that family farms traditionally assume that the sexual partner of a farmer (often a wife or a husband) will support them through an off-farm job or a by taking care of the family. This isn't necessarily the case for queer farmers and this assumption can hurt even heterosexual farmers that don't have a partner to rely on.
[83] See the discussion of the decolonization of agriculture in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.

which involved the acquisition of land through the forceful removal and genocide of Indigenous communities. In that context, decolonization requires the repatriation of land.[84] Native advocate Corinne Rice explains that giving the land back to tribal nations can mean different things but generally involves giving back the control of the land to Native communities.[85,86]

Native scholar Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin also explains that despite the centuries that separate us from the arrival of the European settlers, our current agricultural system is a direct result of a culture of colonization. As such, it allows for the abuse of land, the disruption of people, the concentration of ownership, and the loss of Indigenous knowledge.[87] He also argues that the roots of colonialism have weaved themselves so deeply into our society that all of us have been colonized whether we are aware of it or not and, as a result, we all experience to different degrees the impacts of our colonized minds. Thus, he also encourages farmers to take steps to decolonize their minds and their practices.[88] Haslett-Marroquin warns that the process of decolonizing the mind is radical and counter cultural. As a result, it will take time and requires intentional subversion and insurgency: going back to nature-based foundations and a commitment to integrity. Additionally, he explains that the process is a dynamic one and that it needs to be in constant evolution. He however suggests that the first step to decolonize one's mind is the re-discovery of Indigenous systems. In her contribution to the book *Land Justice,*

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[84] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indegeneity, Education, & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012).
[85] Andrea Guzman, "A Call to Return Land to Tribal Nations Grows Stronger," *Mother Jones* (blog), April 30, 2021, https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2021/04/land-back-tribal-nations-sovereignty-treaties-white-supremacy/.
[86] While selling the land to the tribal nations is an option, Rice suggests that farmers could also deed their land to a tribal nation and continue to farm the land in partnership with the tribal nation. The tribal nations would therefore be the ones managing the money from property taxes and have the power to fight development they oppose. For more examples, see Guzman (2021).
[87] Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquín, "Decolonizing Agriculture Part 1."
[88] It is important to note here that some scholars, including Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that "decolonization is not a metaphor" and has to include land repatriation. Haslett-Marroquin therefore employs the term differently.

Winnona LaDuke agrees and explains that she sees Indigenous agriculture as the future of American agriculture, in part because it relies heavily on biodiversity and the cultivation of multiple locally adapted crops. As such, it offers solutions to the damage inflicted on the land by a colonized approach to farming.

These approaches all serve to shed light on the power inequalities inherent to our system and invite us to challenge them. As we attempt to improve our current agricultural system, proposing narratives that challenge and transform the established power structures is key. Holt-Giménez argues that people need to come together for a movement towards a new food system to have enough influence and to advance a transformative agenda of land sovereignty. For this purpose, he reminds us that an alliance between struggles is fundamental to a significant social transformation.[89] Making sure that all of the voices that have previously been excluded and silenced are heard is essential to avoiding the blind spots that inevitably come with privilege. For this reason, I argue that alternative narratives of farming need to come from the farmers themselves.

The importance of participatory research

To make sure that the stories that came out of this dissertation work were representative of the need of the farmers, it was important to me that I included their voices as much as possible. It therefore made sense for me to make my research participatory.

By definition, participatory approaches are designed to increase the participation of the communities in the research process. They work to legitimize forms of knowledge that have traditionally been dismissed in academia and consider participants as collaborators rather than "research subjects." Participatory research also aims to create social change by shifting power

[89] Holt-Giménez, "Agrarian Questions and the Struggle for Land Justice."

from the elites in academia and into the hands of the community. Successful participatory research leaves the communities with tools to grow even after the researcher has left the community.[90]

When applied to agricultural research, participatory methodologies challenge the now outdated idea that researchers have little to learn from farmers. Indeed, farmers have now been recognized to be very creative and innovative people whose contribution to research could be extremely valuable. In the 1990s, more and more scientists included participatory approaches to their agricultural research, calling for farmers to be more involved in deciding what kind of research was needed. This was particularly necessary as there was some concern that researchers had lost touch with the needs of farmers and focused their work on projects that would benefit their career advancement instead.[91] Additionally, farmers had developed antagonistic views of researchers at land grant universities and the USDA as they were seen as chasing increased productivity that would decrease the market value of products.[92]

The participatory research process can however contribute to mending this strained relationship as it strives to co-create knowledge and skills, and to develop relationships.[93] By growing the academic vision of what type of knowledge is valuable, the process recognizes the expertise of farmers.[94] It also helps to ground academics who are sometimes removed from the

[90] Randy Stoecker, "Are Academics Irrelevant?: Roles for Scholars in Participatory Research," *American Behavioral Scientist* 42, no. 5 (February 1999): 840–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/00027649921954561.
[91] William Lockeretz and Molly D. Anderson, "Farmers' Role in Sustainable Agriculture Research," *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture* 5, no. 4 (December 1990): 178–82, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0889189300003660.
[92] Alexandra Lyon et al., "Maculate Conceptions: Power, Process, and Creativity in Participatory Research: Maculate Conceptions," *Rural Sociology* 75, no. 4 (December 2010): 538–59, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2010.00030.x.
[93] Stoecker, "Are Academics Irrelevant?"
[94] Lyon et al., "Maculate Conceptions."

reality of farm work.[95] Finally, the participatory research process works to engage the participants in actions that have a direct impact and will build self-sufficiency.[96]

Using stories

With this understanding of the American agricultural system and the role of stories we choose to tell, I am convinced that reframing these stories has the power to create change. Farmers are regularly encouraged to share their stories with the rest of their community and with the larger public, but academic scholarship about agriculture does not often make use of narratives. Herndl et al. have witnessed how the different ways farmers and researchers talk about farming practices can impair their ability to effectively communicate and connect around the same topics.[97] They encourage researchers to pay attention to the different language they use and recommend learning from the ways farmers communicate with each other.[98]

Storytelling offers a very approachable way to share research findings, and academics who adopt this storytelling tool are able to create virtual reality that helps their readers relate more to the content they present. Their expressive and vernacular language can help promote empathy while ensuring that their writing holds their personal signature.[99] As a graduate student, I have most often found research which used a narrative voice more engaging.[100] When it comes to

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[95] Michael M. Bell, ed., *Farming for Us All: Practical Agriculture & the Cultivation of Sustainability* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).
[96] Stoecker, "Are Academics Irrelevant?"
[97] C. Herndl et al., "What Is a Farm: The Language of Space and Place.," in *Field Rhetoric: Ethnography, Ecology, and Engagement in the Places of Persuasion.*, ed. Candice Rai and and Caroline Gottschalk Druschke (Eds. U Alabama P., 2018), 61–94.
[98] While all three chapters of this dissertation are infused by rhetorical approach to interviews and data analysis, in Chapter 3, I take this call for better communication even more seriously and offer a methodology for crafting stories with farmers as co-authors.
[99] See how Leavy (2013) discusses Barone and Eisner's work (xxxx).
[100] I regularly recommend for people to read Bell's *Farming for us all* (2004), White's *Freedom Farmers* (2018), Cronon's "The Trouble with Wilderness" (1995), Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), and Pollan's "Nature Abhors a Garden" (1991), just because they are great examples of storytelling.

discussing the environment and farming, storytelling also allows the writers to paint vivid pictures that can transport their readers.

Additionally, Saltmarshe argues that when working to change systems like the agricultural system, stories can be powerful tools used to shed light on the complexity of the situation, to act as a glue and strengthen bonds, or used to create a web of stories that connects people and helps them find their place in the system.[101]

First, as light, stories illuminate the past, present, and future, allowing the reader to see a clear picture of the whole system and how it has evolved. Visions of the past allow people to understand what changes have taken place and under what circumstances while visions of the future bring goals and potential outcomes to the present time and invite the reader to experience a world where the desired change has happened. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer uses her stories to shed light on the violent history of Indigenous communities in America and the flaws of the existing system.[102]

Stories also have the capacity to expand people's understanding of the current situation by painting a more accurate picture. For example, many of the stories shared by women farmers in the second chapter of this dissertation shed light on some of the challenges they encountered as they joined an industry depicted as masculine while still carrying most of the responsibility for raising children.[103]

As light, narratives also offer alternatives to the existing system by shedding light onto the people who are currently working to implement the desired change and who have chosen to be pioneers of the new practices. By sharing stories of alternative approaches, we have the ability to

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[101] Ella Saltmarshe, "Using Story to Change Systems," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 20 (2018): 02–18.
[102] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013).
[103] See the result section in chapter 2.

inform farmers and make these options more familiar, therefore influencing their likeliness of adopting new practices and changing behavior.[104] For many, agroforestry practices remain unclear and farmers wish that there would be more examples shared among the community.[105] Similarly, the colonial mindset inherited from western colonizers leads us to think that individual land property is the only viable way to gain long term access to land for agriculture. The stories of collective land access and ownership shared by the women I interviewed in Chapter 2 highlight alternative pathways for land access that many might not have imagined to be successful or even available.[106]

Saltmarshe also reminds us that stories can foster empathy, connect people, and strengthen bonds. As such, they can be used as glue to foster collaboration across differences.[107] Stories allow farmers to share their values efficiently and to offer different points of view to their interlocuters who might be able to find common ground and relate. While every farmer's story is different from their neighbor's and the knowledge shared is not directly transferable, each story told adds to the bigger picture. Identifying common ground and differences allows for farmers to learn from each other and to imagine ways to use the information gathered.[108] The agroforesters I interviewed for the first chapter of this dissertation have appreciated attending events such as the Savanna Institute's Perennial Farm Gathering as it allowed them to hear dozens of stories of like-minded farmers and gave them the opportunity to learn from other people's experiences.[109]

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[104] Valdivia and Poulos, "Factors Affecting Interest in Riparian Buffers and Forest Farming Practices."
[105] Joysee M. Rodriguez et al., "Barriers to Adoption of Sustainable Agriculture Practices: Change Agent Perspectives," *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* 24, no. 1 (2009): 60–71.
[106] See the result section and the discussion in Chapter 2.
[107] Saltmarshe, "Using Story to Change Systems."
[108] Herndl et al., "What Is Farm."
[109] See the result section of Chapter 1 where I discussed the importance of community in sharing knowledge about agroforestry.

Additionally, as the glue that connects people, stories have the ability to bring people together and offer them a common narrative, strengthening the movement in which they engage and highlighting their role in changing the system. As shown by Carter, women looking to increase their decision power on their farm have found incredible support and validation in alternative networks such as the Women, Food, and Agriculture Network (WFAN). In Chapter 2, I have also proposed that women who have shared stories of "paying it forward" and "farming collaboratively" have participated in building a new narrative of farming that has gained traction in alternative network communities.

Another way stories and narratives have the ability to create change is by developing a web that allows for a better understanding of the complexity of the system and of the way it is currently set up.[110] It is necessary to understand the dominant narratives, their origins, and their impacts to increase awareness and move the readers from a place of acceptance to a place of action and agency. Recognizing the violent history of the US agricultural system has allowed some of the farmers I interviewed to critically think about their own place in the system and the steps to take to start decolonizing their relationship to the land and agriculture. Additionally, stories as a web can help us understand the system in place and the status quo and institutions it has maintained. By making the system and its consequences appear legitimate and preordained, such narratives have affected social norms and Saltmarshe believes that a change in cultural narrative could help alleviate the consequences of the system.[111] Giving the farmers themselves the platform to reinvent these narratives and new myths that will shape the industry is a very effective way to ensure that the stories told about farming are the ones farmers want to embody.

[110] Saltmarshe, "Using Story to Change Systems."
[111] Saltmarshe.

The many impacts that stories can have on the farming system, particularly when told by farmers, have inspired this research and the co-authored narratives it produced.

Throughout this dissertation and the three research projects I developed, I adapted my methodology and the levels of participation as necessary and appropriate. The first two chapters relied on semi-structured interviews where participation and co-design was made possible through the use of free-floating prompts.[112] This allowed the farmers I interviewed to take control of the flow of the interviews and the topics we discussed. In the third chapter however, I took participation to another level and invited the participants to become co-authors of narratives with me. This collaboration process allowed them to move from a status of "research participant" to "research collaborator." The autoethnographic[113] observations I make of this process are presented in detail in the third chapter of this dissertation.

Using farmers' stories to change the agricultural system

With this understanding of the over-story of agriculture in the Midwest, the challenges to the implementation of perennial agriculture, and the role that narratives could play in challenging the dominant practices, I went back to the Driftless Area of Wisconsin. There, I had witnessed more agroforestry and perennial agriculture than in the rest of the state and I wanted to talk with the farmers who were implementing these practices. I set out to interview agroforesters and ask them to share their story with me and their motivations for practicing agroforestry. I was curious about the ways our conversations would be limited by the neoliberal framework, so I intentionally framed our conversations around their non-economic motivations for practicing agroforestry. The first chapter of this dissertation presents in detail the methodology I employed and the

[112] Tarla Rai Peterson and Cristi Choat Horton, "Rooted in the Soil: How Understanding the Perspectives of Landowners Can Enhance the Management of Environmental Disputes," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 2 (1995): 139–66.
[113] Autoethnographic methodologies include the researcher's reflections and experiences as part of the study.

results of this research project. I found that these farmers had many non-economic motivations to discuss that could be used to propose a narrative of agroforestry that takes the sociopolitical aspects of agriculture into consideration and could challenge the dominant narrative of agriculture.

As I found myself talking mostly to land owning men, I grew curious of what stories women would tell of perennial agriculture as land access appeared at first glance to be more complicated for them. I was also interested in hearing about the solutions they had found to these challenges and the way networks might have supported them in the process of accessing land for perennial agriculture. Casting my net more widely this time, I visited women farmers in the Midwest and asked them to tell me their story of land access. The under-stories they shared encouraged them to approach farming collaboratively and to support each other. The second chapter of this dissertation presents in detail the results of these interviews and the impact that sharing these women's narrative of agriculture could have on the larger system.

In a desire to participate in sharing these important narratives and to show the impact that storytelling could have on individual farmers but also on the larger community, I imagined a methodological process that would allow me to work with farmers to co-author narratives inspired by their experiences. In the process, we built relationships and came to realizations that I believe could be useful to researchers conducting participatory research with farmers. The narratives co-authored for this project are wonderful short pieces of literature that truly reflect the concerns and hopes of the farmers who helped write them. They have been shown to facilitate connections between farmers who read them and to strengthen the bonds between farmers who are trying to change the system in similar ways. Ultimately, the methodology

developed is one that leads to deep reflections about the relationships between farmers and researchers and fosters collaboration and trust.

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Chapter 1

I. Introduction

As discussed previously in the introduction to this dissertation, agroforestry practices are agricultural practices that intentionally include trees in agricultural system to promote environmental, economic, and social benefits.[114] Although the environmental benefits associated with agroforestry practices have been extensively studied, economic and social barriers are still limiting the adoption of agroforestry. More importantly, the neoliberal narrative that shapes the capitalist agricultural system in the US makes the valuation of social and cultural benefits hard to measure in economic terms and accentuates the economic cost of establishing agroforestry practices. In this context, practicing agroforestry can appear irrational.

In Southwest Wisconsin, however, farmers have taken advantage of the unique topography and soils of the Driftless Area and implemented agroforestry practices. This chapter explores the motivations behind the practice of agroforestry in the Driftless Area of Wisconsin. Recognizing how economic concerns shape over-stories of agriculture in Wisconsin, I discuss how asking agroforesters about their non-economic motivations can shed light on some of the under-stories of agriculture in Wisconsin and encourage the emergence of narratives that challenge the neoliberal framework that has shaped these over-stories.

Overview of agriculture in Wisconsin

Wisconsin's history of agriculture dates back to the first communities that occupied the land. Indeed, Indigenous communities in the area farmed the land and grew corn and vegetable before the European settlers arrived to the continent in the 18th century. A majority of the farmers were of German, Norwegian, and Irish descent and planted crops imported from Europe including

[114] "Agroforestry."

wheat which remained Wisconsin's staple crop until the late 19th century.[115] As yields dropped in the second half of the century, farmers transitioned their activity to dairy and, encouraged by the researchers from the University of Wisconsin,[116] started producing milk and cheese.[117] To this day, the Dairy State is still number #1 in cheese production.[118] In the second part of the 20th century, agriculture in Wisconsin evolved again as the technologies of the Green Revolution introduced hybrid seed corn.[119] Currently, Wisconsin also ranks highly in the country for its production of cranberries, snap beans, and ginseng.[120]

Wisconsin's productive agriculture has forever been influenced by its topography and soil which were carved by glaciers over thousands of years.[121] Interestingly, the Southwestern most part of the state now known as the Driftless Area remained unglaciated and undisturbed. Its characteristics therefore largely differ from the rest of the state and so do the agricultural practices that have developed there. Plowed and intensively grazed by the European settler farmers in the early 1800s, the highly erodible soils of the steep hillsides of the Driftless Area washed into the water streams. After Coon Valley in Vernon County became the first watershed in the country to be the focus of a conservation project in the 1930s, the situation improved and farmland practices evolved throughout the Driftless Area to reduce the amount of cropland that would be tilled on steep hills and on the edge of streams.[122] The Driftless Area has been a place

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[115] "Agriculture in Wisconsin," Wisconsin Historical Society, August 3, 2012, https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS2287.
[116] "Food & Farming," Driftless Wisconsin, accessed May 22, 2021, https://www.driftlesswisconsin.com/explore/food-and-farming/.
[117] Jerold W. Apps, *Wisconsin Agriculture: A History* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2015).
[118] California overtook Wisconsin in milk production in the 1990s. See Apps (2015).
[119] Apps, *Wisconsin Agriculture*.
[120] "DATCP Home Wisconsin Agricultural Statistics," accessed May 23, 2021, https://datcp.wi.gov/Pages/Publications/WIAgStatistics.aspx.
[121] "Wisconsin Ag History - Wisconsin Corn Agronomy," accessed May 22, 2021, http://corn.agronomy.wisc.edu/Management/L005.aspx.
[122] "Chapter 2: Analysis of the Driftless Area," n.d.

for farmers grow a variety of specialty crops. After focusing on hemp and tobacco for a while, the farmers in that region turned to growing fruits and nuts such as apples, grapes, and hazelnuts while continuing to raise cattle and pork using practices adapted to the constraints of the topography and soil.[123] The microclimates of the region are indeed able to support a wide variety of flora and fauna and while the sloping hills aren't suited to commodity crops, they present opportunities to grow high value crops such as grapes on south facing slopes. Additionally, many farmers in the Driftless Area of Wisconsin have also adopted organic farming practices[124,125] and modern agroforestry pioneers, like Mark Shepard have established their farms in the region.[126]

Agricultural myths and neoliberalism

Considering how the main discourse around agriculture in the Midwest encourages commodity farming, paying attention to the values that farmers hold a well as to their beliefs, narratives, and myths can help us understand what motivates them to practice agroforestry despite the ways the dominant narrative depicts these practices. Rhetoricians have studied how these arguments have shaped farmers' behaviors. Myths gather values, beliefs, and common narratives under an umbrella that allows people to justify behaviors and unite communities.[127] These myths in turn shape the stories that farmers share and the over-stories that take front stage.

As shown in the literature, it is common for farmers to struggle with the conflicting myths they identify with. As "stewards of the land", they feel responsible for maintaining the quality and availability of our resources and value the aesthetic beauty of the landscape. However, as "an army of hunger fighters," they feel the responsibility to produce as much as possible to feed

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[123] "Place-Based Foods at Risk in the Great Lakes" (Renewing America's Food Traditions, 2009).
[124] "About | Driftless Region Food & Farm Project," accessed May 22, 2021, http://www.driftless.wisc.edu/about/.
[125] Organic Valley's first and largest plant is located in the Driftless Area, in LaFarge, WI.
[126] April Nugent March 9 and 2017 at 7:05 Am, "Upper Midwest Hazelnut Initiative | Driftless Region Food & Farm Project," accessed May 22, 2021, http://www.driftless.wisc.edu/upper-midwest-hazelnut-initiative/.
[127] Peterson and Horton, "Rooted in Soil."

the world.[128] Born from what was promoted as a green agricultural revolution, this last myth brings light to the fact that new myths and narratives can appear and change farmers' practices.[129] Paying attention to the types of myths that agroforesters identify with can help us understand how these motivate them to implement agroforestry practices. Similarly, identifying the values, beliefs, narratives, and motivations that they share could help us shed light on the under-stories of agroforestry and support the emergence of a new myth of farming that encourages the practice of agroforestry.

As discussed in the introduction, the neoliberal narrative that structures the agricultural system has deeply influenced the myths and narratives of agriculture and shaped the over-stories that are shared and the practices that were implemented in the Midwest. [130]

While farmers are often aware of the treadmill of production that forces them to keep us with the technological advancements and levels of production of their neighbors, they are less aware of the ideology that has come to shape their vision of the world, encouraging them to focus their attention on monetary gain and to rely on markets to make decisions on the farm. Anderson who studies food systems argues that neoliberalism is a form of capitalism now dominant in the American society. She explains that neoliberalism's main argument is that the government is ill suited to guide social interactions while the market and rational thoughts have the ability to serve people's interests and lead to gain. In this system, economic growth is perceived as the greatest

[128] Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, "Agonistic Methodology. A Rhetorical Case Study in Agricultural Stewardship.," in *Field Rhetoric: Ethnography, Ecology, and Engagement in the Places of Persuasion* (The University of Alabama Press, 2018), 22–42.
[129] Peterson and Horton, "Rooted in Soil."
[130] As discussed in the Introduction, the US agricultural system is a capitalist system but, considering the many subsidies available to farmers, particularly the ones growing commodity crops, the discourse around agriculture is neoliberal but the system itself is not.

good for society and to reach this goal, neoliberal policies tend to support the commodification of all goods and services, the lowering of wages, and speculation.[131]

This dominant narrative affects the way agricultural practices are valued and encourages the implementation of practices that allow for monetary gain. Additionally, this mindset tends to devalue practices that balance economic gain with environmental and social benefits.[132] While payments for ecosystem services can be used to measure the monetary value of a practice based on the ecosystem services it provides social and cultural benefits are harder to measure in financial terms and therefore tend to be devalued and dismissed.[133] Practices like agroforestry which can require a significant investment during the establishment phase can therefore be harder to justify despite their many environmental and social benefits.[134]

Adopting agroforestry in this context

Recent studies of agroforestry have paid attention to the motivations behind the adoption of the practices and emphasized the role of economic concerns in influencing decision-making. Rhodes et al. found that farmers concerned with economic advancement and profit were less likely to adopt agroforestry and more specifically riparian forest buffers.[135] In a study conducted by Sereke et al., payments for ecosystem services highly influenced farmers in their choice to adopt agroforestry.[136] Similarly, in their article, Rois-Diaz et al. report that farmers' choice to adopt agroforestry practices was highly dependent on their confidence in the profitability of the system.[137] While important for farmers, Peterson and Horton have however uncovered that these

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[131] Anderson, "Food System Transformation: What Is Necessary and Why?"
[132] Anderson.
[133] Joan Martinez-Alier, Giuseppe Munda, and John O'Neill, "Weak Comparability of Values as a Foundation for Ecological Economics," *Ecological Economics* 26, no. 3 (1998): 277–86. And Anderson (2018)
[134] Rhodes et al., *Factors Influencing the Adoption of Riparian Forest Buffers*.
[135] Rhodes et al.
[136] Sereke et al., "Swiss Farmers Fear for Their Reputation."
[137] M Rois-Díaz et al., "Farmers' Reasoning behind the Uptake of Agroforestry Practices: Evidence from Multiple Case-Studies across Europe," *Agroforestry Systems* 92, no. 4 (2018): 811–28.

economic motivations are more connected to the realization that unless satisfied, financial requirements could affect the farming activities. As such some farmers see profit as a "necessary evil" that allows them to maintain their activities.[138]

In this context, the adoption of agroforestry practices can be seen as irrational. Indeed, the implementation of agroforestry can be costly and take time to be profitable as trees will usually take decades to grow enough to fulfill their economic role in the system. Some would argue that, as part of this neoliberal capitalist narrative, the adoption of costly practices is a way for the farmers to showcase their wealth and power through conspicuous waste as they reject opportunities to make more money. However, all agricultural practices are capital intensive as they require farmers to invest in land, equipment, inputs, and labor.[139] Additionally, as Bell has observed during his work in Iowa, very few farmers truly engage in agriculture simply for the money.[140]

As presented in detail in the introduction to this dissertation, Bell's dialogue of solidarities is particularly helpful when trying to understand why some farmers practice agroforestry if it doesn't appear to directly benefit them in the short term. He indeed proposes that people make decisions both based on a solidarity of interests and a solidarity of sentiments and that trust is built through the dialogue of these solidarities.[141] The concept of solidarity of sentiment can shed light on some of the motivations for the practice of agroforestry that would be lost if our focus were solely on a solidarity of interest.

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[138] Peterson and Horton, "Rooted in Soil."
[139] Bell, *Farming for Us All*.
[140] Bell.
[141] Michael M. Bell, "The Dialogue of Solidarities, or Why the Lion Spared Androcles," *Sociological Focus* 31, no. 2 (1998): 181–99.

It is particularly useful here as we consider the non-economic motivations for the practice of agroforestry. While some of the non-economic motivations identified in the literature would still fit the category of interest (such as reducing soil erosion which can directly affect the farm's activity), others would be better described as sentiments. For example, farmers talk about their appreciation for the landscape and the beauty of the farm, their independence, the time spent outdoors with the family, and their connection to the land which all can be put in this category. These non-monetary arguments truly influence farmers decisions and affect their practices. The literature is full of evidence of these non-economic motivations. Rodriguez et al. have identified the change in practices as a cultural change that can be a barrier for farmers as habits, knowledge, and traditions are part of their identity.[142] Herndl et al. address the role of the community and recognize how the support it provides is key in influencing the adoption of new practices.[143] The farmers' attitude towards trees,[144,145] their desire to connect to the community,[146] their concern for the future generations,[147] or their attachment to the traditional farming practices[148] are some examples of the non-monetary drivers presented in the literature regarding the adoption of sustainable practices such as agroforestry. As I argue that no farmer is solely motivated by economic profit and that some of their motivations can be reframed in non-economic terms, the concept of solidarity of sentiments is particularly relevant and helps me bring attention to the under-stories of agriculture as they relate to farmers' motivations.

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[142] Rodriguez et al., "Barriers to Adoption of Sustainable Agriculture Practices."
[143] Herndl et al., "Talking Sustainability."
[144] Orefice et al., "Silvopasture Practices and Perspectives."
[145] Rhodes et al., *Factors Influencing the Adoption of Riparian Forest Buffers*.
[146] Amy Trauger et al., "'Our Market Is Our Community': Women Farmers and Civic Agriculture in Pennsylvania, USA," *Agriculture and Human Values* 27, no. 1 (2010): 43–55.
[147] Valdivia and Poulos, "Factors Affecting Interest in Riparian Buffers and Forest Farming Practices."
[148] Rois-Díaz et al., "Farmers' Reasoning behind the Uptake of Agroforestry Practices."

Bell makes further use of these two solidarities and argues that when these two categories converse and build each other up, trust can be achieved which support long-term successful relationships. In his work with Petrzelka, they have shown how this idea of the dialogue of solidarities can help us understand successful common resource management.[149] Chapter 2 of this dissertation will make further use of this dialogue of solidarities, showing how networks of women in farming that offer opportunities to foster this dialogue of solidarities are particularly successful in supporting women, including during the challenging process of accessing land and capital.

Reynolds et al. encourage the consideration of the social components of perennial systems. They offer a theoretical framework to evaluate the true perenniality of systems that rests on the foundation of agroecology as a practice, a science, and a movement. They argue that an agroecological approach to perennial systems should be highly place-specific and adaptive, acknowledging the dynamic nature of the ecosystems they try to mimic. Similarly, agroecologically perennial systems should be managed perennially, with concern for the future of the ecosystem and of the community it serves. As such, the management of these systems should take into consideration the social aspects of agriculture and address social justice issues it creates. Finally, an agroecologically perennial system makes use of perennial plants to combine agriculture and ecology.[150]

This awareness of the over-stories of agriculture in the Midwest and of the dominant narrative of production that influences them coupled with my understanding of the social and economic barriers to the adoption of agroforestry, I set out to ask farmers who practice

[149] Peggy Petrzelka and Michael M Bell, "Rationality and Solidarities: The Social Organization of Common Property Resources in the Imdrhas Valley of Morocco," *Human Organization*, 2000, 343–52.
[150] Reynolds et al., "An Agroecological Vision of Perennial Agriculture."

agroforestry in the Driftless Area of Wisconsin about their motivations.[151] As these practices can be seen as financially unviable in the short term, I was particularly interested in discussing with them some of their non-economic motivations.

I hypothesized that when asked to discuss their motivations in non-economic terms, these agroforesters would be able to tell a story of farming that was richer than a simple search for a higher profit. If shown true, this could indicate that the neoliberal story that we have been telling about farming has been limiting our understanding of what motivates farmers to farm. I expected this deeper understanding of motivations for the practice of agroforestry to help the emergence of a new narrative of agriculture that could be conducive to change. With this research I also sought to answer an academic call to uncover motivations for the continued practice of agroforestry rather than just documenting its adoption, which has already extensively been studied.[152]

II. Methodology

According to Amare and Darr, a significant portion of studies focusing on motivations for the adoption of agroforestry practices lack the depth of understanding that qualitative research can offer.[153] I therefore chose to take a qualitative approach to my research on farmers' motivations to practice agroforestry. Thankfully, understanding what motivates farmers to implement a certain set of practices requires quite simply asking them the question. Using questionnaires allows for the gathering of a large amount of information and the quantitative analysis that follows can help understand trends.[154] However, qualitative analyses have the ability to provide

[151] Here it is useful to note that I am primarily discussing land in the Driftless that may have been part of row crop agriculture, including marginal land and permanent pasture, rather than portions of the land that have remained or reverted to forest.
[152] Dagninet Amare and Dietrich Darr, "Agroforestry Adoption as a Systems Concept: A Review," *Forest Policy and Economics* 120 (November 2020): 102299, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2020.102299.
[153] Amare and Darr.
[154] Amare and Darr.

additional information perhaps unavailable to a quantitative analyst. In the case of my own research, I decided to combine a couple of qualitative approaches into a mixed methodology that would allow me to approach the question from multiple angles and get a better understanding of what motivates farmers in the Driftless Area to practice agroforestry. Being particularly interested in the non-economic motivations, I anticipated complex responses and decided to rely on a mix of sociological, ethnographic, and rhetorical methodologies.[155]

II.1. Inviting farmers to the studies

The Savanna Institute, a non-profit organization working in the Midwest to promote knowledge and adoption of agroforestry practices, helped me identify agroforesters in the Driftless Area that would be interested in the project and put me in touch with them. The sampling of farmers which resulted is a mix of purposeful sampling as my contact identified for me farmers who would be receptive to the concept of non-economic motivations, convenience sampling as it focused on farmers located in or on the edge of the Driftless Area,[156] and relational sampling as the farmers were invited to share with me the name and contact of other farmers who they believed might be interested in joining the project.[157] Together with my contact, we identified farmers in the Driftless Area and around that were practicing a form of agroforestry as defined by the USDA. My Savanna Institute partner also proposed names of farmers they knew would potentially be interested in discussing their non-economic motivations. The list compiled contained 15 names of farms ran both by men, women, and mixed couples.

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[155] Druschke, "Agonistic Methodology"; Herndl et al., "Talking Sustainability"; Michael Carrithers, "Why Anthropologists Should Study Rhetoric," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11, no. 3 (2005): 577–83.
[156] Since some farmers were located on the edge of the Driftless Area, the phrases "Southwest Wisconsin" and "Driftless Area" will sometimes be used interchangeably to describe the area of study.
[157] Mahin Naderifar, Hamideh Goli, and Fereshteh Ghaljaie, "Snowball Sampling: A Purposeful Method of Sampling in Qualitative Research," *Strides in Development of Medical Education* 14, no. 3 (September 30, 2017), https://doi.org/10.5812/sdme.67670.

II.2. Conducting the interviews

With my list of potential participants in hand, I contacted them to schedule a meeting[158] and informed them of my interest in non-economic aspects using culture, history, personal preferences, or community support and opinion as examples of these aspects. I specified that this list was not extensive and hoped that, in the time between our first contact and the interview, these farmers would be able to think about ways in which they could answer my questions in their own words. I did not ask them or even expect them to deeply think about these aspects, but I hoped that these suggested non-economic motivations would help them think about what they would themselves see as a non-economic motivation and how they related to their personal experience of farming. As such, my intention was to provide them with an opportunity to craft their responses ahead of time. Indeed, the narrative they would present was something I was interested in studying as much as the content of their discourse.[159]

I scheduled nine interviews in the following weeks and most of them took place on the farms. A couple were held in coffee shops to accommodate the participants' schedules and sometimes their off-farm jobs. We sat at porch tables or in their stores, walked around the land, or shared a glass of lemonade.[160] Depending on their interest and availability, our discussions lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes. Participants were offered $50 for their participation, and all of them accepted this compensation.

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[158] I either used the email address I received from my Savanna Institute contact or searched the internet for a contact information.
[159] Jill Sinclair Bell, "Narrative Inquiry: More Than Just Telling Stories," *TESOL Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2002): 207, https://doi.org/10.2307/3588331.
[160] These environments ensured the participants felt comfortable and safe to share their knowledge with me. Corbin and Morse (2003) explain that it helps build a sense of trust.

I initiated the conversations[161] using a prompt that I believed allowed the participants to tell their own story: "Can you tell me about the history of your farm and of the practices on the land?"[162] and then asked clarifying questions about elements they would bring up. Throughout the conversations, I took notes of elements I wanted to further discuss as they related to my research interests and used these as 'floating prompts.' These are themes of interest to be discussed as they manifest in the conversation rather than in a specific order or at all if they don't appear relevant.[163,164] With this approach I meant to give my participants as much control as possible of the interview structure and made sure they were aware of it.[165] This approach to the semi-structured interviews was meant to acknowledge the importance of each farmer's story and of the way they chose to tell it. Using this methodology, I also hoped to overcome some of the distrust that might be inherent to the interviewer-interviewee relationship by highlighting their agency in the process and the value of their contribution and knowledge.[166]

The methodology was also infused with rhetorical elements as I was interested in studying both the motivations they would discuss but also the ways they would talk about them.[167] For this research, I paid attention to which topics came up first and which needed to be prompted a little further, which aspects they seemed to be comfortable discussing and which led to more

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[161] In the rest of this chapter, I will use the term "conversation" as a synonym to "loosely structured interview" or "free-floating-prompt interviews" as my intention was for the interviews to feel as natural and informal as possible in order to make the participants comfortable and let them tell their story in their own terms.
[162] The original prompt was meant to invite farmers to step into the conversation from a non-economic angle through a discussion of the history of their farm.
[163] Peterson and Horton, "Rooted in Soil."
[164] Corbin and Morse (2003) also talk about "unstructured interactive interviews", "open-ended or narrative interviews".
[165] Juliet Corbin and Janice M. Morse, "The Unstructured Interactive Interview: Issues of Reciprocity and Risks When Dealing with Sensitive Topics," *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, no. 3 (June 2003): 335–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403009003001.
[166] Corbin and Morse.
[167] Druschke explains that this requires a disciplined and deliberate attention to the language used, the symbols evoked, as well as the discourse employed (2018).

strenuous exchanges, as well as which emotions appeared to be associated with each topic of conversation.

II.3. Data analysis

I recorded the interviews with the participants' consent and transcribed them using a medical grade level transcription service. Once checked for accuracy, these transcriptions were coded using NVivo. Using the motivations already identified in the literature, I created categories that I used to code the interviews. When a motivation was discussed by a farmer but had not been introduced in the literature, I created an additional category and used it to code the other interviews. I also created coding categories related to the tone of the participants, their emotions, and the intensity[168] of the conversation to identify if certain motivations could be connected to particular emotions such as excitement, frustration, or boredom.

II.4. The participants of this study

Before I go on to present the results of this research, it is important to note the limitations of this methodology and of the sampling of participants as they directly impact the results I obtained and the conclusions I will make in the discussion section.

First, I would like to note that the term agroforestry is one that is officially recognized by the USDA as meaning "the intentional integration of trees and shrubs into crop and animal farming systems to create environmental, economic, and social benefits."[169] However, although some farmers have been managing trees intentionally in their systems for a long time, they still do not choose to identify as agroforesters and instead prefer to use other terms to describe their practices such as "permaculture," "perennial agriculture," "regenerative agriculture," or "holistic

[168] Heather Brook Adams, "Historiographic Remembering and Emotional Encounters: Possibilities for Field-Based Rhetorical Research," in *Field Rhetoric: Ethnography, Ecology, and Engagement in the Places of Persuasion* (The University of Alabama Press, 2018), 43–60.
[169] "Agroforestry."

management." The farmers interviewed responded to an invitation to discuss agroforestry practices, which might have deterred some farmers from participating in the study if they did not agree on defining their practice as agroforestry despite being identified by others as agroforesters. No matter what language the participants used to describe their activity, I made sure to employ the same terms during our conversation to avoid confusing them.

Additionally, the sampling methodology employed might have left out from the invitation farmers who were not already involved or connected with the Savanna Institute. Although the organization has been present in the Midwest for a few years, later conversations with perennial farmers in Wisconsin revealed that some farmers, particularly women, were still unfamiliar with the Savanna Institute and their activity. Similarly, the member of the Savanna Institute who helped me contact farmers was a man who had himself been living in the Driftless Area. Although he might have been closely familiar with most the agroforesters in the area, it is possible that his personal relationships were stronger with other men and that the contacts he shared with me, whether phone numbers or email addresses, were those of the men on the farms. As a result, even though there seems to be a balance between men and women in the agroforestry community,[170] a large majority of the participants of this study were men.

In the end, I conducted nine interviews with eleven farmers practicing agroforestry in the Driftless Area or on its edge. Most farmers farmed with their partner or in collaboration with others but only two of these interviews took place with more than one of the farm heads. All of these farms were located in the Driftless Area of Wisconsin or on its easternmost edge.

[170] This is a personal observation after a couple of years attending agroforestry conferences. It is however important to note that the accuracy of this observation is limited by the fact that women have found it challenging to attend conferences when they are still considered the main caretakers of their children and that by the fact that gender is fluid and their gender expression does not always align with people's genders.

Of the eight men and three women I talked to, three were under 40 years old, six were between 40 and 60 years old, and two were over 60 years old. All but one were white, and that farmer was the only one not originally from the Midwest. The range of farming experience spanned between three years of experience all the way to more than 15 years of farming experience. Their initial farming experiences involved mentorship opportunities, time spent on the family farm, or intensive gardening on their private property prior to becoming farmers. A few of the participants had grown up in farming families even if they didn't initially plan on farming themselves and had left the farm for a couple of years before coming back. At the time of these interviews, all but one farmer were owners of the land they farmed. The tenant farmer was however benefitting from an unconventional and particularly rare rental agreement that gave him almost entire decision-making power regarding what practices to implement on the farm.

Although these farmers engaged in a large variety of agricultural practices, they were all growing perennial crops and implementing agroforestry practices, as defined by the USDA.[171] For that reason, I will refer to them as agroforesters or agroforestry practitioners, even if some of them might not claim the term for themselves. The term "agroforestry" was one that seemed to carry different meaning for different farmers, especially as it related to the amount of diversity on the farm, both in terms of plant and practices implemented. Here "agroforestry" almost appears as a polysemous term that might make it harder for people to align with or to join.[172]

[171] As a reminder, the USDA lists the following practices as agroforestry practices: silvopasture, alley cropping, forest farming, riparian forest buffers, and windbreaks.
[172] Herndl et al., "Talking Sustainability."

III. Results

The farmers I interviewed knew about my interest in non-economic motivations. While some of them asked me to develop a little bit on what I meant by that, most of them jumped right in and shared with me what motivates them to practice agroforestry. As suggested by Amare and Darr, this research pointed at many of the motivations previously identified by researchers studying motivations for the adoption of agroforestry and confirmed their findings. These studies tend to present these motivations as independent from one another and to overlook the complexity of connections that relate them.[173] To build upon their findings, I instead present them in clusters that I believe help us get a better sense of the ways these motivations connect and influence each other.[174]

III.1. Agroforestry practices "make sense"

The first significant motivation that came out of these conversations with agroforesters is that agroforestry practices are farming practices that "make sense." Many of them actually used the phrase to describe the practices they chose to implement. However, what "makes sense" is in the eye of the farmer and multiple components are to be considered when figuring out what practices make sense. Here farmers mostly discussed the importance of the suitability of the crops to the land, the logic of only planting a crop once, and the benefits of a practice that reduces the amount of labor required.

Because every farmer is different and every property is different, the types of crops they chose to grow differed widely. Some were growing fruit and nut trees like cider apples, pears, hazelnuts, and chestnuts; others had berry bushes including Aronia berries and raspberries; many

[173] Amare and Darr, "Agroforestry Adoption as a Systems Concept."
[174] It is only made more appropriate by the fact that the farmers themselves made these connections as illustrated by the quotes I share here.

also grew crops such as perennial flowers and grasses. For a few of them, raising animals also made sense. They had cattle, sheep, pigs, and chickens that they managed in silvopasture systems, letting them graze in between their trees. A majority of the farms also had a portion of the farm devoted to annual crops, including vegetables that they sold through CSA shares.[175]

Although this idea of "making sense" can appear vague, personal, and culturally dependent, a few common elements emerged that helped me sort out which practices made sense to them and which did not. For many of these agroforesters, a practice that makes sense is one that is well adapted to the constraints of the land, that minimizes the amount of labor and input required, that reduced the cost of farming over the years, and overall can prosper over time. These motivations although not directly economic seemed to fit in Bell's category of interests.[176]

Most of the farmers I interviewed worked on medium-size farms with only a couple of them being over 100 acres in total.[177] As these farmers pointed out, the landscape Driftless Area is a very fragmented and comprises many sloping plots which require for farmers to be creative in their planning to best adapt their practices to their land. Agroforestry practices are very well suited to this landscape as it allows farmers to make use of marginal land.[178] These parcels of land can easily erode, and growing row crops is usually ill-advised.[179] For Karen, a flower and berry grower, growing perennial crops and trees in these circumstances makes sense.

> I'm not really trying to pass any kind of moral judgement on types of farming, but my experience is, you know, sloping lands where you have a lot of old soils or erodible places, perennial cover is really how you keep your soil.

[175] CSA refers to Community Supported Agriculture and usually allows customers to purchase boxes of produce directly from the farmers through a subscription program.
[176] As opposed to sentiments.
[177] The average size of a farm in Wisconsin is around 220 acres. The national average is closer to 440 acres.
[178] Mattia, Lovell, and Davis, *Barriers and Motivators for Adoption of Multifunctional Perennial Systems*.
[179] Source about slopes and agroforestry

It was also important for Karen that these crops do well in this environment. Picking practices and crops that made sense wasn't just about whether the crops would grow or not, but rather about identifying the crops that would grow well with little help and thrive on the land.

> I think anytime, you start from a place of just observing and working with nature; that's your guidepost. And, your soil is the bedrock to that. It's just like planting the right plants at the right place at the right time. I think […] it takes a shift to go into a space and be like 'I'm going to grow it this way, and do it this way' because [of] the current structure that exists.

For Karen and many of the farmers I talked to, practices and crops that fit the land and would thrive were attractive. In this context, the fact that agroforestry practices particularly made sense was a motivation to keep implementing them. This place-based and adaptive approach to perennial systems also meets the criteria for an agroecologically perennial system introduced by Reynolds et al..[180]

Another thing that made sense for Karen and her fellow agroforesters was the fact that they only needed to seed or plant the crops once. That, for them, was a clear motivation to practice agroforestry. As she explained, not only did it reduce the amount of labor required in the long term, but it also made the initial financial investment more appealing. Annual crops indeed need to be seeded every year and although they are cheaper to purchase, over time the cost of theses seeds or seedlings compound. "I don't know - it just makes so much more sense than having to start [over] every time we grow," Karen told me.

[180] Reynolds et al., "An Agroecological Vision of Perennial Agriculture."

"It's just very idealistic to me," Tom agreed. "It just seems so much more efficient that we can plant a crop that doesn't have to be replanted every single year, and I just like perennials in general."

I was not surprised to see them discuss the cost of agroforestry with me. Although I framed our conversations around non-economic motivations, the financial benefits of having to plant a crop only once are non-negligible. It is however interesting to note that neither Karen nor Tom talked about it in terms of financial cost. Rather, it seems like the efficiency that Tom references has perhaps more to do with labor.

Paul, who planted thousands of chestnut trees on his 60-acre property, clarified this for me. He explained that once the trees are established, the work required to maintain them is a lot less than could be expected and a lot less than what his conventional counterparts end up having to do for their annual crops.

> I like growing things and I love the concept of things that keep growing. You plant them once. I don't mind planting things, but it is a lot of extra work. If you plant every spring, like conventional farmers do, it's just a lot of work, and it's a lot of cost too, because you're constantly buying seeds, and then you're planting them, and you're harvesting, planting and cultivating and harvesting. The trees you plant once. And that was a huge job to plant all those trees. It was a big job, but once we got them in, now they're just kind of on autopilot. All we're doing is we're mowing the alleys, and we're just watching to see what happens.

Although in a neoliberal framework reducing labor requirements could be discussed in terms of costs, the non-economic context of our conversation opened the door for farmers to discuss an

under-story of agriculture where agroforestry practices allow them to spend their time and energy working on other projects.

Paul's farm is very diversified, and had he been planting the same crops over and over every year, he might not have been able to find the time to grow mushrooms in the forested areas or to raise chickens in between the rows of trees. As diversified as it already is, Paul hoped to further the diversity of his farm, with trees growing in "autopilot" allowing him to focus his attention on adding sheep to the multilayered system, for example.

Tom, who also grazes animals under his trees, has adopted silvopasture on his farm because it made sense for him to benefit from the essential ecosystem services they provide. By grazing pigs under hazelnut trees, it reduces his need for pest control while ensuring that his animals are benefiting from the shade the canopy of trees provides, without him having to build any infrastructure for them.

After observing the type of varieties that grew naturally around his property, Tom planted rows of fruit and nut trees along contours and seeded perennial grasses in between. With this design, he is protecting his soil from erosion while also offering multiple sources of food to his cattle and pigs. This system improves the diversity of nutrients that the animals ingest get while saving him from having to harvest the nuts. "We planted a lot of hazelnuts with the intention of pasturing pigs through them and having the pigs harvest them instead of us doing all the work to do it," he explained.

For Tom, practices that made sense are practices that are efficient. However, he considers efficiency an issue of labor rather than an issue of cost. He told me that hard work is a traditional measure of a good farmer and that many of them take pride in the hardship and labor involved in

their activity. He, however, would rather work smarter rather than harder and agroforestry practices allow him to do that.

> I really like perennial farming and diversified farming because I'm a lazy farmer. I want to do things as easy as possible, and I think that makes me think harder and think how to do things more easily.

Tom, Paul, and Karen are motivated to practice agroforestry by the fact that when they do, it makes sense to them. It makes sense because the land they farm in the Driftless Area is highly erodible. It makes sense because these trees and bushes already thrive in this environment. Agroforestry crops only need to be planted once and that makes sense to them economically and more importantly in term of the labor required. Grazing animals in a silvopasture system makes the most efficient use of the space, the trees, and the animals while reducing the amount of work that the farmers need to put in and that makes the practices attractive. It just makes sense to the farmers to farm in these ways and the framework of non-economic motivations allowed the emergence of this under-story of agriculture.

III.2. Agroforesters support each other and share their knowledge willingly

Another way farmers talked about their motivations is by discussing the ways they built and accessed knowledge of agroforestry practices. They developed on their appreciation of the experimentation involved in practicing agroforestry, the availability of knowledge, and their ability to rely on their fellow agroforesters for knowledge, advice, and resources. They made it clear that since accessing knowledge of practices is necessary to their success, being part of a community that happily shares knowledge and resources is a key motivation for their continued practice of agroforestry. At the same time, they reiterated the positive impact that a supportive local community has on the practice of sustainable agriculture and explained how this

community motivates them to keep practicing agroforestry. As Rois-Diaz et al. have observed, lack of knowledge and understanding about alternative agricultural practices can be a powerful barrier to the adoption of these practices.[181] Having access to knowledge is therefore key to the implementation and continued practice of agroforestry.

For the farmers I interviewed, the process of accessing resources is one that has been facilitated by the fact that their peers seem to be willing to share their knowledge. Whether it is to learn about a specific practice, get advice on what type of tree tube to use, figure out what species will grow well on their land, or get access to a specific variety grown by a fellow agroforester, the farmers I interviewed described the process of developing knowledge as being highly collaborative. They benefitted from the support of their peers in the beginning stages of their practice of agroforestry but also later in their careers, which added to their motivations to keep practicing agroforestry.

Like many others, Jeremy who owns an apple orchard, first got introduced to holistic management practices, perennial agriculture, and agroforestry by reading books written by other farmers. A couple of them have established themselves as household names through these publications and their willingness to share the secrets of their success with others has been greatly appreciated.

Paul in particular talked to me about the support that he got when he started his farm. He read *Restoration Agriculture*, a book by Mark Shepard, a fellow agroforester from the Driftless Area who has been implementing agroforestry practices on his farm for over thirty years. He met with him and picked his brain about how to design his farm before hiring another agroforester from the area as a consultant. Receiving this kind of guidance didn't take away from his own

[181] Rois-Díaz et al., "Farmers' Reasoning behind the Uptake of Agroforestry Practices."

autonomy when time came to make decisions about what he wanted to grow on his farm but might have mitigated his apprehension as he was jumping into an unfamiliar version of farming. While Peterson and Horton have noted that ranchers acknowledge their activity as stressful but find comfort in the autonomy they enjoy,[182] it almost seems like agroforesters instead use their support system to alleviate some of that stress.

The Driftless Area also seems to present interesting opportunities for farmers interested in agroforestry practices. Perhaps because of the topography of the area, many farmers have noticed that it fosters the development of sustainable communities. As Chris described, the local community is interestingly split between some very traditional farmers and a more regenerative community, built around some household names.

> There's a very solid contingent of very progressive farmers. It's a hotspot of organic agriculture with Organic Valley being there and really incentivizing and creating markets for grass-based livestock products. […] A lot of folks out there are already doing really cool agroforestry stuff; […] giants in their own field, like Mark Shepherd and folks who we've been lucky enough to call acquaintances or family friends.

Jeremy who mostly grows apples he can use in the cider business he runs with his wife explained that they work very closely with other local apple growers to purchase some of their fruits. They also regularly exchange knowledge and tips with them about the types of apples that grow well in the area or the about the varieties that make for interesting cider mixes. The process

[182] Peterson and Horton (1995) explain that the ranchers they interviewed valued their independence which they associated with personal choice. In their eyes, the stress of their activity was balanced out by the autonomy it allowed.

of figuring out what to grow is one that is made especially enjoyable by the fact that the farmers get to share this knowledge with others.

> For us, it's a place to experiment, try different apple varieties. […] We're experimenting with all these different varieties and seeing what we like. And we hope to learn something through it and maybe share that with other orchards.

Farmers in the Driftless Area have built relationships and organized into a network of likeminded practitioners. Through these networks, they are able to regularly share knowledge and resources which they explained makes their practice of agroforestry more gratifying. One of these networks is the Savanna Institute. The same organization that helped me connect with the participants of this study hosts an annual Perennial Farm Gathering where farmers are invited to share their experience and knowledge with each other.[183] Organized around the needs of farmers, these events center the voices of the farmers and encourage them to share their knowledge and ask questions. The Savanna Institute also organizes workshops and farm tours over the summer and offers free webinars all year long, providing farmers with additional opportunities to share knowledge and offer each other support.

Although this organization has been present in the Driftless Area for a few years and is expanding its activities steadily, the farmers that I talked to for this research regularly expressed their need for more regular opportunities to meet and connect. Tom, who grazes his pigs under his hazelnut trees, explained that social media has helped the younger generation of farmers connect outside of these annual events and strengthen their relationships.

[183] The Nutshell Talks have become a staple of the annual Perennial Farm Gathering. Farmers are given up to 5 minutes to present something they have developed on their farm or introduce others to a challenge they would need help in addressing. These short talks have helped hundreds of farmers start conversations about the practices and connect to others or receive support.

Despite some struggles to stay connected with other agroforesters throughout the year, Paul who regularly benefitted from the knowledge shared by others expressed his appreciation for a community of practice and interest that he describes as welcoming and supportive. He explained that being able to be part of this community is one of his motivations to practice agroforestry.

> I think [the community is] highly collaborative. Everybody we have met who's doing this or something like this has been open and willing to share information and really supportive of the enterprises of each other. Because you would almost think it would be a little competitive. You're trying to do the same thing I'm doing. You're competing for my market share. But I haven't seen any of that. It seems to be very cordial; not only cordial, it's very collaborative, and people are very willing to share information, and it feels good. It's a nice community, and that wasn't a motivator to get into it, but that would definitely be a motivator to stay in it, to know that there are likeminded people who have similar motivations, and maybe, at some point, we'll be able to support people who are new to it or want to get into it.

In this case, the farmers I interviewed made direct connections between their ability to gather the knowledge needed to practice agroforestry and the type of community they are part of as agroforesters, which shed light on the way access to both is a strong motivator for them. Here, the community is rooted in place and their location in the Driftless Area seems to facilitate their access to the community and therefore to knowledge.[184] Additionally, both easy access to knowledge and the feeling of belonging to a supportive community are what I would call non-economic motivators. Although they have regularly invested in books, online courses, or

[184] It's interesting to note that some the farmers who were located on the edge of the Driftless Area seemed to feel more isolated than those who farmed in the heart of the Driftless.

attendance fees for conferences and workshops, most of the knowledge they've acquired and connections they've built have been free of any major cost. The neoliberal narrative of agriculture constantly pits farmers against each other and calls for the commodification of even knowledge and relationships. As such, we can wonder if asking about the non-economic motivations revealed the depth of these relationships in a way that would have been hard to achieve otherwise. This willingness of the agroforesters to share knowledge and support each other's success also sheds light on some of the ways they already practice farming outside of the neoliberal standards of individualism and constant commodification. This apparent noncompliance with the expectation of the dominant system is something that came up regularly in these conversations and that I will discuss further later in this result section. As such the over-stories of agriculture and knowledge gatekeeping illustrates the fact that neoliberal capitalism breaks the dialogue of solidarity while agroforesters work to foster it.

III.3. Agroforestry makes farms and communities healthier

After discussing their interest in farming practices that "make sense" for their land and their desire to be part of a supportive community, the agroforesters I talked to end up acknowledging the environmental and social benefits of agroforestry practices as part of their motivations for implementing these practices. Although previous research recognizes environmental benefits as a motivation, these agroforesters drew direct connections between practices that make farms healthy and practices that make communities healthy and vibrant. As they work for their systems to be ecologically and socially sound,[185] this synergy adds to the impact that these motivators have on their choice to practice agroforestry.

[185] Reynolds et al., "An Agroecological Vision of Perennial Agriculture."

The environmental benefits of agroforestry and other perennial agricultural practices have been studied quite extensively and many farmers were motivated to practice agroforestry by the fact that these practices allowed them to meet their conservation goals. Deep rooted perennial plants like nut and fruit trees, berry bushes, or perennial grasses provide a continual soil cover which helps protect the soil from erosion, particularly on sloping land. [186] Agroforestry also offer opportunities to increase local biodiversity,[187] provide habitat for wildlife,[188] and help improve water quality.[189] Adopting these practices allows these farmers to limit their use of inputs and helps them meet their conservation goals.[190] For Paul whose land incudes a restored wetland, this was an important factor in his decision to practice agroforestry.

> [Another] motivation is just doing the right thing for the land, so improving the soil; improving organic matter in the soil; creating soil that holds water, so water conservation; creating land that doesn't erode easily, because it constantly has roots in the ground.

Here, these farmers' solidarity of sentiments even extends to the land and the region itself. Again, although these benefits could be measured using the concept of ecosystem services and their value given a monetary equivalent, the farmers I interviewed expressed their desire to do "what's right for the land" in non-economic terms. There is no denying that these agroforesters save money by not having to compensate for the health of the land with the purchase and use of inputs but framing their conservation practices in neoliberal terms misrepresents their motivations which are quite simply non-economic.

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[186] Mattia, Lovell, and Davis, *Barriers and Motivators for Adoption of Multifunctional Perennial Systems*.
[187] Valdivia and Poulos, "Factors Affecting Interest in Riparian Buffers and Forest Farming Practices."
[188] Rhodes et al., *Factors Influencing the Adoption of Riparian Forest Buffers*.
[189] Valdivia and Poulos, "Factors Affecting Interest in Riparian Buffers and Forest Farming Practices."
[190] Mattia, Lovell, and Davis, *Barriers and Motivators for Adoption of Multifunctional Perennial Systems*.

"Healthy soil. Healthy grass. Healthy animals. Healthy people." Sam said to me after discussing the efforts that the farmers in his watershed had made to drastically reduce soil erosion and improve water quality. "Good food is good medicine."

Tony, who grows berries and decorative branches on sloping land, agreed with Sam that healthy food makes for healthy communities. He told me about the many varieties of berries he grows all by himself and sells to breweries and the juice market. From Aronia berries,[191] to red and black currants, elderberries, blueberries, raspberries, and honeyberries, Tony's focus is on teaching the customers about fruits that used to be part of the local diet and possess incredible nutritional values. He hopes that growing fruits and berries that are native to the area can help heal the land and provide healthy food to his community. Being able to both heal the environment and the community has motivated Tony to implement and expand agroforestry practices on his land.

"Obviously, the health of our agricultural systems and our rural communities are deeply intertwined," Chris agreed.[192] For him, implementing practices that protect the soil and the environment was one way to protect the local communities he cares about. He explained however that healthy communities are not just achieved by making nutritious, high-quality food available locally or by limiting the amount of pesticides and fertilizers that farmers use. As he told me, a significant part of these communities are the farmers themselves and he wants to make sure that they are also are happy and healthy.

> And so, my personal mission is figuring out what makes my family's farm healthy and vibrant. And how does that mesh with me having a healthy, vibrant life?

[191] Aronia berries are richer in vitamin C than oranges and in potassium than bananas.
[192] Chris's vision of the relationship between land and people is one that resembles Aldo Leopold's Land Ethics.

Again, these farmers worked to improve the health of their communities but not because it would save society millions.[193] While they talked about providing nutritious and tasty food and ensuring the availability of clean drinking water, many of them recognized that healthy and vibrant communities require more. As it could be hard to define what makes a community healthy and vibrant and measure it in monetary terms, the non-economic framing of our conversation perhaps highlighted multiple social and ecological benefits that motivate the farmers but would not be discussed in the over-stories shaped by the neoliberal narrative of agriculture.

III.4. Agroforestry allows farmers to think long-term and to reconnect with the land

The concern for the land that these agroforesters discussed as part of their under-story was restated once more as they discussed their vision for the future of the community and the land. As exemplified by Chris's statement before, the agroforesters I interviewed are also concerned with the health of the farming communities and of the farmers. As a result, they are motivated to implement practices that they believe will be fulfilling for them in the long-term. Thankfully, it seems like agroforestry practices allow them to meet these expectations.

Chris who earlier wondered how to make his own life as a farmer vibrant also spent time on the west coast working in the entertainment industry. He told me quite bluntly that he knew his reasons for coming back to his family farm would be considered irrational. "I make less money. By most modern measures of success, I am worse off than I could have been if I had [stayed in the] business." He told me however that back then, he was quite unhappy with his life and knew he couldn't continue working a job he saw as making such a small impact on the rest

[193] Although health is perhaps one of these concepts that is difficult to measure in monetary terms, the CDC estimates that obesity costs the US health care system almost $150 billion a year.

of the world. His own belief that he could be happy as a farmer helped him make the hard decision to move back and start farming.

> But it's the slight little voice inside me or this piece of my heart that's like, 'there's gotta be a better way to make it work.' There's gotta be a good life where I can still relax sometimes and still be happy and enjoying modern amenities but within a more wholesome context and a healthier emotional and physical landscape.

Just like Chris, Sebastian chose to farm and implement regenerative practices because he knew he would be able to find a connection back to nature and himself that he believes our capitalist approach to life and farming has been damaging for generations.

> I recognized, studying history, our shift from agrarian-based societies or pastoral societies to the kind of urban industrial ones, and then eventually capitalism as well. And I was very much aware that it did a lot of damage to our spirits and our souls.

Jeremy, like Chris and Sebastian, saw agroforestry practices as an appropriate way to farm while building meaningful connections between him and his environment. Agroforestry indeed requires planting trees that will take years to grow to their full size and Jeremy found in it an opportunity to take a step back an reflect on his own life and the future of his farm. He phrased it quite eloquently:

> It's an interesting meditation on life, to watch a tree year after year after year, and see that through the seasons, to just watch these things change. Yeah, I think it enriches my life to do that. And I think that's my favorite thing about it.

While Jeremy had obviously reflected before on the connection he felt with the trees he grew, a few of the people I interviewed for this research weren't quite so comfortable talking about the more personal and perhaps intimate aspects of their daily work. It seemed to me like they simply weren't used to talking about it or sometimes felt uncomfortable discussing motivations that had repeatedly been presented to them as irrational because these were economically irrelevant.

After almost two hours walking the land and talking about practices, Sam finally seemed comfortable enough to tell me about his appreciation for particular trees on his property. One produced black walnuts, which meant squirrels would come running to gather the nuts and, as a former hunter, the daily sight was something he enjoyed. Another tree had grown outwards and bent before straightening up; Sam told me with a smile that he thought it was a good allegory for his own life. Finally, he showed me the plaque he had installed that commemorated the memory of his family members who had passed and whose ashes had been dispersed on the land. He told me that this was the way future stewards of the land would remember them and that he hoped the trees he had managed would do the same for him.

As discussed in the literature, the opportunities for spiritual connection that farmers and consumers have through the practice of agroforestry are particularly hard to measure using neoliberal equivalents and tend to simply be dismissed. Phrasing my questions in non-economic terms opened the door for the agroforesters I interviewed to fully express the degree of connection and personal satisfaction they gain from growing trees. Additionally, it allowed me to witness how the neoliberal framework that has infiltrated our agricultural system has made it difficult for some of these farmers to discuss some of their true motivations as they would be perceived as irrational.

As Sam told me about the positive mark he was hoping to leave on the land through his trees, he also told me about the long-term vision he had for his farm. Like him, most of the farmers interviewed for this research were motivated to practice agroforestry as it gave them an opportunity to think about and shape the future of their farm and the agricultural system as a whole with future generations in mind.

For Tom, thinking about the future of his farm started right as he was designing his plans. He planted his trees with the goal of grazing his pigs underneath and have them benefit from the nuts they would produce. In doing so, he hoped to reduce his workload in the future, giving himself more time and resources to grow his business. However, the planning and design process involved more than just thinking about how to reduce his workload temporarily. With this approach, he aimed at making a full-time living from the farm and hoped to set himself up for the future. Additionally, he wanted the future generations of farmers that would come after him to inherit a healthy farm. "If our farm is losing soil, then what soil is going to be there when I'm 50, 80 years old or when my kids take over the farm? I want to have something here for the next generation."

This concern for the future of their systems showed their contribution to its perennial management.[194] Chris shared Tom's long-term vision of agriculture and regretted that the current agricultural system didn't take the future of the land and the communities into more consideration. He not only believed that it made more economic sense to think about your business and practices in the long-term, but he also explained that taking this long-term vision allowed him to be more reflective and to consider his own place in the system and the role he played in improving it or maintaining the status quo.

[194] Reynolds et al., "An Agroecological Vision of Perennial Agriculture."

> I think that one serious benefit of [agroforestry], socially, is that when you get people thinking about production in the more long-term sense, you kind of get those gears turning on. Having a long-term perspective can open people's eyes to, socially, politically, what are they doing? How are they affecting community in the long term?

These agroforesters' concern for the future generations of farmers motivates their practice of agroforestry and illustrates yet again their solidarity of sentiments with a community they haven't met. Thinking about the future of the land and the communities that make the Driftless Area actively shapes their practice of agriculture. Importantly, long-term concerns about the health of the farm or the farming communities are not encouraged by the neoliberal narrative that instead pressures farmers to think about their activity in the short term to maximize immediate profit. In this context, making decisions that benefit future generations instead of the individual farmer would be deemed irrational and the kind of motivation that would be easily dismissed or pitted against their responsibility to make money and spend it in their local community.

III.5. Agroforestry offers a critique and an alternative to the dominant farming system

For many of these agroforesters, this concern about the future generation and the future of our agricultural system has led them to question the way the system was designed and whether it can last. Chris who has already thought about the future of his farm, and made steps to reach it, noticed that the current challenges faced by some of the conventional farmers are forcing them to reconsider their practices as well and to pay attention to the alternatives available to them. "I think that the difficult economic time for farmers […] has the side effect of creating a more open-minded space for people to be willing to hear new ideas about farming." It's not to say that these curious commodity or dairy farmers don't find their traditional knowledge challenged by

these alternative practices or that they are immediately willing to give up the practices that their families have implemented for generations but as Chris noted: “Unfortunately, you know, these days, it's more difficult to make a living. And it's not working so people are willing to listen a little bit more.”

Concerns about reputation,[195] lack of knowledge about agroforestry practices, and difficulties challenging the over-stories and decades of conventional farming have been identified as significant barriers to the adoption of agroforestry practices.[196] These are what Tom referred to as “preconceived notions.” He explained to me that “there’s just so many preconceived notions [about] farming and how things should be done.” Although, “not many people are willing to change,” he told me, he sees the current economic challenges that conventional farmers are facing as an opportunity for them to adapt and evolve their practices to face the hardships the system has created.

Some of the agroforesters I interviewed explained that, even though the Driftless Area seems to foster sustainable communities, they sometimes felt surrounded by conventional farmers who perhaps did not understand their approach and had been farming according to “preconceived notions.” For these agroforesters however, adopting practices that contrast with those historically implemented in their area presents an opportunity to share their under-story, educate their neighbors, and raise awareness. It motivates them to keep practicing agroforestry, even if that means standing out more in the middle of their disapproving neighbors.

While I was expecting the participants of this study would relate their motivations to concerns for the environment, the importance of community, collaboration, and knowledge, or to discuss the challenge these practices pose to their reputation, I did not anticipate for them to be

[195] Sereke et al., “Swiss Farmers Fear for Their Reputation.”
[196] Rois-Díaz et al., “Farmers’ Reasoning behind the Uptake of Agroforestry Practices.”

so vocal about their disapproval of the current agricultural system and to act as advocates for a new approach to the system.[197]

The under-stories they shared about their motivations, practices, goals, and values did hint at some level of discontentment with the over-stories that support the established and dominant conventional agricultural system, but I argue their disapproval of the current situation is such that they have accepted their role as changemakers and the importance of advocating for a better system. In that context, they are motivated to practice agroforestry because it allows them to both oppose a system they disagree with and to embody the new system they advocate for.

Although they discussed the impacts that conventional agriculture has had on the environment and the farming community, these agroforesters rarely criticized the conventional farmers themselves, instead focusing their frustration and criticism on the overall system that made conventional farming appear as the only successful farming model.

Paul questioned a system that convinces farmers that a 40-acre diversified farm cannot support a family and help feed the local community. He told me about how he once was able to grow over 500 pounds of squash and 300 pounds of tomatoes in his suburban backyard. With actual farmland, he believed you should be able to make enough money to pay off your mortgage and taxes and then produce enough food to eat. Recognizing the limitations and dangers associated with a narrative that had convinced farmers that the best option for them was to only grow corn or soybean on their land, he told me:

> My primary motivation, I would say, is to catalyze a different way of thinking about agriculture in our country, because we think that the agricultural system in our country is broken. It's really flawed and it's not sustainable.

[197] This is consistent with 'early adopter' literature which suggests that they will be become advocates and defenders of their choices.

Paul was not the only one who made a statement about his responsibility to participate in changing the agricultural system. Although Sebastian recognized the deep historical roots of the system and the narratives that built it, he always saw it as his responsibility to push back however he could.

> I'm very aware of the history in this country of, you know, agriculture as degradation, soil erosion and loss of organic matter and breeding animals for the sole purpose of production and taking them off the land. So, I'm always sort of working against that paradigm and doing what I can to change it. […] I think I sort of perceived what I was doing as one way of resisting what I viewed as the kind of degrading effects of the dominant culture.

While most of the farmers I talked to expressed some level of criticism of the dominant agricultural system, they did not all express it as forwardly as Paul or Sebastian did. Some like Tom used terms like "preconceived notions" to express their disapproval of the normalization of conventional agriculture and others like Karen or Tony blamed the disconnect between farmers and consumers on a system that has commodified food so much that people have forgotten how to properly value food. The concerns they voiced about the dominant system highlighted their focus on social justice and illustrated their agroecological approach to perennial systems.[198]

As they shared with me their under-stories and discussed their practices, values, and goals, these agroforesters hinted at the emergence of an alternative narrative for what it means to be a good farmer and made it clear sharing this narrative and advocating for it was also part of the type of farmers they wanted to be. As Chris discussed the importance of working towards

[198] Reynolds et al., "An Agroecological Vision of Perennial Agriculture."

healthier farm systems in support of healthy communities, he explained how his responsibility also included sharing this goal and narrative with others:

> I think that diverse communities are healthy and diverse landscapes are healthy. And [I'm] trying to be a part of a movement that's setting this example for a different paradigm of agriculture and of rural existence, I guess. I think that that's a benefit on its own.

For him, this went beyond just a motivation to educate others or to spread knowledge. Being part of a contingent of farmers trying to tell a different story of agriculture and to move the system in a new direction was a significant part of what made him happy with his work and content with his life. And as the current system has led to the demise of many farmers over the past decades, farmers like Chris are motivated to prove that their rural lifestyles are still viable and "we can still have healthy, vibrant communities in places like I grew up."

It almost appears as though these farmers see it as a moral imperative to work to right the wrongs that the dominant system has created and to make sure that more people are aware of the alternative farming opportunities available to them. As such, this criticism of the current agricultural system is a driver of their practice of agroforestry. Druschke explains that the same sense of moral imperative was used during the Green Revolution to convince farmers to use innovations as tools and weapons to fight the global war on hunger.[199] While that narrative could lead farmers into an ethical and rhetorical bind by asking them to pit their desire to "feed the world" and "be good stewards of the land" against each other, the vision of agroforestry as a tool towards a better agricultural system offers a way to sustain the local community and land all at once. It also continues to resonate with American farmers' heroism as farmers get an opportunity

[199] Druschke, "Agonistic Methodology."

to fix the damage created in the past and are offered a way forward and out of the bind created by the narrative of "hunger fighter."[200]

The challenge of economic viability is however real and, although they are offering a new paradigm for agriculture in the US and hoping to see it improve the state of our environment and the health of our rural communities, these agroforesters are still farming within the dominant system and have to play by its rules.[201] Implementing new practices, having secure tenure of their land, financing their perennial enterprise in the initial steps, and paying bills still requires them to farm in a way that provides cash flow or to hold off-farm jobs. The systemic change that these agroforesters want to see happen is one that they have the power to initiate but that will struggle to have a significant impact until it is supported by policies. When I talked to Chris, he was about to reduce the amount of time he was going to work on the farm and growing perennials in order to spend more time on his off-farm job, in hopes to save enough money to support his projects.

> It sucks. And that's part of this sort of stubborn feeling of 'there's gotta be a way to make this click, to make this work, to make it viable for people.' Part of it is policy and part of it is the agricultural systems that we're using. And those two things have to find a way to meet. And it's a lot easier to push policy through when there's examples of people already doing the right thing.

So many of these farmers are motivated to practice agroforestry not only as a way for them to farm according to their values and goals but also because it provides a concrete way to make their vision for the future of our agricultural system come true. As Chris said:

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[200] Holt-Giménez and Altieri (2012) argue that agroecological practice have the ability to feed the word without having the same impact that conventional practices have on the environment. They however explain that the focus needs to be on food justice rather than simply increasing yields and production.

[201] Peterson and Horton (1995) called money a "necessary evil" to operationalize values.

> Now's the time when the work is more critical than ever. And I guess that also part of what I enjoy about it, not only does it feel wholesome, but it feels necessary.

IV. Discussion

After conducting these interviews with agroforesters and hearing their under-stories, I argue that the non-economic framework I offered allowed for the emergence of a narrative of agroforestry that challenges the traditional over-stories of agriculture. In this section, I discuss how this narrative can be helpful to organizations working with agroforesters.

IV.1. From non-economic motivations to a narrative of agroforestry

IV.1.a. Their motivations echo those identified by previous studies

The long list of motivations that emerged from these conversations with agroforesters first and foremost validates the findings of many researchers who previously identified some of these motivations in their own research studies. Valdivia and Poulos talked about the role of knowledge and farmers' interests in increasing biodiversity.[202] Orefice et al. discussed the importance of animal health.[203] Rhodes et al. identified positive attitudes towards trees as good motivators.[204] Sereke et al. recognized farmers' concerns about reputation as key barriers.[205] And Herndl et al. discussed the importance of community support in the adoption of practices.[206] For my research findings to echo those of other researchers is not surprising. Amare and Darr indeed

[202] Valdivia and Poulos, "Factors Affecting Interest in Riparian Buffers and Forest Farming Practices."
[203] Orefice et al., "Silvopasture Practices and Perspectives."
[204] Rhodes et al., *Factors Influencing the Adoption of Riparian Forest Buffers*.
[205] Sereke et al., "Swiss Farmers Fear for Their Reputation."
[206] Herndl et al., "Talking Sustainability."

argued that a lot of the research pertaining to the motivations for the adoption of agroforestry practices points to the same results.[207]

However, it is important to remember that the motivations presented in the results section were proposed by farmers who have been practicing agroforestry for a couple of years at least rather than by farmers interested in adopting the practices. They therefore have shared with me their motivations for continuing to practice agroforestry. The sample of farmers would have been different if my question had been phrased to focus on the adoption stages. I will discuss later how the results of this research can benefit researchers and practitioners focusing on the adoption of practices. These results, especially as they relate to the land and the community, also suggest the importance of the Driftless Area as a place that fosters the implementation of agroforestry practices.[208]

IV.1.b. The neoliberal limitations

While some of the motivations described by the research participants would likely be discussed without having to frame them as non-economic, I argue that framing the discussion in these terms allows us to consider motivations in their full complexity. Without this intentional framing around non-economic matters, some of these farmers' motivations would probably have remained unclear while others would have simply never emerged.

For example, while I believe that motivations such as "reduces labor" or "reduces the need for inputs" would have emerged even in a neoliberally framed conversation, others that are not so easily measure in economic terms like "being part of a like-minded community" or "leaving a positive mark on the landscape" would have been harder to justify and could have been

[207] Amare and Darr, "Agroforestry Adoption as a Systems Concept."
[208] Gieryn (2000) indeed suggests that places are made up of a unique location, a physicality, and meaning and value. Additionally, he also argues that a sense of place is associated with experiences on the land.

overlooked. Thus, I argue that the agroforesters I interviewed would have found themselves limited by the neoliberal narrative that has shaped agricultural practices in the last few decades when discussing their motivations. Depending on the framework under which one operates, the definition of what "makes sense" can change. In a neoliberal context for example, the over-stories of agriculture would define practices that "make sense" as practices that make or save money, and the complexity of these systems that make sense would be simplified to mean systems that are profitable. Similarly, concerns about the environment could have been framed using the idea of ecosystem services and their cost to recreate. Concerns about soil erosion would have been framed in terms of yields and cost of water purification. While each of these motivations carry economic values and can be used to financially incentivize these practices, others may be much harder to put in economic terms and would have most likely been brushed over or simply dismissed. The health of a community is hard to measure in economic terms. The benefits that farmers get from leaving a positive mark on the land or the spiritual connection they experience are even more so. Additionally, recognizing the supportive community as a motivation to practice agroforestry could be seen in this framework as both too emotional and counterproductive in a system that paints farmers as competitors.

Some of the farmers I talked to would probably have still discussed some of these non-economic motivations knowing they would challenge the neoliberal expectations, but I believe that they would have done so with some concern about the way their statements would be received. The neoliberal culture that has become dominant in the US not only has people give a monetary value to everything, it also has given us the understanding that things are only valuable or worth discussing if they can be measured using economic terms. Rational decisions have also become synonymous with financially beneficial, so any discussion of non-economic motivations

has been painted as useless, a waste of time, and perhaps even irrational. A couple of the farmers I interviewed unconsciously expressed this concern, whether by simply struggling to trust me with this information or by clearly saying that they didn't want to sound too sentimental about these motivations. Over the course of our conversations however, I worked to validate all of the motivations, particularly when I could feel their hesitation to express them; the depth of the responses I received makes them incredibly valuable.

Additionally, I argue that framing our conversation around non-economic motivations allowed farmers to tell under-stories that expressed some level of criticism of the current system. The over-story that encourages monoculture highly benefits from this neoliberal narrative and is a direct result of the mindset farmers were encouraged to adopt. It can be hard for people to oppose such a system when the dominant narrative makes it appear desirable. It can be particularly hard for farmers who have been benefiting from this narrative. Voluntarily stepping out of it, even for the time of one conversation, can open the door to a reflection on the limitations of this system and validate farmers who actively try to distance themselves from it. As such, they practice of agroecologically perennial agriculture[209] embodies the sociopolitical concerns that define agroecology.[210]

Finally, I argue that this invitation to think about motivations in non-economic terms did not prevent farmers form discussing concerns about financial viability and profit but instead shed light on the complexity of their motivations. When not limited to their economic value, these motivations take more dimension and give us access to a more complete understanding of what motivates the farmers who practice agroforestry.

[209] As defined by Reynolds et al. (2021).
[210] Bell and Decré, "Agroécologie et La Troisième Position."

IV.1.c. The emerging narrative of agroforestry

Additionally, I argue that these conversations about non-economic motivations allowed for the emergence of a useful narrative of agroforestry. In many ways, these farmers align with the narrative of regenerative food systems that Anderson and Rivera-Ferre present as the counterpart for the extractive narratives of agriculture.[211] This regenerative food systems narrative goes as follow:

> Regenerative food systems provide food for human use but also sequester carbon, preserve biodiversity, produce diverse diets to combat malnutrition, and build community well-being by maintaining farming livelihoods and the social reproduction of culture and farming communities, support the dignity and autonomy of the person and allow severing ties of dependence on external inputs and external knowledge.[212]

Similarly, the findings of this research show that these agroforesters have engaged in agroecologically perennial agriculture as defined by Reynolds et al..[213] They indeed approach agroforestry as more than just a practice, recognize how place specific and dynamic it is, manage their systems perennially, and use perennial plants to further their social and justice goals.

However, the results of this research study invite us to build upon this narrative of regenerative agriculture to imagine a narrative of agroforestry. This narrative also includes practices that "make sense" in more than one way, collaboration among farmers, a long-term vision of the agricultural system, and a desire to advocate for a different agricultural system and

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[211] Molly D. Anderson and Marta Rivera-Ferre, "Food System Narratives to End Hunger: Extractive versus Regenerative," *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 49 (April 2021): 18–25.
[212] Anderson and Rivera-Ferre.
[213] Reynolds et al., "An Agroecological Vision of Perennial Agriculture."

offer a pathway towards it. Here, I propose the following statement to summarizes the findings of this research and suggest that it could be used to build a narrative about agroforestry:

> Agroforesters are regenerative farmers that implement practices that "make sense" to them and for the land. Their perennial practices are the result of experimentation, shared knowledge, and collaboration, and participate in building a long-term vision of the agricultural system that considers the health of the land, the community, and the farmers themselves. Through these practices, they advocate for their vision and make it a reality.

IV.2. What can we do with this narrative?

IV.2.a. A useful tool for those studying adoption

The statement I offered as a summation of the narrative that emerged from these conversations about non-economic motivations with agroforesters is one that I believe can be useful to those working to spread awareness about the practice of agroforestry and who are trying to build a movement around these practices.

This narrative can be informative for the researchers studying adoption as it offers a different look at what motivates farmers to practice agroforestry, particularly in the long term. It can provide insight on what attitudes farmers hold about these practices, the norms that they identify, and the challenges to the adoption of these agroforestry practices.[214] The complexity of the motivations unearthed by these non-economic conversations illuminates the complexity behind the idea of attitudes and offers a multitude of ways to frame and understand positive attitudes. Similarly, this narrative of agroforestry questions the dominant norms of agroforestry and offers

[214] A lot of the research on the adoption of agroforestry practices is built upon the use of the Theory of Planned Behavior that explains that the likeliness of adoption of new practices depends on (1) personal attitudes towards the practices, (2) the norms surrounding these practices, and (3) the perceived behavioral controls, which in this case, refer to the perceived challenges associated with adopting the practice.

new ones that can be used to encourage the adoption of agroforestry practices. Finally, it provides ways around some of the challenges associated with the adoption of agroforestry, particularly as they relate to knowledge and community support. Future research on the motivation for the adoption of agroforestry and campaigns advocating in favor of these practices could benefit from using the narrative I proposed as part of this research.

IV.2.b. An opportunity to talk about decolonization

In many ways, the values, goals, and approaches expressed by the agroforesters I interviewed reminded me of those presented by Haslett-Marroquin who was invited by the Savanna Institute to discuss the opportunities we have to decolonize our minds and our practice of agriculture. As discussed in the Introduction, Tuck and Yang argue that decolonization demands the repatriation of land for it to not just be a "metaphor."[215] Haslet-Marroquin, who is Native, adds that our minds have been colonized as well as the land. He suggests that going through the process of decolonizing our minds can lead to a decolonization of the practice of agriculture.

For example, he explains that decolonizing agriculture is a radical act that requires building insurgency. I argue that the farmers who talked about "opposing the dominant paradigm" or about "asking for forgiveness rather than permission" could be interested in the suggestions that Haslet-Marroquin offers to build that insurgency. Haslett-Marroquin also emphasizes the importance of organizing systems based on natural designs and on working together, which I argue echoes the agroforesters desire implement practices that make sense and to work with nature and with each other.[216] Here again, I propose that the agroforesters I interviewed would be

[215] Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor."
[216] Haslett-Marroquin used the example of his own chicken farm to illustrate what decolonizing farming could look like. He talked about rethinking efficiency to be about the management of the energies in the system (for example, the carbon cycle) and talked about creating a system of practices that made sense and in which we could find our place.

interested in learning from Haslet-Marroquin how to push their approach and decolonize their practice of agroforestry.

As a result, I argue that these conversations about non-economic motivations reveal an opportunity for agroforesters to learn about decolonization and to start implementing it on their farms.[217] This narrative differs from the one about regenerative food systems proposed by Anderson and Rivera-Ferre which doesn't recognize the importance of the spiritual connection between farmer and the land, shared knowledge, community building, and advocacy. These elements are particularly important to the decolonization of agriculture. Indeed, as presented by Haslet-Marroquin, the decolonization of agriculture involves reconnecting with the land on a spiritual level and finding our place in nature to create change from within it. It also seeks to move us away from a system that accepts extraction and legitimizes violence against anything or anyone who opposes it towards a system that uses resources sustainably and recognizes the value of ancestral knowledge and values collective physical and mental wellbeing. Additionally, decolonizing agriculture offers an opportunity to shift from a vision of farming as an independent endeavor manipulated by corporations to one of interdependence, collective governance reflecting real community needs, and where defending collective interest is systematic.[218]

Although the farmers I interviewed have yet to learn about decolonization and have not discussed with me returning their land to tribal nations or started the work of decolonizing their own agricultural practices, the conversations I had with them hint at an open-mindedness and a curiosity conducive to growth. I argue that this is an opportunity for them to educate themselves further about the concept and learn about ways to further their engagement with their values. It

[217] Some scholars argue that the first step is to return the land to the tribal nations, otherwise the decolonizing process remains a metaphor. See Tuck and Yang (2012).
[218] Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquín, "Decolonizing Agriculture Part 3."

also presents an opportunity for organizations who are supporting the adoption of agroforestry practices to offer decolonization as the way forward and away from the dominant colonial and neoliberal system. In 2019, the Savanna Institute, which has established itself as a key resource for farmers interested in agroforestry and perennial agriculture in the Midwest, took this step and invited Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin to be the keynote speaker at their 2019 Perennial Farm Gathering. His presentation about how to decolonize agriculture in the Midwest is one that initially shook the farmers in the audience as it forced them to think critically about their colonialized practices, but that ultimately was received by many agroforesters as illuminating a path forward for them.

For these farmers, the decolonization process is one that will take time, practice, and intentionality particularly for those who, like the agroforesters I interviewed, have been privileged by the system as white men landowners.

V. Conclusion

Throughout this research, I have tried to highlight the importance of over-stories about agriculture and worked to show how we can use interviews to help farmers share under-stories that have otherwise been overshadowed. The conversations I had with agroforesters allowed me to collect a long list of non-economic motivations that not only confirms the research of multiple studies on the adoption of agroforestry practices but also suggests the emergence of a narrative of agroforestry that challenges the over-story often told about agriculture in Wisconsin and the neoliberal narrative that shapes it. These conversations also suggest an opportunity for agroforesters to learn about the concept of decolonization and take steps toward the more socially just system they envision.

While I am enthusiastic about the richness of the motivations unearthed by these non-economic discussions, the narrative that emerged, and the use that can be made of it, I am particularly curious about understanding how different the under-stories would have been if I had interviewed another group of farmers. As I previously discussed, a majority of my research participants were white, men, landowners and most of the time, all three at once.

Because of their privilege, questions of land access specifically didn't come up as much as expected. Weak land tenure has been identified as a key barrier to the implementation of perennial agriculture such as agroforestry.[219] Land access and land tenure are more likely to affect women farmers, farmers of color, Indigenous farmers, queer farmers, beginning farmers, immigrant farmers, and be amplified for those who fit more than one of these categories. I expect that interviewing agroforesters or perennial farmers that identify with these categories would address issues of land access more clearly and offer a different narrative of perennial agriculture.

I also want to recognize the importance of the Savanna Institute and its network in making this research possible. The support they provided was invaluable. I cannot however help but wonder how my sample of agroforesters and their particular demographic reflects the Savanna Institute community and the relationships that my point person shared with the agroforesters he suggested for this research. I am therefore curious about how other networks have supported perennial farmers and the type of under-stories they would share with me. As a result, the work that I conducted and present in the next chapter of this dissertation directly addressed these questions.

[219] Valdivia and Poulos, "Factors Affecting Interest in Riparian Buffers and Forest Farming Practices."

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Chapter 2

I. Introduction

The under-stories, or stories usually overshadowed by the dominant narrative, that agroforesters shared with me in the first chapter of my research informed my understanding of what motivated farmers of the Driftless Area of Wisconsin to implement these practices and what made for agroecologically perennial systems.[220] The stories that emerged from our conversations about non-economic motivations presented agroforestry as more than just a practice and highlighted the importance of developing place-specific and dynamic systems. Agreeing with the goals of regenerative agriculture, these farmers managed their systems perennially and used perennial plants to carry out their social and justice ideals.[221]

I noticed, however, that all but one of the farmers I interviewed for this research owned their land. As such, they were in total control of the decision-making process and could plant perennial crops without concerns about the security of their land tenure. Land tenure has indeed been identified as one of the main barriers to the adoption of agroforestry and other perennial practices.[222] As discussed previously in this dissertation, perennial plants such as trees, bushes, and perennial grasses have the advantage of only needing to be seeded once.[223] This however means that tenant farmers might be discouraged to invest in perennial crops, as they could lose access to the land they rent and the crops they planted. This is particularly true for farmers interested in planting trees, as they can take at least a few years to reach maturity and provide a return on the initial investment. The issue of land access for perennial agriculture was therefore one that highly interested me.

[220] See the result section in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.
[221] Reynolds et al., "An Agroecological Vision of Perennial Agriculture."
[222] Valdivia and Poulos, "Factors Affecting Interest in Riparian Buffers and Forest Farming Practices."
[223] See the discussion I had with agroforesters about this benefit in Chapter 1.

Similarly, most of the farmers I talked to about agroforestry were men. I discussed previously some of the factors that might have influenced the sampling in this way. I believe that secure land tenure, a strong relationship with my contact person, and the gendered expectations of who is a farmer have all played a part in shaping my first interview sample. I realized that although these farmers had shared their under-stories, it was possible that more under-stories were shaded by those of landowning men. Indeed, the traditional over-stories of agriculture most often depict farmers as men. Aware of this and curious about the social complexity of perennial systems, I chose to focus the second part of my dissertation work on women, social networks, and land access for perennial agriculture. Despite what might be inferred from the fact that mostly men participated in my initial study about the motivations behind the practice of agroforestry, women farmers are also interested in perennial practices.[224] With this work, I want to participate in deepening our understanding of the sociopolitical implication of perennial agriculture as encouraged by Reynolds et al.[225] and see what under-stories would emerge from conversations with women in perennial agriculture.

In this chapter of my dissertation, I present and discuss the results of a study I conducted where I interviewed women in perennial agriculture about their land access stories, with a focus on the help and support they received from their networks.

Women, land, and agriculture in the U.S.

As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the current agricultural landscape of the United States is made mainly of huge farms owned by older white men and a multitude of small

[224] As a matter of fact, when attending a conference about perennial agriculture and agroforestry like the Savanna Institute Perennial Farm Gathering, the audience is usually made up of both men and women (although one should avoid assuming someone's gender with just a look).
[225] Reynolds et al., "An Agroecological Vision of Perennial Agriculture."

farms run by minority farmers, women, and beginning farmers.[226] The history that led to this demographic make up for the American farm-scape is a complicated and violent one that starts with Indigenous genocide and land grab, continues with slavery, and culminates in the establishment of a capitalist agricultural system that makes land access almost impossible for those with little inherited wealth or traditionally excluded from the agricultural system.[227] As a result, land in the United States has historically been mainly owned by white men.[228]

And yet, the systemic barriers installed to limit land access to white men only are not just a relic of the past. Well into the 20th century, Jim Crow laws and denial of loans by private and federal lenders worked to dispossess Black and Indigenous farmers of their land.[229] Barriers to land access for women were also in place until quite recently.

In the United States, women were not legally allowed to own land until 1850[230] and they weren't recognized as co-landowners until 1981.[231] Additionally, the social custom of passing land from father to son is still very much in place to this day, limiting women's ability to access land.[232] Traditionally, women who do access land do so through marriage or inheritance, but these situations usually leave them with limited farming knowledge and power over the land.

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[226] Eric Holt-Giménez, "Agrarian Questions and the Struggle for Land Justice in the United States," in *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons*, ed. Justine M Williams and Eric Holt-Giménez (Food First Books, 2017), xviii.
[227] See the introduction chapter, particularly the section reviewing the history of the American agricultural system.
[228] Angie Carter, "Placeholders and Changemakers: Women Farmland Owners Navigating Gendered Expectations," *Rural Sociology* 82, no. 3 (2017): 499–523, https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12131.
[229] Holt-Giménez, "Agrarian Questions and the Struggle for Land Justice."
[230] Ryanne Pilgeram and Bryan Amos, "Beyond 'Inherit It or Marry It': Exploring How Women Engaged in Sustainable Agriculture Access Farmland," *Rural Sociology* 80, no. 1 (2015): 16–38, https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12054.
[231] Carter, "Placeholders and Changemakers."
[232] Angie Carter, "Chapter 4. Changes on the Land: Gender and the Power of Alternative Social Networks," in *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons*, ed. Justine M Williams and Eric Holt-Giménez (Food First Books, 2017), xviii.

Their involvement on the farm was indeed usually limited to bookkeeping and providing care and support across generations on the farm.[233]

Today, women own or co-own half of America's farmland.[234] This, however, does not always mean that they have full decision-power over what happens on their land. For example, Eells and Soulis explain that despite the fact that over 25% of the Iowa farmland is owned by women,[235] their tenants, who are usually men, are still generally the ones making decisions on the farm. And in many cases, Eells and Soulis have found that these decisions don't align with the values of the women landowners they work for.[236] However, Carter has observed that when supported by networks that validate a change of narrative, some of these women have felt comfortable enough to voice their opinions about the type of practices to implement on their land and went from being "placeholders" on their land to being "changemakers."[237]

Importantly, not all women who farm the land they own accessed it through inheritance. Pilgeram and Amos describe two other stories of land access common for women.[238] The first alternative story to inheriting land was that of the women who purchased land later in life to fulfill their lifelong dream of farming. Usually, these women were younger than those who inherited their land and had spent a few years working office jobs to accumulate the funds necessary to the purchase of land. Most often they started farming after a significant change in their personal life and after their maternal responsibilities had lessened. The second story of land access pertained to younger women who chose to start farming right away, taking advantage of

[233] Pilgeram and Amos, "Beyond 'Inherit It or Marry It.'"
[234] Carter, "Chapter 4. Changes on the Land."
[235] As of 2007, 25% of the farmland in Iowa is owned by women over the age of 65. See Eells and Soulis (2013).
[236] Jean C. Eells and Jessica Soulis, "Do Women Farmland Owners Count in Agricultural Conservation? A Review of Research on Women Farmland Owners in the United States," *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* 68, no. 5 (2013): 121A-123A, https://doi.org/10.2489/jswc.68.5.121A.
[237] Carter, "Placeholders and Changemakers."
[238] Pilgeram and Amos, "Beyond 'Inherit It or Marry It.'"

the space made for them in the community by previous generations of women farmers. They often accessed land with the support of their life partner's off-farm income and financial support from their community. Being younger than the women in the other two groups, they tended to have fewer resources at their disposal and sometimes lived frugal lives where they had to balance farming with their parental duties.[239]

Most women farmers, no matter how they access land, tend to farm smaller parcels[240] and approach farming differently than the men in their industry. They are more likely to use organic and regenerative methods and raise animals rather than conventionally grow commodity crops.[241] They also often perceive resources differently than men and seek practices that involve more physical labor and provide more personal fulfillment.[242]

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to simply assume that women's choices of farming practices are homogeneous or disconnected from the conditions of the system in which they operate and removed from its impacts. Rather, it is possible to imagine their choices as direct responses to these conditions. In a system that tells the story of farming using a narrative of "masculine heroism,"[243] women tend to rely on their community for support as well as for their market.[244] They engage in civic agriculture and design their farms to provide educational opportunities, offer options for agrotourism, or support locally based food systems.[245]

When discussing the topics of land access for women, an ecofeminist lens can show the complex power relations that have shaped women's farming experiences. As presented in the

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[239] Pilgeram and Amos.
[240] Kivirist highlights the fact that over 80% of the farms under 50 acres are owned and operated primarily by women.
[241] Trauger et al., "'Our Market Is Our Community.'"
[242] Pilgeram and Amos, "Beyond 'Inherit It or Marry It.'"
[243] Druschke, "Agonistic Methodology."
[244] Trauger et al., "'Our Market Is Our Community.'"
[245] Trauger et al. explain that "civic agriculture" refers to an approach to farming that embeds the farm and its practices into the local community.

introduction to this dissertation, taking an ecofeminist approach to these issues can for example shed light on the fact that many women farmers still struggle to see themselves as farmers even after they have spent years farming.[246] Similarly, taking a womanist approach encourages us to pay attention to the intersectionality of these topics while a queer ecology approach invites us to consider how heteronormativity might have affected these women's experiences.[247]

Women and their farming networks

Considering the importance that networks and community played into the successes of the agroforesters I interviewed for a previous part of my research,[248] it seems particularly appropriate to consider how personal connections, networks, and community support women in agriculture. As previously described, women farmers tend to turn to their local communities for help and for their markets,[249] and are able to find validation for their new approaches to farming in alternative networks.[250] Here, Carter refers to non-institutionalized networks such as non-profit and informal groups, and explains that they provide women farmers with "mentorship, inclusive support and information sources, and alternative narratives."[251] Whether these networks support them as women in agriculture or as regenerative farmers, with their support, women landowners have been able to get their voices heard and to distance themselves from the narrative of "feeding the world" to instead implement practices that better align with their values of stewardship. Carter's findings point at the potential that these alternative networks have to foster positive and just changes in the agricultural system, particularly as it relates to land.[252] Additionally, in her

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[246] Bell, *Farming for Us All*.
[247] Bell et al., *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*.
[248] See the result section in Chapter 1, particularly the subsection on knowledge and community.
[249] Trauger et al., "'Our Market Is Our Community.'"
[250] Carter defines these alternative non-institutional networks in opposition to networks deployed by institutions like land grant universities or the USDA.
[251] Carter, "Placeholders and Changemakers."
[252] Carter, "Chapter 4. Changes on the Land."

preface for *Land Justice*, Monica White recognizes the "importance of our relationship to the land in constructing collective and cooperative relationships and in providing new narratives of self-determined agrarian community."[253] With this understanding of the structural challenges to land access for women, the importance of secure land tenure for perennial agriculture, and women's potential interest for these practices, I set out to study the role that social networks played in facilitating women's access to land for perennial agriculture and to pay attention to the narratives that would be fostered by these networks.

With this in mind, I hypothesized that women interested in growing perennial crops in the Midwest would benefit from being part of alternative networks. I expected the support coming from these networks[254] to be particularly crucial to their success and I was interested in the narratives they would support. With this work, I also aimed to address the need for further research on narrative construction and to explore how these narratives are influenced by alternative networks.[255]

II. Methodology

For this research project, I developed a participatory research study using qualitative methods of data collection and analysis in order to get a better understanding of women's experiences. Qualitative methodologies of inquiry are particularly helpful to provide more depth to quantitative data. For this particular study, I combined methodologies from sociology, ethnography, and rhetoric studies into a mixed methodology based on interviews. The interdisciplinarity of this research allowed me to approach the question from multiple angles and

[253] Monica M. White, "Preface for Black Agrarianism," in *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons*, ed. Justine M Williams and Eric Holt-Giménez (Food First Books, 2017), 17–18.
[254] As suggested by Carter (2020).
[255] Carter, "Placeholders and Changemakers."

get a better understanding of the ways networks supported women farmers in the process of accessing land. In this section, I describe the methodology I employed and my experience conducting these interviews and analyzing them.

II.1 Inviting participants to the study

For this project, I chose to identify participants using a voluntary sampling method. This sampling methodology requires the researcher to identify a community to involve in the research and to share with its members a description of the study as well as an invitation to join the research project.[256] I expected the resulting sample to be composed of participants particularly interested in the research topic and prepared to share their story.

The Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES)[257] Women Caring for the Land program held a meeting in Wisconsin in 2018 as I was developing my research plan for this part of my dissertation. I joined this meeting of women landowners interested in sustainable practices and stated that my intention was simply to hear their stories. I learned a lot from just observing these conversations but was also able to make very useful connections.

When the time came to start recruiting participants for my research in the summer of 2019, I reached out to Lisa Kivirist who had facilitated that meeting of women landowners. I knew that Lisa had also created the Soil Sisters network and was involved with MOSES's In Her Boots program.[258] She seemed like the perfect person to ask to introduce me and my project to her networks of women.[259] I sent her an email and asked if she could share with her networks the call

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[256] Stanley Murairwa, "Voluntary Sampling Design," *International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences* 4, no. 2 (2015): 145–200.
[257] MOSES hosts a yearly event that is the largest organic farming gathering in the country.
[258] As per MOSES's website, In Her Boots is a program that "supports women farmers by providing resources and collaborative opportunities to champion new business start-ups that support food system change."
[259] Both MOSES and the Soil Sisters would be considered by Carter as alternative networks. They are well established but not institutionalized.

for participants I had drafted. In this email, I asked for women interested in perennial agriculture and located in the Midwest to respond to my invitation and share their story of land access with me. The following excerpt from my email illustrates how I emphasized my desire to provide more understanding of challenges that women face when accessing land.

> *"I am conducting interviews with women interested in perennial agriculture in the Midwest and would love to meet some of you to discuss how you accessed the land you currently farm. I am also very interested in learning about the networks and programs that have helped you and supported you in this process.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> *If you live or farm in the Midwest, are growing perennials on your farm (or are interested in growing them) and would like to share your story with me or just want to hear more about my research, please email me."*

With this phrasing, I invited anyone who identified as a woman to respond. Gender is fluid and, in this case, anyone who could identify with the challenges that women encounter when trying to access land was welcome to participate in the project. Similarly, the definition and geographical boundaries of the Midwest can be unclear or disputed, so I let people decide for themselves if they felt like their location met the "Midwestern" requirement. Finally, the use of the phrase "land access" did not limit the participants to stories of land tenure or land purchase.[260]

The response to this email was overwhelming. In less than three days, I had received about two dozen responses from women all over the Midwest who were interested in joining the project. I am unsure how many networks and email lists Lisa Kivirist shared my email with, but

[260] Hachmyer (2017) reminds us that land access is possible without land property.

the sheer number of responses I received was a first indication of the power of the networks of women in sustainable agriculture. Additionally, this voluntary sampling method means that most if not all the people who responded to my email were genuinely interested in participating in the project. Contrary to farmers who might be asked regularly to join research projects and might be feeling some level of burnout, most of the respondents seemed to be very excited about the idea of participating. This sampling of convenience also implies that the participants were already aware of the importance of sharing their experience or represented a part of the farming population that is used to discussing this aspect of their story.[261,262]

More interestingly, a couple of people who responded to my call did so to connect me with other people they thought would be interested in my research or other individuals whose stories they believed deserved to be shared.[263] In doing so, they illustrated how strong their networks were and how they made use of it. Similarly, when discussing the feasibility of a farm visit with some farmers, a few of them offered to host me during my travels and to rally a couple of their neighbors to make my travelling to their area productive. Their generosity was a first example of how these networks allow women to support each other's projects and offer help when necessary. These first few experiences demonstrated the importance and community interest in my research.

It is important to note that although entering a network through a trusted member can facilitate the creation of relationships, it is possible that the sampling will be affected by the respondents' personal relationships with said member. Additionally, using a voluntary sampling

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[261] Terry Arendell, "Reflections on the Researcher-Researched Relationship: A Woman Interviewing Men," *Qualitative Sociology* 20, no. 3 (1997): 341–68, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1024727316052.

[262] Arendell (1997) explains that with such a sampling method, it is impossible to determine why people joined the study and the sample is unlikely to be representative of the population it studies. Although generalization for all women in perennial agriculture is inappropriate, we are able to learn from the stories of the women who voluntarily joined this project.

[263] This made the sampling of this research a mix of voluntary, convenience, and relational sampling.

method means that the respondents will already want to share their under-stories. We can expect the sample to be made of women who have experience sharing their story or who personally believe their story is worth hearing. It perhaps then excludes farmers who are not used to sharing their story or have been used to their story being dismissed.

II.2 Conducting interviews

Due to time constraints and funding limitations, I had to organize my interviewees into clusters to schedule day trips to the various regions. These limitations confined my travels to Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. I conducted 11 interviews and met with most of the farmers who participated in this project on their farm while others choose to meet me halfway in a location of their choosing. It was important to me to meet in person with these women. I believe this approach to be more personal and engaging. I hoped it would help build a relationship faster and make discussing some of the difficult aspects of the conversation easier.[264,265] All interviews lasted approximately an hour, with most participants willing and interested in continuing for approximately 15 minutes after the hour notification.[266] With permission from the participants, I audio recorded the interviews, which allowed me to focus my attention on the conversation at hand rather than on my notes. We sat around kitchen tables and went on walks around the farm, we talked in offices in town and at local coffee shops. I listened to their stories in the quiet of

[264] Corbin and Morse, "The Unstructured Interactive Interview."
[265] While all the interviews were held before the Covid-19 pandemic, attending online farm conferences and having virtual conversations with farmers has informed how I would hold these interviews today. I strongly believe in the importance of building relationships with my research participants. Taking the time to visit them on the farm, get to know them, and even help them on the farm are good ways to build these relationships. This approach however prevented me from connecting with women located more than a couple of hours away from my own location. I received enthusiastic responses from people in south Illinois or northern Wisconsin that I was unable to visit due to the distance. I realize now that a mix of in-person and online video conversations could have been appropriate and would have helped better represent the Midwest.
[266] All the participants were offered and accepted a $50 stipend for their participation in the study.

their gardens or surrounded by the sounds of lakeside parties. Sometimes we herded sheep back to their paddock as we talked, cooked food, and shared cold drinks in the warm summer sun.[267]

Borrowing from rhetorical studies, ethnography, and sociology, I designed these open-ended interviews to be free-flowing conversations where the most important voice would be that of the interviewee.[268] With a couple of themes and ideas I wanted to discuss with my participants scribbled in my notebook, I asked them to tell me about their farm and let them lead the conversation from there. As employed by Peterson and Morton, free-floating prompts are meant to be used to loosely reorient the conversation when necessary.[269,270] Most of the time, the participants would bring up the topics on my list without prompting and a simple "can you tell me more about it?" would be enough to get them to discuss it further.[271] When a topic of my interest was not brought up first by the interviewee, it sometimes was a sign of its irrelevance to them. Asking about it would help determine whether it was irrelevant or had just not yet crossed their mind.

II.3 Data analysis

These conversations were later transcribed using a medical grade transcription service. By paying attention to details such as pauses, silences, laughs, and hesitations, I sought to analyze not only the content of the conversation but also its flow and the emotions and intensities associated with some of our topics of discussion.[272] All the interviews were coded for common themes using NVivo. I initially coded the interview transcripts using the elements identified in

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[267] Lyon et al. (2010) have observed that the environment of a field day and the informal conversations it fosters has been helpful in bridging the gap that can sometimes be felt between farmers and researchers.
[268] Corbin and Morse, "The Unstructured Interactive Interview."
[269] Peterson and Horton, "Rooted in Soil."
[270] Corbin and Morse (2003) also talk about "unstructured interactive interviews" or "open-ended or narrative interviews".
[271] Corbin and Morse, "The Unstructured Interactive Interview."
[272] This approach is inspired by Heather B. Adams's work published in *Field Rhetorics* (2018) and discussed the idea of intensity during conversations about hidden pregnancies.

the literature such as the importance of mentorship,[273] the challenge of growing perennial crops on rented land,[274] or the way women made use of their local communities.[275] As I discovered new common threads in my interviews such as the desire to pay it forward or the interest in co-farming, I added new codes to my list and used them to analyze other interviews.

II.4 Who are the participants?

Before presenting the results of my study, I want to take the time to describe the group of farmers I interviewed. I believe that specifying some elements of their identity and experience will help illuminate the findings of this research.

All the participants in my study identified as cis women and used she/her pronouns. I will therefore refer to them using these pronouns and with the term "woman/women." However, it is important to remember that not all women who farm are cis women[276] and not all people who can relate to the challenges and experiences presented below identify as women.

I held 11 interviews with 12 women, two of which were co-farmers on the same farm and attended the interview together, while one other woman owned the land with her sister but did not farm it. The participants of this study ranged in ages from late twenties to late sixties and had varying degrees of experience farming. On both ends of this experience scale, these farmers had between one and 40 years of experience.

Two of the farmers I interviewed farmed completely by themselves, while six had life partners that could help on the farm but held jobs off the farm. At the time of the interviews, all but one of the women who farmed their land were farming full-time. Three of these women

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[273] Carter, "Chapter 4. Changes on the Land."
[274] Valdivia and Poulos, "Factors Affecting Interest in Riparian Buffers and Forest Farming Practices."
[275] Trauger et al., "'Our Market Is Our Community.'"
[276] Here the term "cis" as in "cis gender" refers to people whose gender identity matches the gender assigned to them at birth. "Trans gender" would otherwise be used.

farmed in Iowa, four in Minnesota, and five in Wisconsin. As such, I will refer to the region using the phrase "Upper Midwest." All but one of these women were white and all had received higher levels of formal education. Although this was to be expected considering the historical resettlement of the Midwest[277] and the levels of wealth required to purchase land, these women all volunteered to join this research project, raising questions regarding who feels like their story is worth sharing and comes forward to do so.

Finally, although I intentionally stated my interest in 'land access' rather than 'land purchase' specifically, most of the women I interviewed were landowners. Only three of them did not access their land through purchase. Of these three, one was renting acres from her father's family farm, while the other two were members of a worker-owned farming cooperative. In practice, however, all the women I talked to had full or shared decision-making power on the farm. All the women I interviewed farmed small acreages with only one having access to more than 100 acres.[278] As expected, all of them grew at least one perennial crop, including fruit trees, berry bushes, and perennial grasses and flowers, which either already made up for the majority of their activity or were planned to in the next few years.

III. Results

The results I am presenting in the following sections should not be interpreted as "the experience of all women farming perennial crops in the Upper Midwest" but rather as a retelling of the stories of women who came forward and responded to my call. Their experiences of accessing land in the Upper Midwest to grow perennial crops help us illuminate the ways networks can support women farmers in a part of the country where the cultivation of

[277] Carter, "Chapter 4. Changes on the Land."
[278] Nationally, average farm sizes are around 440 acres. See "U.S. farming: average farm size" (2020).

commodity crops is prevalent and where gendered social processes still influence who gets access to land. Sharing the stories of how these networks benefit women and how they in return participate in strengthening them can help us better understand their importance and the opportunities for change they offer.

The concept of alternative networks offered by Carter is very helpful when reviewing the responses these women gave when asked to discuss the support they received from established networks. Although some of them discussed getting support from governmental agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS), the USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA), or their state Department of Natural Resources (DNR), most of the support they received came from local alternative networks. The women I spoke with joined these communities because they identified with them as women (such as the Women, Food, and Agriculture Network (WFAN) or the Soil Sisters); supported their missions (like the Farmers Unions or the Land Stewardship Project (LSP)); or were interested in the practices they advocated for (like the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Services (MOSES) or the Savanna Institute).[279] All of these networks are welcoming of all farmers regardless of their location but focus their own work on the Midwest. As suggested by Carter's previous findings, these women were members of or had connected with more than one of these networks.[280]

The conversations with the women I interviewed were rich and allowed me to observe three significant ways in which alternative networks, as defined by Carter,[281] helped these farmers. In the following section, I present a summary of these findings starting with how the networks

[279] All of these organizations are quickly presented in the annexes.
[280] Carter, "Chapter 4. Changes on the Land."
[281] Carter.

helped these women farmers (1) in the process of accessing land, then move on to discuss (2) the support they received in their daily life as a farmer, and finish with a summary of (3) the ways they found support as women in agriculture.

III.1. Accessing land

The first way these networks worked to support farmers is in the process of accessing land. The women I interviewed discussed how these alternative networks helped them find their land, develop legal documents necessary for the purchase, and how to finance their purchase. They also discussed how they used these same networks to then open their own land to other people who wanted to farm.

III.1.a. Finding the right land

Finding land to access in the first place was one of the ways networks helped Jen.[282] As she was moving back to the state where she grew up from the South, she quickly realized that her lack of connections to the area could make it harder for her to find her dream farm.

> I remember reading that it was mostly personal connections that got people rural land. It was either something passed on in the family, or it was [that] somebody knew somebody and they were able to find out about [a property] before it was listed. I was like 'well, we don't know anybody in [the] area we want to live.' And so, I thought 'how do I make a personal connection?'

Jen took it upon herself to build relationships in the area and posted a flier with a picture of her family, asking for people to contact her if they had a place to sell or knew of listings that could interest her. It took some time, but she finally connected with a woman who was happy to imagine her farm going to a young family. The local connections she made and the bond she

[282] All names are pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities.

established with the seller helped them overcome challenges and concerns throughout the process.

Similarly to Jen, Donna, a flower farmer in her thirties, knew when looking for a farm in an area she wasn't particularly familiar with that she needed to connect with the community in order to find the perfect land for her. She took a chance and connected to the local listservs where people were selling goods and asking for advice.

> I posted that […] our place fell through and we were looking for another property and sure enough, our new neighbor sent an email and said, 'Hey, you know, we have this place that you might be interested in coming to look at.' And it just wound up being the place.

Although Jen and Donna found land in different areas of the Upper Midwest, their stories highlight the role that local alternative networks and personal connection can play in allowing women to find land and offer a first look into the type of under-stories that that these networks foster.

III.1.b. Purchasing land for perennial agriculture

Donna's desire to purchase land stemmed from challenges that she had faced trying to farm according to her values on rented land. She explained that given the financial investment that came with perennial agriculture and the risk of losing access to the land, implementing perennial farming practices there had been too risky. Although she had always dreamed of growing perennials, she refrained from doing so on the land she was renting from a friend. Getting animals was another enterprise that would require investing in some infrastructure. Despite the risk, she built two outbuildings for her Guinea fowls. And when the landowner told her that he was planning on farming the land himself and would not be renewing her contract, she had to

leave behind the structures she had built and lost the investment she had made on the land. Luckily enough, they had signed a contract that meant she could finish the season before vacating the space.

Drafting that rental agreement was challenging and Donna explained that she wrote her own using samples she had found online via a land grant university extension program. Some of the alternative non-institutionalized networks she had joined, like the Land Stewardship Program, also supported her by providing her with an extensive list of components to include in the contract and making resources available online for free. However, these examples rarely included mentions of perennial crops already established on the land.

As tedious and intimidating as the process of designing a contract might be, it is an essential part of the land access process. Whether farmers are renting land short term or getting long-term leases,[283] buying on contract or purchasing with the help of a realtor, the complexity of these documents only reflects the richness of the land they are accessing.

When looking to purchase a farm, Ingrid wanted an already established orchard to be able to start her cider business right away. This would give her access to already producing trees which would save her the trouble of having to run another enterprise while the crops grew. This added another element to her list of requirements when searching for a property as she needed to pay attention to the varieties of apples already established and to the design of the orchard. After finding the land through farmer friends in the area, she had to take the trees into account once more. She negotiated with the seller a moving in date that would allow him to get the return on

[283] Long-term leases are tenant-landowner agreements that are developed to guarantee farmers access to the land over long periods of time. They usually are set up to last 15, 30, 50, or even 99 years. Another form of this is known as a land contract, with annual rent that is applied as capital investment toward land acquisition if fully paid for the entire contract term. For more information, see the work that the Savanna Institute has been doing on long-term leases.

his investment for the season while ensuring that she would have time to start planting new trees and to prune the old ones ahead of the new season. She summarized the situation with humor: "So, you know, it ended up being more just like a real estate transaction complicated by the fact that there's a perennial crop on the site."

The complications didn't stop with the agreement, however, and Ingrid had to demonstrate to her financers the value of the trees as well. She explained that with few orchards going for sale in the area every year, lenders were usually unfamiliar with how to evaluate them and finance them.

> I was trying to get a sense of how do you value an apple tree. I didn't get a lot of great answers. I know there is a professor of applied economic at the [local land grant university], and I do remember taking a look at some of her stuff - because I was trying to make a claim with regard to the value of an apple tree, because it's not just the land, it's the tree too. And the crop that you're gonna harvest from that tree for a period of time, and - I mean even complicating it further was the fact that the trees weren't all the same age.

It's important to note that the value of farmland is likely to be higher for land on which perennial crops are already producing.[284] In a system that makes land purchase almost unattainable for those who are just starting or those whose inherited wealth has been systemically limited, acquiring already productive crops is both a privilege and luxury. Planting these crops after purchasing the land represent another expensive process. Due to their nature, perennial crops – especially bushes and trees – can take years to get established and produce.[285] They therefore represent a big investment upfront which requires farmers to be able to sustain their farm activities in the meantime via other enterprises that will ensure adequate cash flow for

[284] Although this depends on the demand for such land versus the demand for cleared, tillable land.
[285] Valdivia and Poulos, "Factors Affecting Interest in Riparian Buffers and Forest Farming Practices."

lifestyle, debt service, and farm investments. While secure land tenure is heavily recommended and desirable when growing perennials, not every farmer has the financial ability to cashflow the first couple of years or to set aside highly productive land while perennial crops develop and mature. This prerequisite might make perennial farm practices less accessible to some farmers. Due to the inequal structure of our society and agricultural system, women, farmers of color, and other marginalized members of the farming community might find adding trees and bushes to their land more challenging than others. Interestingly, this under-story of perennial agriculture rarely emerged during my conversations with agroforesters in Wisconsin and instead was perhaps obstructed by the fact that most of them were men and owned their farmland.[286]

III.1.c. Financing the purchase

The majority of the women that I interviewed for this project told stories of financing the purchase of their farmland the same way they had previously done for their city homes. In doing so, some of them missed out on some of the resources and opportunities available to farmers in the purchase of land, especially those who were not from an agricultural background, like Marcy.

> We bought it but in a very - kind of an odd way. We bought it like we were buying another like suburban house. We didn't know that there could be different processes for buying agricultural land. We didn't know anything about that world at all. […] It was hard to find a mortgage.

Knowledge of formal and social networks can be one of the keys to accessing land and resources, particularly for new and young farmers.[287] Had Marcy been part of more of these

[286] See Chapter 1 for more about the under-story that emerged from conversations with agroforesters in the Driftless Area of Wisconsin.
[287] Caitlin Hachmyer, "Chapter 6. Notes from a New Farmer: Rent-Culture, Insecurity, and the Need for Change," in *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons*, ed. Justine M Williams and Eric Holt-Giménez (Food First Books, 2017), xviii.

alternative networks, she might have encountered people like Ann who could have told her about the FSA loans[288] available to farmers and that she benefited from herself when purchasing her land.

Ann's farm is located in a valley and is heavily forested. It was initially being sold as a hunting property through auctions which would have prevented her from applying for a down payment assistance loan. With very few farmers interested in the land, she was later able to purchase it from the seller using a loan that covered 95% of the down payment and financing the rest with a local bank.[289] "It was lucky that [my husband] had a pretty good off-farm job. That helped us get a loan. I mean, it's much, much harder for people who their only source of income is farming." While she was grateful for the support she received from her local community, Ann was also aware that it was a privilege that came with her education, socioeconomic background, and the network she had developed while farming in the area in previous years.

> We had a lot of help in terms of people to bounce ideas off of. I mean we have everything going for us, and it was still hard for us. And so, I just can't even imagine if, say, you don't speak English as your first language or you don't have a big network of people that you can bounce ideas off of and ask questions.

The professional and personal relationships that Ann had previously built in the area allowed her to access funding and support in the process of accessing land. This example illustrates the importance of maintaining a dialogue between solidarities of interest and sentiment.[290] The rest of Ann's story, which will be discussed later, continues to illustrate this dialogue of solidarities.

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[288] The Farm Service Agency (FSA) is an organization part of the USDA that enacts agricultural policies, administers credit and loan programs, and manages a wide variety of farm programs.

[289] For more information about FSA loan programs, see their website: https://www.fsa.usda.gov/about-fsa/structure-and-organization/farm-loans/index

[290] As a reminder, Bell (1995) proposes the concept of a dialogue between solidarities of interest and solidarities of sentiments that can help understand the decision that people make and can't be entirely explained by the concept of

The support that these farmers received from their community sometimes went above and beyond what Carter identified.[291,292] Donna, who found her land through a local community listserv after losing access to the land she was renting, received incredible support from her local community when it came time to purchasing her land.

> We couldn't have bought this place without the support of our community. Not just - I mean everybody was sending me listings and stuff like that but we also didn't have enough money to make our down payment. And some friends of ours put together a community benefit and we had like a silent auction and all the stuff […] and we did a GoFundMe in conjunction with that, and, between those things, we were able to raise enough extra money to be able to make our down payment.

While stories of generous communities donating to farmers to access land are probably rare, Donna's story of community participation isn't the only one I heard while working on this project. April's story is an inspiring one. Her local community came together a couple of years ago to protect the area from the establishment of a confined animal feeding operation that they were worried would affect the local quality of life and the health of the environment. Together, a group of neighbors, including April, bought the land and set it up as an LLC that they all co-owned. April was farming elsewhere at the time but quickly received offers from her neighbors to buy their shares at a lower rate and farm the land sustainably. Some went as far as donating their share to her farm. Here again, a solidarity of interest pushed the neighbors to band together to protect the land and the community from a project that they believed would affect everyone. A

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rational decision which focuses on a solidarity of interests. Bell argues that this dialogue of solidarities helps build trust which in turns helps support the relationship as the solidarities mutually constitute and reconstitute each other.

[291] Carter, "Chapter 4. Changes on the Land."

[292] As a reminder, Carter saw these networks as valuable providers of mentorship opportunities, support and knowledge, and of validation for new farming narratives.

solidarity of sentiments then convinced some of them to either sell or donate their share to April. Both women are from different states in the Midwest but share similar stories of their local communities supporting them in accessing land. Such stories of community support appear unlikely when the over-stories about land access revolve around competition between neighbors and concerns about who will be offering the most for the land,[293] but sharing April's under-story shed light on the power that supportive communities hold and reminds us of the "10-cent sales" that embodied Midwest farmers' solidarity during the Great Depression.[294]

III.1.d. Opening land to others

April felt privileged to have benefitted from the generosity of her neighbors. To ensure that the gift would benefit more than just herself and carry on serving future generations of farmers, April set up her farm as a worker owned cooperative. Any and all interested in farming with April would bring in some capital to buy into the farm and gain access to the entirety of land the cooperative owns. Lisa is the first one to have benefitted from this opportunity. She joined right as April was setting up the cooperative and gained access to the type of land she might not have been able to access by herself.

> I knew that's what I wanted to do with my life, but if [April] hadn't said, 'Hey, here's this land, I need a business partner.' Right then, I would not have thought that I should be running a farm, you know, [Laughs], but it worked out.

For April, the best set up was an LLC run as a cooperative under the Rochdale principles.[295] As a worker-owned cooperative, the co-farmers on the farm are equal decision makers. To join

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[293] Bell, *Farming for Us All*.
[294] Montenegro de Wit et al., "Agrarian Origins of Authoritarian Populism in the United States."
[295] These are principles guiding that can be adopted to ensure the good functioning of co-operatives. They include (1) voluntary and open membership, (2) democratic member control, (3) member economic participation, (4) autonomy and independence, (5) education, training, and information, (6) cooperation among cooperatives, and (7)

the co-operative, the potential associates need to bring in a contribution to the farm. This contribution can take many forms, including monetary, land, or equipment. This participation remains accessible to many as it is not as significant as a down payment would be. Additionally, it gives the new member of the co-operative access and equal decision power over the entirety of the farm rather than on a small portion of it. The co-op members then all get paid the same salary and are expected to work the same number of hours on the farm. Depending on interests or skills, they can be in charge of different enterprises. This democratic approach gives all members the same amount of power and agency over the land while being inviting to farmers with fewer resources. The local community that helped April and Lisa access land is another one of these alternative networks and in the case of these farmers, the gift they receive is one they have decided to share as part of their own community.

Like them, Ann acknowledged her privilege and the luck that allowed her to get to where she is today. The recognition of this privilege convinced her of the importance of paying it forward. She purchased her land with the help of an FSA loan and soon after decided to set up an incubator for beginning farmers on her land.

> [My husband] and I, in different ways, come from in an immense amount of privilege. And we've been really lucky, we've been really privileged. We've worked hard for what we have, but also, we realized that it's not always about how hard we've worked. There are systems in places that have set us up to succeed, and we want to be part of making sure that more people have a chance to succeed.

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concern for the community. For more information, see the UW Center for Cooperative's website: https://uwcc.wisc.edu/about-co-ops/cooperative-principles/

Through her farm incubator, she hopes to give beginning farmers a head start, allowing them to gain skills and develop their business without having to pay a mortgage or infrastructure bills. She also believes that these opportunities might encourage her incubatees to stay in the area and later use the privilege they have had to pay it forward for others. “Land access is so tricky. It was so hard for us. We wanted to be part of making it easier for other people.”

Ann also aims at righting some of the wrongs the system allowed and sometimes fostered, by opening the doors to new farmers that might be interested. She is aware of the inequalities of the system and recognizes that some communities have systematically been excluded from land access. As a result, she vouched for her farm to be a place where these farmers feel welcome and get an opportunity to farm. Her solidarity of sentiments here extends to communities and farmers she hasn’t personally met.

As suggested by Carter, the women I interviewed benefitted a lot from the support of the networks they belonged to when accessing their land, particularly local ones. When they weren’t already part of a community, they worked to join one or build one around themselves, knowing that it would help them access the resources necessary to the purchase of their farmland. After going through the process themselves, a couple of them chose to share the access to their land. In doing so, they chose to give back to the networks that had supported them.

III.2. Growing their knowledge, skills, and businesses

In this section, I discuss the support that the women I interviewed received from their alternative networks as they were learning to farm and then growing their businesses. They told me about the many instances where these networks provided them with opportunities to further their knowledge of perennial practices, about the support they received from mentors in the community, and about the ways these networks allowed them not to have to farm on their own.

III.2.a. Learning about perennial farming practices

The alternative networks that helped the women I interviewed gain access to land also provided support past the purchasing process. Once established on their farm, many of the women I talked to said that they turned to these networks for information and support as they learned about practices and crops.

For the women who grew up in farming families, turning to perennial practices sometimes came with its own set of challenges, especially when they chose to implement different practices than those traditional to their families. The two women in the sample who benefitted from this agricultural background explained that the challenge wasn't as much about finding land as it was about learning how to farm it in the best possible way, sometimes despite the way they were instructed.

Marlene, a farmer in her sixties, shared with me that she felt really privileged to have grown in a farming family with a lot of experience growing food on flat land. She explained that during her childhood she gained a lot of knowledge about farming and grew up to feel very confident in her ability to farm any land she would be able to access. "That's my unfair advantage. That's really where my biggest asset is. It's just the way I grew up."

However, she told me that this knowledge did not help her much when she and her sister purchased a farm on a hill. Marlene now owns it by herself as her sister decided to stop farming soon after. Her farm is located on a beautiful piece of land on the side of a hill and this sloping and highly erodible land forced the experienced farmer to forget all that she knew about farming on flat land and teach herself about perennial practices that could protect the land and produce food in sustainable ways.

> I've always done livestock. […] But I never - we never had to - this farm forced me to be regenerative… […] We never had to. We were flatland farmers before, so we could grow corn and soybean. But this land made me say 'we can't do that.'

Marlene explained that she was glad for the opportunity to learn and found a lot of helpful resources and training through some of the alternative networks she was already a part of. She was part of multiple groups, some catering specifically to women, others supporting small farmers locally, and some focusing on specific practices. Like Marlene, many of the women I interviewed for this research were part of a few different networks but MOSES, the Savanna Institute, the Soil Sisters, Practical Farmers of Iowa, and the Land Stewardship Project were some of the most common ones.

Leslie, an organic farmer in her forties working on her family's land, shared Marlene's experience and told me about the challenging conversations she regularly had with her father regarding her farming practices. He was used to growing corn and soybeans and to rely on fossil fuel energy and chemicals, she explained, and he sometimes struggled to understand her approach. She noted that the pressure to keep farming according to family traditions made the adoption of perennial farm practices more challenging. While she said it never discouraged her, she admits that it slowed her down and added to her activity a level of conflict that farmers who purchase their own land to farm probably didn't experience. "I'm renting acres - my father is not sold on organic agriculture. He's not - he doesn't believe in climate change. And he doesn't agree. He doesn't understand the regenerative movement."

This echoes Carter's findings about the challenges that women face within their families when trying to adopt practices that differ from the ones historically implemented on the land,

even when they theoretically have total decision-making power over what happens to it.[296] Leslie explained that she knew from the beginning that she wanted to farm differently than her father did but that to do so, she had to go and figure it out by herself. She read about organic agriculture and regenerative grazing and found support by joining some of the local groups and networks of like-minded farmers. There she was able to find mentors who have accompanied her over the years and helped them develop their own support system.

> And just year after year, just meeting people within that network, we've made lifelong friends. […] We're beginning farmer mentors through MOSES. And we met quite a number of people through our [own] mentors. And then, we did the Savings Incentive Program through Practical Farmers of Iowa. We met a number of people through those mentors.

Although some of the farmers I talked to have yet to get actively involved with these networks, they still benefit from them and the information shared virtually, often even learning from farmers across state borders. Marcy, the beginning farmer that didn't know about financing opportunities, explained to me that while she had only attended a couple of the events hosted by the networks she had joined, she particularly enjoyed that they allowed people to freely and constantly share knowledge and ask questions. "You get emails every day about any number of things. So even things that I don't care about at all, I'm still learning about via these emails. Then there's still open space for me to ask a question and then you get a response from other people." The alternative networks she discussed also held regular meetings instead of a big yearly event which she found less intimidating and more helpful when it came to making connections and

[296] Carter, "Chapter 4. Changes on the Land."

building relationships. Marcy told me that she started raising pigs after meeting another woman farmer at one of these gatherings.

> I feel like I was moving really slowly and just at the speed of my own knowledge until I met them. And now, the possibilities are pretty endless, right? Because you have this network of people that you can rely on. I don't know how to do pigs, but this woman is willing to sell me the pigs and the support too.

Marcy explained that this support went as far as this farmer recommending Marcy's pigs rather than her own to customers when she felt like they were a better fit. Although it started informally, a sort of mentorship developed between the two women that was facilitated by these alternative networks.[297]

Many of the women I talked to were very grateful for the mentorship relationships they were able to build through these networks. These networks bring together farmers with similar interests and values but also give women the opportunity to learn from other women. In an industry that is still gendered, it can sometimes be easier for women to learn from other women and feel safe to share their experiences as women with someone who can relate.[298] As Jen told me with humor:

> It's not that I'm opposed to talking to men about it, [laughs] but it is – it's just different. It's fun to talk with other women as business owners, and to kind of, I don't know, have the conversation flow how we'd like it [laughs].

Bell's dialogue of solidarity was particularly present in these conversations about knowledge as many of the farmers I interviewed explained receiving support from other farmers they had never met. In Marcy's case particularly, she received support from someone who could have

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[297] Carter.
[298] Lisa Kivirist, *Soil Sisters: A Toolkit for Women Farmers*, 2016.

been – and probably is – a direct competitor. However, the two women shared an interest for pigs and a desire to develop a strong local food system as well as a solidarity of sentiments born from their shared experiences as women and pig growers. This dialogue of solidarity led to the creation of valuable relationships that soon evolved into mentorships.

III.2.b. Receiving support in their daily activity

Donna, whose farm she was able to purchase with the help of her community, told me about the importance of mentorship in her life. Before she was able to move to her own land, she benefited from a mentorship opportunity with a woman who had been farming for a long time in the area and was very well known in the community. From her, Donna learned how to farm sustainably but remembers most how important relationships were to her mentor and how she shared her own network with her: "I mean, you know, she was a great teacher on the farm but she showed me how to find resources and connect with community right away." She explained that the most important lesson she learned from her mentor was how to connect and collaborate with the rest of the community.

> You know, it was just like I was learning that you really can integrate with your local community and rely on each other which was not something that I had thought about before. […] Farming before that seemed like a pretty self-isolated thing. It's like 'oh, no, actually,' seeing how she was interacting with all of these other farmers and networking with them and just like going for resources, you know?

Donna described her experience with mentorship as involving a lot of support for other farmers and Ann shared a similar experience. As an incubatee on a farm, she was able to find support as she was starting her business and help when she had questions. The relationships that

these women built with their mentors lasted long after their formal mentorship opportunities ended. Both Donna and Ann explain having learned the importance of supporting other farmers from their mentors and today foster multiple relationships with younger and beginner farmers in their area.

III.2.c. Not farming alone

Although Ann was able to purchase her land thanks to her husband Mark's stable income which allowed them to get a bank loan, she remains the main farmer on the farm. While Mark helps her whenever he can, they still rely on his off-farm job for health insurance among other things and Ann had to look elsewhere for regular support. That's in part why she decided to start an incubator on her farm. In exchange for offering land access to beginning farmers, Ann asks all of her incubatees to put in 20 hours of work a month on her own farm. This arrangement allows her to get some help to perform tasks on the farm that she would not be able to do on her own without having to hire someone. "There are certain projects around here that I could really use help with," she explained. "But not all the time." Additionally, Ann agrees that farming is not the lonely endeavor it's been portrayed to be and that farming alongside people makes her experience more enjoyable and the challenging times more manageable.

> It's just always more fun to work with other people. I usually do the vast majority of my livestock work on my own, which I like. I don't want to have to manage employees, but then in those crucial times where it's an emergency, like your animals get out, it's nice to know that I do have [support in time of] emergency, I have lots of people to help me out.

Gayle purchased her farm by herself in her mid-fifties and has had firsthand experience of what it's like to farm on her own. Her plans for her farm initially included planting an apple

orchard following keylines[299] on her land, setting up a pond for water retention, and managing animals. Unfortunately, getting it all done on her own proved to be a lot more challenging than she expected. Gayle did initially seek help but found the group of women farmers in her area to be unaware of the challenges that women who farm alone often face. After a bad experience with a contractor recommended by someone in her perennial network, she decided to stick to her already existing community and rely on her church friends for support. However, this partial isolation has limited her in her farming activity. The trees in her apple orchard are not exactly planted following the keylines of her land and she has never been able to manage more than a small herd of meat goats by herself.

> One of my limiting factors, with the size of my herd, is that I have to carry water all winter. I don't have any water lines to my buildings. So, the most I can handle over winter, easily, is about 13 adults. I just can't carry more water than that. It's just too tiring.

Gayle also mentioned that farming alone presented a risk of getting injured and not having anyone available to take care of the farm. In the ten years that separated her purchase of the farm and our interview, she explained that she witnessed the aging of her body and wished she had started farming earlier.

Marlene, unfortunately, had to deal with the challenge of getting hurt while farming alone. Right then, she was glad that she designed her farm to anticipate a situation like that. "I built in a lot of redundancy," she told me. "So, we've got backup water systems, bought backup feed systems. Then if I get sick or get hurt, most of my stuff can go a good 48 to maybe 72 hours." But when Marlene found herself stuck in bed for two months after an operation, she had to turn

[299] Keylines refer to topographical characteristics of the land related to the flow of water. Adopting a keyline design can help maximize the use of water on the land and limit erosion.

to her neighbors for help and once again she was glad she had built strong relationships with them over the years.

> A set of neighbors came in and […] they just helped out. But then I help them out, too, right? And they all got a nice thank you gift at the end of two months when I finally was back on my feet. But it was the first test of how resilient am I if I'm down for the count.

The dialogue of solidarities that Marlene maintained over the years paid off and she was able to get the support she needed from her neighbors. The under-stories that Ann, Gayle, and Marlene shared shed light on the reality of farming alone. Indeed, the over-story of farming as an individual endeavor doesn't acknowledge the challenges that solo farmers face every day. As suggested by Carter however, the many alternative networks to which women belong help them access knowledge and support as they learn how to farm, develop their market, and grow their businesses. The level of support and formality of it depends on each person's need.

III.3. Being women in agriculture

This last result section offers some insight on the support and validation that the women I interviewed received as they dealt with the challenges they faced as women in farming. They discussed experiences of sexism in a male dominated industry and the challenge of having to raise children while working on the farm. They appreciated the opportunities the alternative networks offered to exchange with people who shared their experience and to address these issues as a community.

III.3.a. Raising children

When discussing their experiences as women in farming, a couple of the women I interviewed talked about the challenge of raising children while working on the farm. Based on

Pilgeram and Amos's findings, I expected for some of the younger women to be balancing their parental responsibilities with farm work and for the women who had started to farm later in life to have done so after their children had become more independent.[300] While a few of my interviewees fit that second category, very few of the younger women who would have fit in Pilgeram and Amos's other category actually had children. Pilgeram and Amos found that, although these younger women had to simultaneously handle parenting responsibilities, they chose to make some of these sacrifices in order to access land and grow their business.[301] The younger women I interviewed did not have the same responsibility of balancing their responsibilities on the farm with the responsibilities of raising children. The women who started farming later in life however discussed motherhood and family a lot.[302]

Jen explained how having and raising children significantly impacted the time women could spend farming. Although she had long dreamed of farming, she knew that farming was physically demanding and that she wouldn't be able to properly do it while pregnant or raising a young child. "If you're pregnant and nursing," she explained, "it's just physically hard to keep up with farming things when you have children. And so, I waited to have a farm, in part, until after I had a child…"

Although Jen's family helped her find her land (she used a picture of them on her flier), she explained that even though her partner is heavily involved in raising their child, she couldn't help but note that her family responsibilities often prevented her from working on the farm as much as she wanted. Indeed, despite how liberal her partner had decided to be, she still found herself

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[300] Pilgeram and Amos, "Beyond 'Inherit It or Marry It.'"
[301] Like Pilgeram and Amos observed in their study, some of these women chose to live frugally, often in temporary accommodations without running water, to prioritize land access and their business.
[302] Pilgeram and Amos (2015) and Carter (2020) argue that it is important to consider women's ages and stages in life when discussing their approach to farming. Here however, it feels important to note that the trend of women having children later in life that has been observed recently affected our ability to use Pilgeram and Amos's categories efficiently.

being the primary caretaker for her child. “I don’t know how people have more than one child,” she commented with a laugh, “but you kind of end up being the default like person that takes them to their doctor’s appointments…”

Jen’s experience illustrates what some sociologists call women’s “second shift.” With this phrase, they acknowledge the gendered division of labor and the additional labor expected from women once they come home from work and that usually includes cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children.[303]

Ingrid also had children before she started farming and waited to grow her business until they were older. She bought her apple cider orchard while her children were still pretty young and only now that they are more independent does she feel comfortable focusing more on her farm activity and developing her cider business. “Just their increasing independence and abilities have meant that I've been able to work more here and then leave home and establish more of a presence [in the city].”

The challenge of raising children while farming therefore goes beyond farming while pregnant or nursing and these conversations shed light on the additional parental responsibilities that still fall onto women’s shoulders and limit their ability to get involved in the farm activities.

Lucy who bought a farm with her husband right after having her first child explained that her responsibilities as a mother also limited her abilities to learn her craft and build her network. Being the primary caretaker for her daughter, she struggled to find time to attend workshops and conferences. As a result, she could see the knowledge gap between she and her husband widen and his network grow while she was home with her child. This imbalanced and gendered division of parental responsibilities therefore promotes the narrative that women who have fewer

[303] Bell et al., *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*.

opportunities to gain knowledge and work should be expected to hold the role of primary caretaker.[304]

While not regretting their choice to have children, these women are very aware of the sacrifices they had to make and how it affected their ability to farm and enjoy the practice. When paying attention to the tone of the conversation, the frustration and guilt can sometimes be heard as women navigate their farming responsibilities with their responsibilities as mothers whether socially- or self-inflected. Jen explained feeling torn between her dream to farm and her desire properly take care of her son.

> I'm always weighing those things. I really want to do this, I really want to [grow] my business, I really want to invest my heart and soul in this, but I also want to invest my heart and soul in my child and not just ignore him…

Marcy shares all of these concerns but also acknowledges that she personally made some choices that mean she has to spend more time with her children. Indeed, on top of running her small farm business on her own, Marcy is homeschooling her children. Her desire to be more involved in their education in turn affects her ability to spend time working on the farm.

When joining networks of women in farming, a lot of the women I interviewed said that they found a lot of support and that they appreciated the opportunity to discuss these challenges with other women. Their experiences they were able to share were similar no matter where they were located and the emotional support they received came from all over the Midwest. However, their under-stories of balancing motherhood with farming also revealed that this support was usually limited to opportunities to commiserate. Kivirist who started the Soil Sisters and wrote a

[304] I am happy to say however that after this conversation with Lucy, I invited her to attend the 2019 WFAN conference. There she met a lot of other women with whom she was able to discuss the challenges of raising children while farming. She also started building her own network of relationships. I believe this is an interesting example of how joining some of these alternative networks can significantly impact the lives of these women.

book of the same name discusses the challenges of farming while raising children but doesn't explicitly question the system in place or the gendered expectations associated with these responsibilities.[305] The book positions itself as a toolkit for women in farming and as such provides them with a plethora of tips to improve their experience and build successful enterprises. It doesn't, however, deconstruct the system and perhaps even perpetuates the idea that the responsibility to raise children falls solely on women, even if farming is their primary activity. Carter explains that depending on some organizations' view of gender equality, this is a criticism that could be made about many of the alternative networks that are geared towards women.[306]

III.3.b. Perception of women

As the over-stories of farming often depict the industry as being mostly masculine, I was curious to hear about these women's experiences with sexism. Most of them explained that these instances were usually few and far between. They were all however able to share with a couple of examples of an older man farmer asking to talk to their husband or questioning their knowledge and abilities. Most of the time, they told these stories with a smile and some of them even explained enjoying the opportunity to set things straight with them.

Most of the women I interviewed were really grateful for opportunities to connect with other women in farming and always looked forward to the gatherings these alternative networks would organize. Ann explained that she enjoyed these opportunities to gather with other women and share about their practices. "I love going to women's gatherings," she said enthusiastically. "I love those spaces. I think there is something special about those environments." She explained

[305] Kivirist, *Soil Sisters*.
[306] Angie Carter, "Women's Farm Organizations in the United States: Protecting and Transforming Agricultural Power," in *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Agriculture*, ed. Carolyn Sachs et al. (Routledge, 2020).

that the experiences she shared with other women allowed them to connect more quickly and on a more personal level.[307] These events indeed offer women an environment in which their under-stories are no longer dismissed and create opportunities for new narratives to emerge.[308]

> I think there's a lot of power in getting people of the same gender together to talk about the issues that they face, no matter what that is.

Leslie who farms organically on her family land has attended multiple of these events and she is aware of the importance that these women farming groups have for many people. However, she also explained not wanting her identity as a farmer to be limited to her gender and instead expressed her desire to be accepted as an equal to the men in the community.

> I envy the whole Soil Sisters thing in Southwest Wisconsin. I wish we had something like that here. But at the same time - and this sounds kind of weird […], I want to be an equal. I feel like [if] I do all these women-oriented things, I won't become as strong as I need to be for a level playing field, if that makes any sense at all. I don't know if it does. But I don't want to use being a woman as an excuse. I want to be an equal to the person, the farmer across the road.

This desire to be seen as "one of the boys" has been already identified by Kivirist,[309] but as explained by Donna, who perhaps shares this vision, the issue with women focused group might be that they were designed by an older generation of farmers to address old issues of gender.

> They grew up in a generation where women weren't the farmers. They did a lot of farming, but it was their husbands that were always recognized as being the

[307] A finding echoed by Carter (2020).
[308] Carter, "Placeholders and Changemakers."
[309] Kivirist, *Soil Sisters*.

> farmer, and they're kind of fighting for their recognition […]. I don't really see that as a problem with our generation.

Donna agrees with Leslie that the network created by previous generations of women have allowed them to feel like equals to men farmers, no longer experiencing regularly the sexism that previous generations of women farmers have. However, becoming an equal does not mean that the structure that created a hierarchy has been abolished. Instead, women are at risk of becoming the ones perpetrating inequalities and exclusion.

Donna worries that nowadays women networks can be seen as exclusionary, especially for farmers from the LGBTQ community who don't necessarily identify as women. She therefore doesn't see the need for more of these women networks. This doesn't mean however that these farmers are not deeply connected to these networks. Both Leslie and Donna are aware of how much they have benefitted from these networks and remain very active, attending conferences and offering support to other women. They however expect these networks to grow and evolve to reflect the lived experiences of farmers and intentionally hold them accountable.

When conducting these interviews, I expected women to discuss issues of sexism and unequal treatment more often than they did.[310] Women who brought up these topics made sure to specify that these were rare occurrences and mostly happened around older male farmers. The older women in the sample had a few more stories, most relating to experiences from long ago. It appears as though most of them benefitted from the work older generations of women farmers put in to establish women as equals to men in the community. It's not to say however that women's experience farming is the same as men, far from it. As it appears, women still carry the

[310] Carter explains that a 2007 survey of women farmers in the Pennsylvania Women in Agriculture Network revealed that almost two thirds of respondents reported not being taken as seriously as men farmers and that half did not feel welcome in agricultural groups. See Carter (2020).

responsibility of raising children and are very aware of the ways motherhood has affected their ability to farm, including when they were able to start farming, the amount of labor they were able to do on the farm while raising kids, or their physical ability to farm once their children were grown. In this case, the women-specific alternative networks offered women opportunities to commiserate and receive validation of their struggle, but very few solutions were offered.[311]

IV. Discussion

My work with these women allowed me to reflect on three key points that I will be present and describe in this section. First, as suggested by Carter, these women have found support and validation for new narratives of farming. Here I propose two narratives that emerged from our conversations: "pay it forward" and "farm collaboratively." In this section, I also discuss how these specific narratives can inform the work that alternative networks supporting women can do. Finally, I also want to reflect on the opportunities these narratives present to change the larger narrative about agriculture in the US and as the result the American farm-scape itself.

IV.1. The new narratives they encourage

In her contribution to *Land Justice*, Carter discusses how she observed women landowners seen as "placeholders" become "changemakers" with the support of alternative networks that offered opportunities for mentorship, getting support and information, and validation of new narratives about farming and women's role in the system.[312] In the case of my research, all the women I interviewed were part of alternative networks similar to the ones Carter described and shared under-stories of the support they received. As members of these networks, they both benefitted from opportunities and provided some to others; they were mentees and mentors,

[311] The book mostly shared stories of bone fires where women commiserated about these challenges but did not offer suggestions for alleviating it.
[312] Carter, "Chapter 4. Changes on the Land."

received help from other women with more experience, and shared resources with each other. Through all of it and regardless of their location, the women I interviewed carried and shared two narratives that I believe have emerged from and spread through these networks: "pay it forward" and "farm collaboratively." The following section details how these farmers have experienced, embodied, and shared these narratives through their networks.

IV.1.a. "Pay it forward"

As suggested by Carter,[313] the women I interviewed for this research benefited a lot from these alternative networks, including when accessing land, learning how to farm, and receiving support over the years. Their gratitude for the support they received meant that these women often adopted a "pay it forward" attitude. A couple of them actually employed this phrase to explain how they were willing to share their resources and networks with others when they could. Interestingly, the language they employed of "paying" it forward can convey an economic component that was rarely present in the actual examples of women paying it forward. Most of the help they provided wasn't financial in nature although it could be argued that the support they offered might have saved someone money or made their business more profitable in the long term. Instead, I argue that this choice of word illustrates how the capitalist framework that shapes the main over-story in agriculture has come to even shape the language of their under-stories.

After benefiting from the connections they established through these alternative networks, many of the women whom I interviewed were actively working to give back to these networks. They took time answering people's questions on mailing lists, welcomed people onto their farms for tours and workshops, or signed up for mentorship matchups.

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[313] Carter.

The older women in the sample started farming at a time where few networks existed to support them. Over the years, they often participated in creating listservs and community groups that they believed would benefit a new generation of farmers. As a result of older women creating community groups and opportunities, a few of the younger women I talked to directly benefited from the networks or mentorship of older women in the sample. As discussed earlier, these younger women, while extremely grateful for the guidance and support of the older generation, did not always see the point in creating more networks of women or in joining new ones. They even stated that perhaps older generations of women farmers were the ones most interested in building these communities. If these comments could be initially read as a dismissal of the importance of these networks of women, they actually help shed light on the great impacts that these networks have already had. It indeed seems like the younger generation rarely had to deal with their presence in the farming community being questioned. They nevertheless were still regularly involved in these networks and often pushed for them to be more intersectional in their approaches. The next discussion section suggests ways these networks could meet the expectations of this new generation of women farmers.

Similarly, the younger women in this sample who often had found the process of accessing land particularly challenging saw it as part of their responsibility to make land access easier for beginning farmers. As landowners, they now saw themselves as privileged and wanted to pay it forward, usually by opening their land to others. Although they were intending on facilitating access for all rather than just for women, all of the farmers who had worked to open their land – be it through the creation of a co-operative, an incubator, or by allowing beginning farmer to use their land for free – found themselves benefiting other women.

This narrative of "paying it forward" highlights the important dialogue of solidarities that is fostered by these alternative networks. Through shared experiences and visions of farming, these women have built trust as a community. The solidarity of sentiments that emerges and is cultivated in these networks allows them to feel confident paying it forward and supporting farmers they have never met.

This narrative of "paying it forward" is one that women shared across locations, ages, practices, or land access stories. More importantly, they regularly shared with me stories of other women paying it forward. The circulation of this narrative through the networks echoes and illustrates Carter's findings. These women either witnessed or directly benefitted from other women paying forward through these networks. They saw women sharing knowledge, offering mentorship opportunities, and opening up their land and it shaped their approach to farming and encouraged them to pay it forward, whenever they could. Later in this discussion, I will elaborate how the different narratives of paying it forward can help drive the actions of these alternative networks.

IV.1.b. "Farming collaboratively"

Another narrative often present during our conversations is that of "farming collaboratively." The support that the women I interviewed received from their communities and the importance of these alternative networks in their success convinced many of them that farming is not a solitary enterprise. Not only were they able to see their place in a bigger farm ecosystem, but they were also inspired to farm collaboratively rather than on their own.

As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation and in Chapter 1, the dominant narrative about agriculture is one that puts an emphasis on productivity and encourages competition between farmers. As a result, farming has often been depicted as a solitary endeavor. Although

the farmers I interviewed still value their autonomy, they disagree with the idea that you can truly farm alone, and this alternative narrative is promoted by these alternative networks.

Some of the women I interviewed accessed land after having a first career that allowed them to gather the funds to purchase land while other were able to farm by relying on the off-farm income brought in by their life partner. As discussed by Pilgeram and Amos, the women who fit this first description are usually older and started farming after a big transition in their personal life.[314] As a result, many of them have had to farm the land alone or find themselves beyond their physical peak. For these women, the task of farming alone can seem daunting. Farming alone means tasks take longer to get done and the risks and consequences of injury are increased. Additionally, they are stuck in a vicious cycle that prevents them from growing their business: they would need more labor to grow their businesses, but they also need more business to justify hiring and paying for farm help.

Through these alternative networks, women are able to share their under-stories and find some level of support. Once again, the dialogue between solidarities of interest and solidarities of sentiments is one that encourages collaboration. They can ask for help during busy farm days and are happy to go help others when they need to. However, this type of support doesn't always ease their feeling of loneliness.

Many of the farmers I interviewed, no matter their location, age, or how they accessed land, were interested in the idea of finding co-farmers to ease the challenges of farming alone. In doing so, they are not looking to hire farm help or to sell part of their land to reduce their workload, instead, they are looking for farmers interested in building relationships and farming collaboratively on the same land. The type of arrangement they have in mind or have already

[314] Pilgeram and Amos, "Beyond 'Inherit It or Marry It.'"

implemented varies depending on their need, available resources, and overall level of comfort. However, it generally involves a trade of work hours for land access. In most cases, these farmers also offer housing opportunities to the farmers they co-farm with. Their under-stories of farming collaboratively contrast with the over-stories and the dominant narrative of farming as a solitary endeavor and challenge the standard and traditional understanding of a family farm structure.

My conversations with the women I interviewed revealed the emergence of two narratives that were directly inspired by the support they received from the alternative networks they were a part of: "pay it forward" and "farm collaboratively." While common to most of the women I talked to, they all implemented them differently based on the resources they had access to and on their vision for their own farm.[315] As these narratives emerged through conversations about land and land access, these narratives of "paying it forward" and "farming collaboratively" can be powerfully disruptive and challenge the many of the dominant narratives and systems that have shaped the US agriculture. These narratives can be used to questions the systems in place and suggest alternatives. The following section discusses some of the ways alternative networks can use these narratives but I invite researchers to consider how these two narratives can be used in their own work to profoundly challenge our understanding of land and how to access it for agriculture in the US.

[315] These narratives also echo the findings of the research I presented in Chapter 1 that suggested that agroforesters were in part motivated to practice agroforestry by the fact that the community was supportive and willing to share knowledge. Although this could suggest that perennial agriculture fosters collaboration and the sharing of knowledge, I believe that these two motivations are perhaps more closely related to the emergence of an agroforestry network where the members wish to support each other's under-stories.

IV.2. How can these narratives be used?

The narratives that were shared by the women I interviewed when discussing land access and networks can help us imagine ways to further support women through these alternative networks.

Both of the narratives of "paying it forward" and "farming collaboratively" put a very strong emphasis on collaboration and community support. Shared through these alternative networks, they have the potential to spread and challenge the established understanding of farming as a solitary practice. However, these narratives do not question the importance of autonomy and invite farmers to independently decide if and how they want to pay it forward and how they want to set up these non-hierarchical co-farming practices. While these narratives might have, in part, emerged from alternative networks specifically focused on women in agriculture, they were common to women from different parts of the Upper Midwest and growing a variety of crops. As a result, I argue that these narratives have the potential to spread through a multitude of other networks and to reach farmers who are not part of these gender specific networks. Indeed, a majority of the women farmers I interviewed were also involved in multiple networks not necessarily aimed specifically at women such as their local Farmers Union, or the networks hosted by MOSES and the Savanna Institute.[316] As such, had the opportunity to share these narratives with farmers in these groups as well.

In this section, I suggest two ways I argue these narratives could be used. First, they could be used to highlight the need to provide options for systemic changes in the agricultural system. Second, they could inform the type of support the alternative networks provide going forward.

[316] As a reminder, MOSES's focus is on organic agriculture while the Savanna Institute works on agroforestry and perennial systems.

IV.2.a. Encourage just approaches to farming

The "pay it forward" and "farm collaboratively" narratives hint at a desire to reform the way we think about agriculture in the U.S. As a result, I argue that they provide an opportunity to suggest a way forward where the alternative networks that support women in farming take a more just approach to farming and address the systemic root of injustices such as unequal land access, gendered labor expectations, and institutional biases that still make the farming system exclusionary.

Carter suggests that alternative networks that support women can fit in four different frames relative to their vision of gender equity. They can work to (1) "fix the woman" and help her better compete with men, (2) "value the feminine" and celebrate what women bring to the system, (3) "create equal opportunities" by dismantling social barriers, and (4) "assess and revise work culture" by challenging the established social order.[317]

The conversations I had with the participants of my study led me to think that the networks that support them have succeeded in making knowledge available to women to ensure they could be equals to men. Similarly, I believe that these networks have participated in making women's contributions to the agricultural system visible to all and have helped make their voices heard.[318] As a result, they have successfully achieved the first two goals suggested by Carter and challenged historical exclusion through the creation of these networks.

As suggested by some of the women I interviewed, meeting these first two goals is however no longer enough. As a result, I believe that a lot of the women in this sample find themselves working to achieve the third goal proposed by Carter of "creating equal opportunities." The

[317] Carter, "Women's Farm Organizations in the United States."
[318] Lisa Kivirist who created the group Soil Sisters was also the host of MOSES's In Her Boots podcast which published interviews with women farmers each week.

narrative of "paying it forward" is perhaps a way for them to participate in creating these opportunities, particularly as they relate to land access and the way some farmers have struggled to find secure land access.

Carter who has long been involved in the governance of WFAN argues that to achieve the fourth goal of "assessing and revising work culture," more work needs to be done to challenge the ways oppressive systems are still deeply embedded in these organizations.[319] Here, relying on more womanist approaches, queer approaches, anti-racist approaches, and decolonizing approaches would be part of the solution. With a commitment to these anti-oppression approaches, these alternative networks can foster conversations and educate their members while conducting deep change from within the organizations.

After conducting these interviews, I believe this kind of work to be needed. Indeed, many of the women I talked to suggested that women were perhaps more collaborative by nature or more comfortable at collaborating than men. However, I warn against the essentialism that associates of women with the idea of collaboration – and of men with the idea of individualism – without considering the complex sociopolitical elements of the system in which we all work. Such simplifications have often been used to justify unequal systems and the abuse of some communities,[320] including women, people of color, and the queer[321] community.[322] Additionally, the work I conducted with agroforesters contradicted this idea and showed that these farmers,

[319] Carter, "Women's Farm Organizations in the United States."
[320] Bell et al. talk about how the close association of women with the idea of nature has long led to their abuse and domination. See Bell et al. (2021).
[321] Here, I use "queer" as reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community. See Bell et al. (2021).
[322] I list these communities separately; it is important to remember that people's identity can intersect these categories. A farmer can be a queer woman of color. In those cases, the impact of these oppressive systems is compounded.

including men, considered collaboration as essential to the success of their farming endeavors and to the health of the agricultural system.[323]

Using an ecofeminist lens to look at the idea of collaboration in agriculture, we are able recognize the constraints of our system that make it difficult for men to collaborate and encourage women to do it. For example, as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the dominant narrative of agriculture as a neoliberal practice puts an emphasis on individualism and competition. As discussed by Bell et al., men have traditionally been seen as the farmers. As a result, they perhaps have been targeted by these messages more than women who sometimes still struggle to call themselves farmers.[324] Similarly, the conversations I had with some women about the influence of motherhood on their farming abilities have made it clear that it is incredibly difficult for them to farm alone and carry the main responsibility of raising children at the same time. For them to be able to do both, asking for help and support appears to be the only option.[325] Additionally, this lens allows me to suggest that the over-stories depicting farming as a solitary practice and as mostly a man's job take for granted the work that the women in these men's lives do on the farm and for their families and that that allows men to focus solely on their farming.

Additionally, using an ecowomanist lens allowed me to understand that the criticism that some of the younger women had for the alternative networks of women in farming were mostly calling out old fashioned ideas of gender equality and an approach to feminism that wasn't inclusive enough. During our conversations, some of these women indeed suggested that the organizations that supported them – as they were functioning at the time – tended to participate

[323] See the Results presented in Chapter 1, particularly the section about knowledge and collaboration.
[324] Bell, *Farming for Us All*.
[325] I also believe that women are regularly encouraged to collaborate through their role as mothers. The saying "it takes a village" indeed relates to the task of raising children and suggests that it is appropriate for parents to rely on their networks for support. As women remain the main caretakers for their children, they are more likely to be on the receiving end of these aphorisms about collaboration. Similarly, as women are often traditionally depicted as mother figures and caretakers, part of their inclinations towards mentorship might be influenced by societal expectations.

in the exclusion of some farmers.[326] An ecowomanist approach suggests the need for these organizations to diversify their membership and to intentionally address some of the oppressive systems that are engrained in their structures.

Similarly, approaching land access through a queer lens helps me identify some of the challenges that many women face when accessing land that have been perpetrated by a heteronormative understanding of the agricultural system. Bell et al. use this approach to explain how the traditional "family farm" format that is praised by many doesn't distribute responsibilities equally and often relies on unpaid family labor and off-farm income.[327] As discussed in the Results section, some of the experiences of the women I interviewed for this research help illustrate this point. This approach for example allowed me to see how Jen leaned into the image of a heteronormative family to gain access to land. During our conversation, Jen indeed explained that she added a picture of her small family to her flier, well aware that had she been a single mother or a woman of color, the response of the community could have been different, and she might not have found her land. She also bought her farm from a woman who was happy to think that many children would grow up on the land. Jen who only had one child and wasn't planning on having more did not correct her. On the other hand, Marcy's desire to live and farm with another family could be seen as challenging the heteronormative image of a family farm.[328] Bell et al. also suggest that alternative family structures can inform alternative farm structures that are more likely to be democratic and resilient. They argue that a queer

[326] As a reminder, Donna was worried that "women's organizations" tended to exclude people from the LGBTQ community.
[327] Bell et al., *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*.
[328] Marcy and her family initially bought their farm with another family with whom they were going to live and farm.

approach to farming allows us to unpack our assumptions and build more creative and innovative solutions.[329]

In addition to these ecofeminist, ecowomanist, and queer ecology lens, taking a decolonizing agriculture approach to farming is also helpful in this case. As decolonization is an inherently land-based issue, it is particularly appropriate when discussing issues related land access. Tuck and Yang indeed argue that decolonization without land repatriation is only a metaphor. [330] Here, Haslett-Marroquin, who is a Native scholar, adds that colonization has also affected our minds and that decolonizing our minds can help decolonize our practices. He suggests that decolonizing our minds can encourage the creation of democratic structures as it works to undo hierarchies of power. Many of the farmers who told me about being interested in co-farming, whether they had started doing it or not, imagined it as a non-hierarchical organization. Whether they set it up as co-farmers being part-owners of a worker-owned cooperative or incubatees responsible for their own enterprises and business, most of the farmers I interviewed wanted these relationships to be about mutual support and equal responsibilities. The structures they established as a result are ones that reflect their desire to maintain even relationships.

Haslett-Marroquin reminds us that hierarchical structures are often the result of colonized minds. He suggests that valuing collaboration and community success is a first step in decolonizing our minds. He also explains that building a decolonized regenerative agriculture system is as much about governance as it is about practices. [331] With that in mind, the co-operative model set up by April not only challenges the heteronormality of the family farm and

[329] Bell et al., *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*.
[330] Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor."
[331] Haslett-Marroquín, "Decolonizing Agriculture," 2020.

the colonial capitalist model of land access by opening to her land to others, but also offers a more decolonialized example of governance.

IV.2.b. Facilitating collaborative farming set ups

More practically, these conversations about land access also illuminate ways for these networks to support farmers who are interested in collaborative farming options. The under-stories that these farmers shared allowed for the emergence of a narrative around collaborative farming that participates in deconstructing some of the oppressive power structures identified such as the heteropatriarchy, the colonial concept of private land ownership, and the individualism encouraged by capitalism. If, as Carter suggested, these networks are interested in doing the work to build a more just agricultural system, supporting these alternative land access options is a first step in that direction.

Not only do farmers who have been thinking about co-farming find validation for their ideas through these networks, but the support that characterizes these networks might also have inspired farmers to implement this collaboration. It seems crucial for organizations supporting women farmers and working to facilitate land access to consider co-farming as an alternative to land purchase or rental.[332] As of now, most of these alternative networks working to facilitate land access have focused on matching sellers and buyers or landowners and tenants. Although they are extremely useful tools, they still rely on the concept of private property which these farmers tend to question.[333,334] More attention needs to be paid to less traditional ways of

[332] I remember sitting in a land access workshop at the 2019 WFAN Women In Sustainable Agriculture conference and noticing that very few people were looking to sell or purchase land. The workshop was set up to help farmers pitch their farm for sale or define what land they wanted to buy but more people in the room were interested in shared land access. The workshop facilitator seemed surprised and had very little insight on how to help these farmers. I do believe that many of them still made meaningful connections by simply being in the same room however.
[333] Hachmyer, "Chapter 6. Notes from a New Farmer."
[334] The next section discusses this finding further.

accessing land, especially those who allow multiple farmers to work on the same land and work collaboratively.

Alternative networks can provide a particularly needed help in setting up these collaborative farming agreements by offering support in the form of relationship mediation and assistance in the design of contract agreements. Collaboration can be challenging and a few of the farmers I have talked to have struggled to find co-farmers whose personality clicked well with theirs. A lot of social skills are needed to ensure successful partnership and when things get complicated, they have found having a mediator external to the partnership particularly helpful. Similarly, as part of any agreement, setting clear boundaries and rules can be challenging. For a lot of the people I talked to, being clear about their own expectations and what others can expect to get out of the collaboration has been a work in progress with its ups and its downs. These boundaries and expectations can be particularly challenging to negotiate and establish when housing is involved. Providing resources such as contract templates or checklists for best practices could be incredibly helpful to these farmers. While all of these documents will need to be adapted to each situation, offering this type of guidance could convince the farmers who have been hesitating or nervous about these options to jump in. Likewise, assisting farmers with the mediation of their relationship either formally or informally could really increase the rate of success of these partnerships.

The narratives of "paying it forward" and "farming collaboratively" can highlight paths forward for the alternative networks that support women. They suggest that these farmers are interested in facilitating land access and using their networks to support each other in a way that challenges the dominant neoliberal narrative around agriculture. More importantly, they use land, which has long been used to exclude people from farming, to implement these narratives. In

doing so, they challenge the settler colonial idea that land access should be only available to those who own it and offer powerful opportunities to challenge the dominant agricultural system built upon the concept of private land ownership.

IV.3. A different conception of land for a different agricultural system

The conversations I had with the women in this study revealed how they use their networks to challenge systems of exclusion such as the heteropatriarchy or the concept of private land ownership. These networks have been successful in connecting women to resources and granting them access to land that they would have been otherwise unable to farm. Land and the concept of private ownership have been used for centuries to exclude communities from the farming system. As women challenge their networks to address these systems of exclusion, focusing on land as a tool for system change holds a lot of potential. As Holt-Giménez argues, changing the way we perceive land is key to changing the larger system of production.[335]

He explains that people all around the world are fighting the destructive agricultural norms established, including the settler colonial idea of private land ownership and adopting instead farming practices that consider land as part of the commons. For Holt-Giménez, land is key to this battle as changing the agricultural system without addressing and changing our land access structures might simply be impossible.[336]

Luckily, other models for common management of resources exist in many parts of the world. For example, Petrzelka and Bell discuss instances of successful common use of land in Morocco. There, the land is owned commonly and all the farmers in the community get to enjoy it, as long as they respect a set of community rules meant to ensure the sustainable use and

[335] Holt-Giménez, "Agrarian Questions and the Struggle for Land Justice."
[336] Holt-Giménez.

management of land as a resource. Although these communal guidelines are necessary, they are not sufficient, and the authors argue that strong social relationships are essential for these models to be successful. Where solidarities of interest and sentiment are in conversation, the members for the community trust each other and are able to work together. In communities where trust has been damaged and members are treated unequally on the other hand, the model is likely to fail.

The women I interviewed for this research have been using their networks to support each other both out of interest and sentiment. As a result, these networks are useful avenues for a dialogue of solidarities that helps build strong bonds based on trust. As such, these women can imagine adopting similar land management models through these networks and maintaining the strong relationships required for these approaches to be successful. Additionally, working to support land access options that stray from the settler colonial framework can help these networks achieve the goal of "assessing and revising work culture" discussed by Carter.[337]

It feels necessary to note here that some of the alternative networks discussed by the women I interview have since the beginning of my research started working on these ideas. In the winter of 2019, the Savanna Institute hosted a farm conference in Wisconsin and invited Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin to be their keynote speaker and discuss the topics of colonialism and offer suggestions to decolonize agriculture.[338] Similarly, WFAN held a series of anti-racist and anti-oppression workshops in the summer 2020, quickly following the nationwide protests triggered by the murder of George Floyd. Additionally, MOSES, whose annual organic conference is the biggest in the country, organized multiple sessions of their 2021 conference around the idea of collaborative land ownership and around the concept of returning land to their Indigenous communities. As these networks allow women to create new narratives for agriculture and to

[337] Carter, "Women's Farm Organizations in the United States."
[338] Haslett-Marroquín, "Decolonizing Agriculture," 2020.

spread them, they provide them with opportunities to create landscape level changes. As Carter argues, they offer "places where community, landownership, and stewardship can be redefined on women's own terms" and opportunities to translate "landscape-level shift in power to institutional shifts."[339]

During MOSES's 2021 conference, one of the farmers facilitating a workshop on alternative land access model quoted adrienne maree brown:

> I often feel I am trapped inside someone else's capability. I often feel I am trapped inside someone' else's imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free.[340]

With this quote, she reminded us that the options that we currently see as possible as part of the dominant capitalist agricultural system are only those that have been imagined for us by others, and generations of cis gender white males imagining variations to the concept of land ownership is bound to lead to a lot of blind spots.[341] This farmer then invited us of to step outside of the boundaries set up for us by others, especially as they uphold an agricultural system that has been excluding farmers of color, queer farmers, women, and immigrants.

V. Conclusion

The interviews I held with women growing perennial crops in the Upper Midwest revealed the importance of their network in their success. They relied on their community for support when accessing land, learning how to farm, growing their businesses, and to connect as women in farming. These networks carried across state lines narratives of collaboration that allowed the

[339] Carter, "Chapter 4. Changes on the Land."
[340] adrienne m. brown, *Emergent Strategy* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).
[341] Leah Potter Weight, "Right Relations: Justice and Sustainability through Polycultural Re-Visioning" (University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2019).

women I interviewed to overcome the constraints of an exclusionary system and encouraged them to further challenge these systems of exclusion. In this fight, land is particularly important.

Black Agrarianism offers powerful examples of organizing around agricultural land that leads to concrete changes and empowerment of communities. In her books *Freedom Farmers*, Monica White discusses many examples of growing food as a form of everyday resistance as well as the importance of collective agency.[342] Similarly, Leah Penniman and Blain Snipstal remind us that "land is power, and through organization, our power becomes real."[343] When it comes to using land to support revolutions of the system, organizations and networks can learn a lot from looking at the example of Black organizations and following the leadership of black women.

These Black organizations, for example, reminded farmers of the importance of intergenerational relationships, as they allow for the transition of knowledge and wisdom.[344] This suggests that, especially as it relates to land access, alternative networks should continue to foster relationships across generations, particularly those that facilitate land access for farmers outside of traditional structures of land inheritance.

Additionally, this research really highlighted the importance of narratives in challenging systems of oppression and exclusion and offering alternative ways of thinking about farming. It also illustrated how networks where solidarities of interest and sentiments are in dialogue could facilitate the concrete implementation of these narratives on the land. Considering the impact that these narratives can have on the American farm-scape, I started wondering how I could

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[342] Monica M. White, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*, Justice, Power, and Politics (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).
[343] Leah Penniman and Blain Snipstal, "Chapter 3. Regeneration," in *Land Justice: Re-Imagining Land, Food, and the Commons*, ed. Justine M Williams and Eric Holt-Giménez (Food First Books, 2017), xviii.
[344] Penniman and Snipstal.

participate in uncovering under-stories and making more of these narratives emerged. I was particularly curious of the types of stories farmers would write and share if given the opportunity to craft their own narratives if they thought it could impact the system. Interested in providing farmers with opportunities and tools to write their own narrative of agriculture, I sought to explore ways to collaborate with them to develop narrative pieces that could be used by their networks. The third and final chapter of this dissertation describes this process in detail.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Email to the listservs

Hi,

My name is Barbara Decré and I am a PhD student from UW Madison.

I am conducting interviews with women interested in perennial agriculture in the Midwest and would love to meet some of you to discuss how you accessed the land you currently farm. I am also very interested in learning about the networks and programs that have helped you and supported you in this process. This research is part of my PhD dissertation with the Nelson Institute and supervised by Steve Ventura.

Secure land tenure is a key aspect of successful perennial ag practices and this research aims at shedding light on the challenges that women face when trying to access land for perennial agriculture in the Midwest. It also aims at highlighting the creative ways that women have used to overcome these challenges. I hope that this work will help raise awareness about land access challenges and inspire and support networks of women in farming.

If you live or farm in the Midwest, are growing perennials on your farm (or interested in growing them), and would like to share your story with me or just want to hear more about my research, please email me at ***decre@wisc.edu before August 23rd [2019]****.*

Thanks in advance for your help and support. Have a wonderful summer.

Best regards,

Appendix 2 - Networks discussed by the farmers interviewed

WFAN (Women Food and Agriculture Network) is a national organization aimed at engaging "women in building an ecological and just food and agricultural system through individual and community power." See their website for more information.

The **Soil Sisters** is a community located in South Wisconsin and working to support women in farming through regular informal events and online exchanges. See their website for more information.

LSP (Land Stewardship Program) is an organization from Minnesota working to "foster an ethic of stewardship for farmland, to promote sustainable agriculture and to develop healthy communities." See their website for more information.

MOSES (Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Services) is a nonprofit organization located in the Midwest "that promotes organic and sustainable agriculture by providing the education, resources, and expertise farmers need to succeed." See their website for more information.

The **Savanna Institute** "works with farmers and scientists to lay the groundwork for widespread agroforestry adoption in the Midwest." See their website for more information.

Chapter 3

I. Introduction

The impetus for this research chapter

The research I have conducted for this dissertation has revealed the presence of what I call over-stories, or dominant stories of farming that have been shaped by forces such as neoliberalism or the heteropatriarchy. These over-stories have, in essence, shaded and silenced what I call the under-stories of farming, or the counter narratives that disrupt the dominant voices portrayed in contemporary agricultural discourses. When asking agroforesters in the Driftless Area of Wisconsin about their non-economic motivations for the practice of agroforestry, individuals shared with me their under-stories. These conversations allowed for the emergence of alternative narratives contesting the over-stories of farming as an individualist endeavor or as necessarily damaging to the environment.[345] Similarly, over-stories rooted in heteropatriarchy that have tended to exclude women from farming have motivated the creation and use of powerful networks. Women in agriculture have used these networks to cultivate under-stories that contest the exclusion perpetrated by the system and allow for the emergence of new narratives that challenge some of the concepts in which these stories are rooted, including the concept of land as private property.[346]

After observing first-hand the emergence of hidden narratives through framing of conversations around non-economic motivations[347] or with the support and validation offered by alternative networks,[348] I reflected on a way for me to participate in supporting the emergence of narratives that could compete with oppressive and exclusionary systems, in order to shift our

[345] See Chapter 1 of this dissertation.
[346] See Chapter 2 of this dissertation.
[347] Again, see Chatper 1.
[348] Again, see Chatper 2.

focus away from over-stories toward more diverse and sustainable under-stories. I also grew curious about the types of under-stories that farmers would tell if given the opportunity. In this chapter, I present the development, testing, and evaluation of a process for co-authoring narratives with farmers that I believe can assist with the emergence of farmers' diverse narratives.

What stories can do

At conferences and other farming events, farmers are regularly invited to share their stories with each other and practice telling their stories for their customers. Stories are powerful tools for system change. The ideas presented by Saltmarshe emphasize the impact that stories can have in fostering system change.[349] As discussed in detail in the introduction to this dissertation, she explains that stories can act as a light, glue, or web and help paint a picture that increases the reader's understanding of the situation as well as offer pathways towards change. As light, narrative stories illuminate the past, present, and future as well as shed light on examples of people already doing the work to build a different system. Throughout my research, the farmers I interviewed have used stories to shed light on agroforestry as a potential alternative to conventional agriculture[350] or to create common land access opportunities.[351] Additionally, as glue, stories connect people and strengthen bonds among the community.[352] The women I interviewed for Chapter 2 of this dissertation built significant bonds with other women in their network by sharing stories of the challenges they faced as women in the industry.[353] As glue, stories can also offer a common narrative to communities and strengthen movements. Finally,

[349] Saltmarshe, "Using Story to Change Systems."
[350] See the results of Chapter 1.
[351] See the discussion section in Chapter 2.
[352] Saltmarshe, "Using Story to Change Systems."
[353] See the results section in Chapter 2,

stories can act as a web connecting individuals to the larger system and help them recognize their place in it and the dominant narratives that have shaped the system, as illustrated by the conversations I had with agroforesters from the Driftless Area of Wisconsin.

With this understanding of the power that stories have to change the agricultural system, Saltmarshe argues that farmers' stories should be further spotlighted to give them a better opportunity to shape the narratives that will influence their practices.[354] This call for participatory storytelling has strongly influenced the design of my research, and more specifically of this third chapter where I employ a deeply participatory methodology to assist farmers from the Midwest in communicating their under-stories.

Conducting participatory research with farmers

As described in the introduction, participatory methodologies aim to increase the participation of the community in the research process. In doing so, participatory methodologies work toward legitimizing forms of knowledge that have traditionally been dismissed.[355] They can be particularly adapted to a process aimed at supporting farmers in discussing their under-stories. Additionally, participatory approaches work to shift the power dynamic away from researchers who are removed from the issue and into the hands of the community and aim at leaving the community with the tools to continue the work independently.[356]

With regard to participatory research projects, Stoecker suggests that the researcher can play various roles including that of the initiator and reach out to communities to ask them what they need. They could also act as a consultant and be commissioned by the community to conduct research. Finally, they could also take the role of collaborator, taking more time to get involved

[354] Saltmarshe, "Using Story to Change Systems."
[355] Stoecker, "Are Academics Irrelevant?"
[356] Stoecker.

with the community and working with them throughout.[357] If the research project is to best support farmers in developing their individual stories, the role of the collaborator is most appropriate.

Importantly, Lyon et al. identified three constraints to farmers participation that I needed to take into consideration: farmers' time commitment toward participation; the general distrust of researchers; and a sense of being unqualified to comment on a researcher's work.[358] Indeed farmers might be wary of joining a research process that will be time consuming or take place during the busiest season. It therefore will be important to design a process that respects farmers' time. Additionally, participatory research projects that don't take into consideration this distrust and don't help build trust between farmers and researchers will be difficult to implement, especially if the project in question asks farmers to share their personal stories. Finally, it is important to remind both researchers and farmers that farmers have a lot of expertise to contribute, which is in part why participatory research was first implemented.[359] More importantly, they are the only experts of the stories they want to share and more familiar with the act of storytelling than most researchers are.

Lyon et al. also suggest that dynamic participatory methodologies don't always fit an ordered process. Rather, it isn't rare for the best way to proceed to make itself clear in the middle of the study. The authors recognize the value of messy and flexible approaches that they call 'maculate conceptions.' They explain that these approaches to participatory research help navigate the constraints of the process and serve to shift the power balance between the researchers and the participants. In particular, these approaches helped these authors address issues relating to time

[357] Stoecker.
[358] Lyon et al., "Maculate Conceptions."
[359] Lockeretz and Anderson, "Farmers' Role in Sustainable Agriculture Research."

constraint, distrust, and the fact that farmers tended to feel unqualified to offer criticism of the researchers work in participatory research.

When it comes to communication, Herndl et al. have observed that scientists and researchers tend to use a very impersonal language when discussing farming and agricultural practices, whereas farmers will use anecdotes and stories to discuss the same ideas and illustrate their points.[360] In addition to the challenges of participatory research with farmers, Herndl warns that these different communication styles can limit understanding and the development of meaningful connections among farmers and researchers. Researchers' discourse tends to be more abstract and hypothetical than that of farmers and they usually consider the farm as a system and highly value technical accuracy, generalizable rules, and talk about challenges unemotionally. While on the other hand, farmers discuss their farms and practices in more personal terms. They do not shy away from expressing feelings and emotions associated with the practices and overall discuss the farm as a lived-in place where challenges threaten livelihoods in very real ways. Herndl et al. argue that "we can't have efficient participation without understanding the differences in languages" and invite researchers to think about how to bridge this gap.[361] The process I designed for this research aimed to address the challenges of participation and communication all at once through a very intentional and reflective approach to interviews.

It's not to say that researchers don't use storytelling and relate to the farmers, however. It simply is not an academic norm, and as a result is rarely taught as a way to communicate research, especially in STEM environments.

[360] Herndl et al., "What Is Farm."
[361] Herndl et al.

Encouraging storytelling in research

Druschke et al. explain that the training that graduate students in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) receive in school when it comes to writing is very limited. It is not required for young scholars to learn how to become good writers or how to anticipate and be intentional about their writing. Instead, writing is seen as an add-on to methodological approaches to communicate research. The deficit model on which these approaches are built imagines the audience as passive and rarely teaches students how to engage them.[362]

In addition to the work done in science communication to encourage researchers to use storytelling to share their knowledge, there are movements in academia to teach researchers about the power of rhetoric to understand your audience and how to properly communicate your results to them.[363] More and more, courses are being offered that teach academics and STEM students about the importance being intentional in their writing using rhetorical tools.[364] As Druschke and McGreavy argue:

> A focus on the rhetorical situation moves students and faculty away from thinking about writing strictly in terms of grammar and spelling, and toward a view of communication as a powerful way of getting things done in the world – a move that affects much more than writing.

A rhetorical approach to communication can also be helpful to interdisciplinary research teams that sometimes struggle to speak the same language and perceive the goal of their work differently.[365] Considering the point of view of their audience can help streamline their message

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[362] Caroline Gottschalk Druschke et al., "Better Science through Rhetoric: A New Model and Pilot Program for Training Graduate Student Science Writers," *Technical Communication Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 175–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2018.1425735.
[363] Caroline Gottschalk Druschke and Bridie McGreavy, "Why Rhetoric Matters for Ecology," *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 14, no. 1 (February 2016): 46–52, https://doi.org/10.1002/16-0113.1.
[364] Druschke et al., "Better Science through Rhetoric."
[365] Druschke and McGreavy, "Why Rhetoric Matters for Ecology."

and improve communication. In the case of a partnership between farmers and researchers, a rhetorical approach can also help them overcome the gaps in communication styles that separate them.[366] Indeed, Druschke and McGreavy argue that a rhetorical perspective can help understand "how language shaped individuals… and can enrich cross-disciplinary partnerships."[367]

Considering Herndl et al.'s findings about farmers communication styles,[368] it would make sense for researchers to adopt similar storytelling-based communication style. Some academics whose research is highly interdisciplinary have written some very compelling and engaging books about farming. Monica White's *Freedom Farmers*[369] and Michael Bell's *Farming for Us All*[370] are two examples of the use of storytelling to describe the research process and the findings in successful ways. As their work is addressed both to academics in their discipline and farmers and community organizers, their approach to storytelling and research is influenced by rhetoric and their understanding of their audience.

Some researchers push the use of narratives and stories even further when reporting on their research and adopt fiction as a research method. Leavy uses the term "fiction-based research" as she explains that writing is both part of the enquiry and a way to share the collected data.[371] The author argues that storytelling and fiction can help communicate about challenging topics and that this type of communication can make use of vernacular language to promote empathy and reach larger audiences.[372]

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[366] Herndl et al., "What Is Farm."
[367] Druschke and McGreavy, "Why Rhetoric Matters for Ecology."
[368] Herndl et al., "What Is Farm."
[369] White, *Freedom Farmers*.
[370] Bell, *Farming for Us All*.
[371] Patricia Leavy, *Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels*, Developing Qualitative Inquiry 11 (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, Inc, 2013).
[372] Leavy suggests that topics like eating disorders or abuse are sometimes more easily approached through storytelling and fiction.

Even when researchers employ storytelling approaches without using the term "fiction" to describe their methodology, the accuracy of the findings is often questioned as being fabricated. Similarly, storytelling approaches make use of descriptions and emotions to convey complex situations and as such have been criticized for trying to play with the reader's emotions, [373] particularly in STEM where scientists are encouraged to remain silent and distant. Many authors however disagree with this approach and instead suggest that the presence of the researcher is significant and should be acknowledged.[374]

Leavy argues that in fiction-based research, verisimilitude is achieved through research such as ethnographic studies or sociological enquiries.[375] In the case of a research process meant to develop narratives inspired by farmers' real experiences, the participatory approach and the expertise of the farmers serve to address the potential criticism about verisimilitude. Similarly, the validity of the stories that would be co-authored with farmers could be measured by discussing their credibility, dependability, and transferability instead.[376] Finally, Leavy argues that the process of writing stories can lead to a lot of reflection. In a participatory approach to writing, the process could allow some personal reflection for the researcher and the farmer individually but also regarding their relationship. After all, Lyon et al. suggest that participation can be increased by the use of structures that encourage creative engagement.[377]

As I designed this research process, I kept in mind the challenges of participatory research with farmers and worked to develop an approach that would help strengthen bonds and improve communication through the writing of narratives that I hoped would help under-stories emerge.

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[373] Jacquelyn A. Collinson and John Hockey, "10 Autoethnography: Self-Indulgence or Rigorous Methodology?," in *Philosophy and the Sciences of Exercise, Health and Sport*, ed. Mike McNamee, Routledge, n.d., 177–91.
[374] Leavy, *Fiction as Research Practice*.
[375] Leavy.
[376] Collinson and Hockey, "Autoethnography: Self-Indulgence or Rigorous Methodology?"
[377] Lyon et al., "Maculate Conceptions."

My approach resembled a 'narrative inquiry' which some scholars explain refers both to the research methodology and the view of the phenomena.[378] As I intend to do, Cain, Estefan, and Clandinin pay attention to the relationships developed with the research participants as well as to the place of the researcher. Narrative inquiry is often used in education research and in conjunction with Critical Race Theory to shed light on the inequalities of the education system, but more rarely in agricultural or food studies. O'Kane and Pamphilon who studied people's relationship with food present a useful example of the way narrative inquiry can be used in food studies. In this work, the authors analyze the stories shared by different groups of food consumers and use them to construct narratives that represent the experiences of each group.[379] They collected stories of food access and relationship with food that they later used to build a narrative representative of each group interviewed. Here, I imagine for my approach to resemble their narrative inquiry methodology. However, I hope for the development of the narratives to be more participatory and more directly influenced by the farmers than the approach that O'Kane and Pamphilon designed.

II. Methodology

Before going any further, I believe it is important to clarify some of the terminology I will be using throughout this chapter to avoid any confusion.

- I use the terms '**study**' and '**project**' interchangeably to discuss the work I conducted over the span of a couple of months and that I report in this chapter.

[378] Vera Caine, Andrew Estefan, and D. Jean Clandinin, "A Return to Methodological Commitment: Reflections on Narrative Inquiry," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 57, no. 6 (December 2013): 574–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2013.798833.
[379] Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin.

- I use the term '**methodology**' to describe the methods I used for this study. I also use it to refer to the methodological models already available in the literature such as participatory research or semi-structured interviews.
- I use the term '**process**' to talk about the process of co-authoring narratives that I imagined and tested in this study.
- I use the terms '**interview'**, '**conversation'**, and '**discussion'** interchangeably when talking about the content of the virtual interviews I conducted.

With this understanding of the power of stories and of farmers communication style, I hypothesize that they have stories to tell that can help offer narratives for farming based on farmers' goals and experiences. As storytellers, they have something to teach researchers about how to communicate about agriculture. A process that allows farmers and researchers to connect and bond can address the challenges of their relationship and the practice of storytelling can help farmers and researchers connect and speak the same language.

When designing participatory research projects, Stoecker recommends asking yourself "What is this project trying to do?", "What are your skills?" and "How much participation does the community want?"[380] I kept these questions in mind as I designed a process for co-authoring narratives that would encourage farmers to think about how their own under-stories can help narratives emerge and remind academics of the importance of storytelling as a communication tool to connect with audiences. I also wanted this process to help address some of the challenges that farmers and researchers face when working together. As a result, I wanted my methodological process to foster relationships, suggest ways to build bonds and to lead to

[380] Stoecker, "Are Academics Irrelevant?"

individual reflection. Finally, this process should lead to the creation of narrative pieces that embody alternative narratives about farming according to the farmers themselves.

Combining methodologies from sociology, rhetoric, and ethnography,[381] I designed a two-step process based on semi-structured and open-ended interviews[382] that would allow farmers and researchers to work as co-authors in the development of a narrative inspired by the farmers' experience.

Step 1 would help my co-author and I decide on the narrative to develop through an extensive conversation and with an intentional focus on our audience inspired by rhetorical methodologies.[383] Step 2 would require us to craft the narrative and edit it together while actively reflecting on our experiences as recommended by autoethnographic methodologies.[384] Following the suggestion of narrative inquiry researchers, I will pay attention throughout the whole process to the type of stories and examples that my co-authors use to help me during the writing phase.[385] In total, this process would require conducting at least two interviews: one for Step 1 and one or more during Step 2.

I then experimented with the process three times with three individual farmers. Afterwards, I had a discussion with each farmer to see if the process had built a relationship and led to reflection. I also tested the narratives crafted by organizing a focus group where the farmers read the stories and discussed them.

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[381] This work also includes methodologies from humanities as it involves the creation of written narrative pieces.
[382] Corbin and Morse, "The Unstructured Interactive Interview."
[383] Druschke and McGreavy, "Why Rhetoric Matters for Ecology."
[384] Here, I don't mean to say that this research fits the accepted definition of autoethnography. According to Wall (2016), the criteria for autoethnography are many and include for the researcher to use their experience to discuss cultural and societal issues through their personal experience. This work, although inspired by autoethnographic approaches, resembles more what Wall considers self-reflective methodology papers.
[385] Bell (2002) explains that narrative enquiry methodologies go further that recognizing the narrative for its rhetorical structure but instead examine "the underlying insights and assumptions that story illustrates."

II.1. The process

Phase 1 - Identify the story to write and the literary tools to use

The first step of this process is designed around one interview meant to help me establish a relationship with my co-authors while deciding on the story to write. Ahead of the first interview, I will send the participants a couple of questions meant to help them reflect on the story they would like to share and their intended goal with sharing that particular story.

In the first part of this interview which Corbin and Morse refer to as the "preinterview phase,"[386] I will reintroduce the process to the participants and discuss with them the literature that has inspired the project. I will also explain that the initial interview will be focused on content and aim to identify the topic of our story and to construct the skeleton of our narrative.

For this story outline to emerge, I have listed all the elements I need for the first draft, have written questions that will allow me to get the answers I need, and have organized my questions into a semi-structured interview script.[387] The script is divided into five parts that I will describe to each of the participants: (I) the context, (II) the story, (III) the audience, (IV) similar stories, and (V) literary tools to employ. We would discuss all these aspects during this initial interview.

Discussing the context for our story is meant to help me identify how the story will fit in the larger discourse around agriculture and how it could suggest changes for the system.[388] Parts II and III are meant to help the co-authors identify their specific audience as well as express their intentions and goals in writing this narrative. This in turn will inform the way we will write the story.[389] The fourth part (IV) of the interview will lead to a discussion of similar stories that

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[386] Corbin and Morse, "The Unstructured Interactive Interview."
[387] The suggested interview script is included as an appendix to this dissertation.
[388] Saltmarshe, "Using Story to Change Systems."
[389] Druschke and McGreavy (2016) argue that successful communication starts by recognizing who the audience members are and working to incorporate their perspectives.

could help push our reflection further. Comparing our story idea with similar stories could help narrow down specific elements to emphasize or shed light on the complexity of the topic at hand. With this refection about similar yet contrasting stories, I hope to help my co-authors hone in on their own story and its specificities. Finally, with the fifth part of this interview script (V), I want to give the farmers involved in this process the choice of narrative voice, tense, metaphors, and other literary tools to rely on. Here, I argue that relying on their expertise as farmers and readers and asking for their preferences will make the narratives more engaging for their fellow farmers. The main product of Phase 1 is an outline of the story that will be used by the co-authors during Phase 2.

This initial interview is also intended to build a relationship between the co-authors and address some of the challenges of participatory research, including the hierarchy of knowledge that is often assumed.[390] As such, it is designed to give farmers involved in the process a lot of agency and to encourage researchers to recognize the farmer's expertise when it comes to their own story and the best ways to tell it.

Phase 2 - Co-writing and co-editing of the narrative piece

With the outline of the story completed in the first step of the interview process, it is possible to design the first draft of each story. To be conscious of the time constraint that limits farmers' participation, I suggest the researcher write the first draft of the story that the co-authors have agreed upon in Step 1.

In the few weeks following the initial interview, I will share the draft with my co-authors and invite them to make revisions as they see fit. The co-authors will able to make edits in three

[390] Lockeretz and Anderson, "Farmers' Role in Sustainable Agriculture Research."

primary ways: (1) either directly in a document eventually returned to me; (2) in a shared document; (3) or by simply suggesting revisions via email.

After my co-authors have provided their initial feedback, we will schedule another interview or call where we will discuss the proposed story draft as well as the changes they have suggested. This part of the process will allow us to see if the story I drafted meets our expectations and contains all the important elements we discussed in Phase 1. I will then implement the changes suggested after the conversation and revise the narrative as needed. We will repeat this iterative process until both co-authors are satisfied with a final product. This labor-intensive revision process is meant to ensure that the final narrative balances both of our goals and ideas. It also serves to remind the farmers of their key role in writing this story and of the value of their opinion.

II.2. Testing the process

For this research, I tested my methodological process with three individual farmers. In the following sections, I discuss how I chose the participants for this study and how I kept track of the changes to apply to the process as I learned from each of the iteration of process.

II.2.a. Selecting the co-authors

To pilot my methodological process, I invited four farmers to join this study; three ended up agreeing. I selected them based on their perceived interest in storytelling research approaches, the fact that we already knew each other, and the fact that they had shared with me experiences that I believed could be developed into stories. Of the four, three had already worked with me on a previous research project and one had interacted with me multiple times during events over the past couple of years. I contacted these individuals by email with information about my research

and shared with them a description of the process they would be partaking in and offered to compensate them for the time commitment I requested of them.

As this participatory process would require participants to be involved in the study over a few months, opposed a couple of hours, it felt important to invite farmers to this project with whom I had built a strong relationship with over time. Additionally, the participatory process I developed combines methodologies and concepts across disciplines (i.e. sociology, rhetoric, creative writing). As this was perhaps different from other research projects farmers may have participated in previously, I sought out individuals whom I believed would be interested in exploring this avenue and would enjoy being part of the project team.[391]

While this sampling is not random, I argue that the importance of trust and relationship in the success of this process is such that it might be hard involve a farmer who had no pre-existing relationship to the researcher. In fact, the fourth farmer invited to this project ended up dropping out quickly after initially agreeing to participate.[392] This perhaps shows that our pre-existing relationship wasn't strong enough to convince them to follow through with such a participatory process. In the end, the three farmers that had previously worked with me accepted the invitation and, although their gender, their location, or the type of practices they implemented did not matter to the project, all of them were women interested in perennial agriculture and farming in the Upper Midwest.

[391] Kimberly Coleman and Marc J. Stern, "Exploring the Functions of Different Forms of Trust in Collaborative Natural Resource Management," *Society & Natural Resources* 31, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 21–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2017.1364452.

[392] It is important to note that the initial invitation was sent out to these farmers only a few weeks before the Covid-19 pandemic reached the US. The research was put on hold then and revived later in 2020.

As all three of the farmers who worked on this project provided considerable insight to this research, they will be considered from here on as research ‘collaborators’ or ‘co-authors’ and named to ensure the recognition of their work.

Bonnie had shared with me her passion for music and the importance of creativity in her farming enterprises. As a result, I felt comfortable discussing with her my ideas for a rather creative project built around the importance of storytelling and invited her to be one of the participants and co-authors. She was the first to accept my invitation and the first with whom I tested the process.

Wendy and I share a fond memory of the first day we met. In the first five minutes of our interview, I helped her untangle a duck from a fence. Thirty minutes later, we were running out in the middle of our interview to bring runaway sheep back into their paddock. We finished the day by sharing a meal that we had prepared together. Unsurprisingly, when talking about the importance of shared experiences in building trust, this story is the one I often tell. Fully aware of the power of this story and of the bond we had quickly formed, it made sense for me to invite her to join this project. She was the second farmer to accept my invitation and the second with whom I tested the process.

Betsy and I met once for another of my research projects, but our relationship truly took shape as we both attended a conference and enjoyed getting together each night to talk about what we had learned as well as just catch up. We maintained this relationship over the following year through email updates and the level of trust we built made it easy to invite her to join the study. She was the third to join this project and the last one with whom I tested the process.

I was delighted at the prospect of working with these farmers again and curious of how our relationships would evolve through the process. I also knew that these women had interesting

stories to tell but I am pleased to say that in the end, the stories I had already heard from them ended not being the ones we worked on together.

II.2.b. Implementing this process

Testing meant holding one initial interview of an hour and a half, and one or more interviews of around 30 minutes to discuss editing. These interviews took place over Zoom and were recorded for me to have as support when writing the individual stories. In compensation for their time, each participant received $50 after every conversation we held virtually.[393]

As I was aware of the challenges to participation, I made use of Lyon et al.'s maculate conceptions in my study.[394] Additionally, as I designed for the participants of this study to become co-authors and collaborators, this approach to research allowed me some flexibility. To account for the time constraint, I kept the participation flexible, allowing my co-author to participate as much as they wanted or as little as they could. I also remained flexible with the interview script.[395] I intentionally scheduled the three processes to overlap and planned to readjust my interview script after each interview and actively learn from each of my conversations. I paid attention to the flow of the recorded conversations, noted which questions led to helpful and interesting discussions and which did not, as well as the challenges that arose during the conversations. I expected the specific questions in each part to evolve from an interview to the next which I will discuss in more details when presenting the results of this process.

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[393] We also exchanged emails in between to schedule the next call or provide some quick feedback or validation of the changes.
[394] Lyon et al., "Maculate Conceptions."
[395] Lyon et al. (2010) use the term "maculate conception" to talk about the dynamic process of adapting the research methodology.

In addition to taking notes during the interviews and conversations, I also wanted to keep track of the changes made to the interview script. I therefore chose to document the changed by taking my own notes on the process as I went along. These journal entries discussed the content of the conversations as well as my own reflections on the process. I made sure to also take notes as I was drafting the narratives and exchanging feedback with my co-authors. As I discuss the results of this process, I will be citing excerpts from these notes. In doing so, I choose to be reflective of my own methodologies. The story I tell in these notes can itself be analyzed and studied to identify valuable themes and topics of discussion.[396] As discussed, this approach is inspired from autoethnographic research and narrative inquiry but doesn't exactly fit either category perfectly.[397]

II.3. Evaluating the process

Once done with the experimentation of the process, it was important for me to evaluate it and the narratives it produced. To do so, I held an additional individual interview with each of my co-authors as well as focus group with all three of them.[398] The evaluation interview was meant to be an opportunity for each of the farmers to share their impression of the process and to suggest ways to improve it. The focus group offered an additional opportunity for my co-authors to provide feedback and served to test out the stories onto other farmers.

Individual feedback

After each of the three narratives was finalized and approved by my co-authors, I invited them to a final conversation designed to allow us to evaluate the process and what was learned through it. As I expected the relationship to have grown overtime, I designed this last

[396] Bell, "Narrative Inquiry."
[397] Both approaches value the use of storytelling and narrative voices however.
[398] In total, each farmer met four times with me individually (one initial interview, two editing call, and one evaluation interview) and once as part of the focus group.

conversation as a rather flexible semi-structured interview. These conversations were guided by a few questions I developed that meant to address each of the different steps of the process, the individual's impression of the narratives that had emerged and been written, and about the reflection the process had spurred. The content of this conversation with each farmer was meant to inform the final methodology and recommendations for implementing this process.

The final evaluation interviews lasted around an hour and were recorded with the consent of my co-author. Once again, each co-author received $50 for their participation. Later, I used a professional transcription service to transcribe our conversations. These transcriptions are used in the section below to quote my co-authors as we discussed in detail our evaluation of the process I imagined.

Focus group

In combination with feedback from each individual collaborator about our narrative writing, I wanted to evaluate these stories further and see how they would be received by farmers. I initially planned on hosting a focus groups where farmers who had not participated in the study would be given the three narratives to read and discuss. Due to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, this idea was revised to instead include only the participants already included in the study. All three of the co-authors were offered $100 in compensation for their time. For this part of the evaluation, I sent all three narratives to my collaborators to read prior to our joint conversation. The focus group was set up as an open conversation.[399] I lightly steered the conversation by asking my collaborators to discuss the stories they had read, the message they had taken out of them, and whether they had been able to relate to the stories they read.

[399] Corbin and Morse (2003) explain that open interviews are designed to give the participants full control over the course of the conversation.

II.4. Study limitations

Though I offer a robust, iterative, and participatory process, this research approach is not without limitations. First, my study group is rather small. More structured recommendations for the phrasing of some of the interview questions may have been possible with a pilot study process with a greater sample size of farmers.

Additionally, the sampling used for this study is of convenience and includes only people with whom a relationship was already established. Consequently, the results of this study reflect the perspectives of involved participants, not necessarily a general population. It can be assumed that if the researcher and the farmer don't already know each other, more work should be done to establish the relationship in the beginning phases of implementing the process. However, considering some of my co-authors and I had only worked together once before and only the time of a single interview, I believe that it would be possible to use the initial interview of the process to build initial bonds that would be strengthened over time.

Similarly, all of the farmers in this study expressed an inclination for storytelling. As a result, this work doesn't suggest how the process would work when collaborating with farmers who aren't interested in storytelling or don't perceive themselves as storytellers. Yet, the findings of Herndl et al. suggest that farmers tend to communicate using anecdotes and real-life examples to share their knowledge[400] which leads me to believe that with support from the researcher, most farmers would be able to co-author a narrative story if they wanted to.

Finally, regarding the sample population, all three participants are women farming perennials in the Upper Midwest. It is therefore possible for the narratives that will emerge from the process to be of similar content or address similar issues.

[400] Herndl et al., "What Is Farm."

With regard to the process described above and tested here, it is also important to note my own interest in storytelling and knowledge of the tools of narrative writing. Although it is my opinion that researchers would gain by adding storytelling to their toolbox, particularly when communicating with farmers, not everyone will feel comfortable implementing this process and taking charge of the narrative writing.

III. Results of the study

As discussed earlier, my desire to remain flexible in my methodology and to implement changes to it as I was going, means that the interviews and the writing of each narrative overlapped. I first worked with Bonnie, then started working with Wendy. At the same time as I was finishing the process with Bonnie, I started it with Betsy. I joked with Bonnie that she had been the "Guinea pig of Guinea pigs" while my work with Betsy was informed by all that I had learned from working with both Bonnie and Wendy.[401] For the purpose of this research and to keep the focus on the process developed and the lessons learned along the way, the following sections will present the results of implementing this process starting with Phase 1 – The First Interview, and continuing on with Phase 2 – Building the Narratives. As a result, this organization keeps with the flow of the process rather than the chronology of the study or each co-author individually. Finally, I will share the insight gathered during the evaluation step last.

III.1. Phase 1 - The first interview

As described previously, Phase 1 was designed to help my co-author and I establish the content of our stories, the context in which it would exist, as well as help us start developing our relationship. Following the process I outline above,[402] I reached out to the co-authors prior to our

[401] You can find the Gantt chart for the development of these narratives in the appendix.
[402] See section II.1 Phase 1 for more detail.

first interview to reacquaint them with the focus of the project. I believe that giving them time ahead of the interview to think about what they wanted to work on or reflect on experiences that could be developed into narratives would help reduce some of the stress associated with having to answer questions on the spot, without any preparation.

As a reminder, the interview script for this phase of the process was organized in five parts: (I) the context, (II) the story, (III) the audience, (IV) similar stories, and (V) literary tools to employ. The following sections provide some insight on my experience during these initial interviews. I start by discussing the necessity of reminding my co-authors of the value of their stories, then address my attempt at understanding the context for their story, then finally discuss how we chose the stories we would write.

Phase 1.0 – Remember that your story matters

As suggested by Corbin and Morse, the pre-interview phase is a time at the beginning of an interview which usually focuses on reintroducing the research and making sure the participants are still consenting to the research. This pre-interview phase also serves to start building a relationship. As expected, this time allowed me to catch up with the farmers who had joined the study. As this co-authoring process would require us to build trust to ensure the success of this project, the time spent reconnecting was particularly important to build reciprocity and trust. Corbin and Morse indeed remind us that this pre-interview time sets the tone for the rest of the interview and, in this case, the whole process. Considering that these interviews took place during a global pandemic and soon after a period of social unrest following the murder of George Floyd, it was also important for me to take the time to reconnect with these farmers as humanly as possible before jumping into the research process.

Although my collaborators had immediately expressed interest for this project upon receiving my invitation to join, they still had some questions about the goal of this research and its expected outcomes.

Bonnie, who was the first of my co-authors to attempt the process with me, asked me to develop on my objectives and what results I expected. I discussed with her the literature that was supporting this project, specifically Saltmarshe's arguments about how stories can help make system change, and the results I was hoping to achieve. This project indeed had two clearly expected deliverables: a co-authored narrative, and the development of a methodology used to produce these narratives. However, it was also important for me to assess the evolution of the farmer-researcher relationship. Similarly, I was curious about the reflection and personal growth that could be spurred by this collaborative work and listed it as part of the expected by-products of this research.[403] Although I had already planned on discussing these goals with each of my co-authors at the beginning of this First Interview, this first attempt at the co-authoring process confirmed the necessity to take the time to really dive deeper into these ideas. It's a lesson I applied to my first interviews with Wendy and Betsy.

Additionally, while all three of them were clearly interested in this research and happy to have joined the project, they had some concerns or questions about an approach that relied on storytelling. Wendy in particular was a little wary of the idea of storytelling which she said was all the buzz in the community at the moment. She also questioned why anyone would want to hear about her experiences. Here, I believe that Wendy expressed some concern about the impact that her under-story could really have. Once again, I used the literature to show her how her own

[403] Leavy (2017) indeed argues that the process of writing a story can lead to some valuable personal reflection and growth.

story could shed light on elements of the systems, be the glue that bonds the community, or be the web that connects parts of the system and reveals its underlying structure.[404]

The flow of the pre-interview with Bonnie and Wendy and the questions that they had about the process allowed me to clearly identify the elements of the study that needed to be presented in detail during this time. As a result, I adapted my approach when talking to Betsy and discussed these elements thoroughly right away. This practice and reflection allowed for my argument and presentation of the literature to feel more fluid and confident. Betsy didn't appear confused and didn't have any questions during the pre-interview, which was a confirmation of the positive impact of this iterative approach and the dynamic methodology I had adopted.

Initially, both Bonnie and Wendy asked me about the type of stories I had in mind. In doing so, it seemed like they were trying to gauge if their own stories were worth sharing. The truth is that I did already have a few ideas about what elements of their experiences would make for good narratives. As I discussed earlier, this was one of the reasons why I believed all three of them would make good participants: I knew that they had interesting stories to share, whether they realized it or not. In both cases, they asked me to be a little more specific about the part of their stories I had already identified and, to reassure them that their stories were interesting to me, I listed a couple of elements I remembered about their farming stories that I believe could be further developed. I suggested that their under-stories of land access, involvement in networks of women farmers, or relationships with the community could make for engaging narratives. However, I assured them that the workshopping process would certainly allow us to see other stories emerge that they would maybe be more passionate about or that would lend themselves better to the co-authoring process.

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[404] Saltmarshe, "Using Story to Change Systems."

The pre-interview time is always an important one but in the case of this process, it was particularly crucial to convince my co-authors of the value of their under-stories, of our ability to make one emerge through this process, and to restate its potential to contest over-stories and support a change in the system.

Phase 1.1 – What are the over-stories?

Confronting my own assumptions

After we established the importance of sharing their stories but before getting into the specifics about our narrative, I asked my co-authors to discuss the context in which their story would be taking place. More specifically, I asked them to share with me what stories were commonly shared when it came to agriculture. I hoped that starting the conversation this way would help us identify the over-stories about agriculture and identify how they had shaped the agricultural system and their own experience. As discussed throughout this dissertation, many over-stories of agriculture exist that have long shaded and silenced under-stories, particularly those of marginalized and excluded farmers. The type of farming encouraged by these over-stories, specifically the one focused on feeding the world, is one that has had devastating impacts on the environment and the health of local communities. Meadows also suggest that pointing out failures of old system can help with paradigm change.[405] I assumed that farmers would share with me some of the main elements of the agricultural discourse and be critical of the system. After all, if stories are meant to help us change the system, then acknowledging where and how the system is flawed seems necessary. As a result, I assumed that over-stories of corn and soybean subsidies, soil erosion and management practices, or climate change would be discussed at this point. But to my surprise, these topics were not what my co-authors focused on.

[405] Donella H Meadows, "Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System," 1999.

Instead, Bonnie discussed the challenges that small scale farmers where encountering when competing with large scale operations. She also talked about how the biggest players in the system had the power to influence policies that ultimately served to push the small farmers off the treadmill. More generally, she discussed how the isolation made small scale farmers vulnerable to the actions and influence of a few large ones in their area.

Similarly, Wendy shared with me stories she had been reading about small processing plants adapting to the challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact it had on essential workers who were mostly immigrants. She told me about farmers developing small grain as part of their revolution towards regenerative practices and about stories she had read about the demise of farmers in the dairy industry.

Finally, when asked to discuss these dominant stories, Betsy discussed the main story shared by other flower farmers regarding the slow flower movement and the importance of educating customers about local options. This story highlighted the impact that the global flowers market had on local growers and the importance of tipping the scales and remind customers of the value, quality, and diversity of options offered by local flower farmers.

This first step of the interview process made me realize how I had expected to hear the over-stories usually discussed by my fellow academics. Rather, the farmers answered that question with stories of challenges directly related to their own experience. The over-stories they shared with me were of a smaller scale and related to current concerns they had about farming. This forced me to reconsider my own expectations.

I perhaps should have also expected this discussion of context and dominant stories to bring out over-stories that were specific to each individual farmer and their own experience and place in the system. Indeed, I knew starting this project that farmers and researchers had different ways

of talking about the farm and I should have expected it to come up in my own work. Herndl et al. warn that researchers tend to talk about the farm in abstract and disconnected ways while farmers use anecdotes and stories, making communication sometimes challenging.[406] With my approach centered on storytelling, I actively worked to reduce this gap in communication. However, the literature also highlights other challenges to communication that I only truly understood when I personally experienced them during these first interviews. Indeed, this difference in communication style isn't limited to storytelling or more formal retelling but also includes differences in the type of examples used. Researchers tend to tell stories at a more global scale and look for more general examples while farmers' examples are much more specific and local.[407] Although I was aware of these differences, they became apparent as I was expecting stories of farm subsidies, market control, and large-scale farm activities but heard instead local stories of struggles between small and large farms or of local communities supporting farmers.

While I wish I had been more self-aware and had expected the kind of responses I received to this contextual question, I am convinced that the diversity of over-stories that were shared with me reflected the diversity of challenges that farmers encounter in their daily lives. These over-stories have a direct impact on their livelihoods and their experiences as farmers. As such, the type of over-story they shared with me sheds light on their immediate concerns, the systemic issues they contested, and the direction they wanted our story to go.

Considering the diversity of answers that can come out of this first question, it is important to approach it without any expectation and to leave the range of responses as open as possible. The over-stories that each farmer discusses indeed help to reveal their underlying concerns, values, and goals which can be weaved into the narrative later. There is no right or wrong answer to this

[406] Herndl et al., "What Is Farm."
[407] Herndl et al.

question and the more information is collected here, the richer our understanding of the farmers' experiences will be.

As this question allowed me to point at my own expectations and how they might affect the answers that the farmers provide, I was glad for my commitment to paying close attention to the ways my positionality – but most importantly my role as a co-author – would influence the type of stories we would write. This realization was only the first of many that would come throughout this research project and almost immediately after, I had to learn to fully embrace my impact as a co-author.

Stepping into the role of co-author

During my first conversation with Wendy, as she was telling me about the stories about agriculture that were circulating, she asked me a simple question: "what about you?" In this moment, I understood what it meant for us to be co-authors and what I had committed to do with this research.

Research notes Wendy – 10/23/2020

"Wendy's invitation to share my perspective was a little unsettling. I am convinced that the academic practice that askes for impartiality and disengagement with the topic at hand is still very engrained in me. In that moment, I questioned whether or not I should volunteer my own views. After all, isn't that the complete opposite of what scientists want to do? I am expected to be removed as much as possible. And yet, I would be the one to write down the summary of the conversation and lead the analysis, using then all that I have learned, and I believe to frame my analysis. How is that really removed? I always make choices that influence my research when I design my interviews questions, when I pick who will participate, when I discuss the frameworks useful in the analysis. I was

> *already aware of my influence on the process and that's probably why I was interested in a process of co-authoring. […]*
> *I therefore shared with Wendy my stories, fully embracing the impact they might have on her and on the story we decided to write. I was happy to hear that my examples echoed some she had already heard and moved the conversation forward rather than take it in another direction."*

As this journal entry illustrates, I have long been aware of the standard requirement for researchers to be unbiased, neutral, and removed from their research topic[408] and I had already struggled in the past to figure out how to influence my research participants as little as possible.[409] Throughout my time as a graduate student, I held many interviews with farmers and always wanted them to share their story with me without my guiding them too much. But the simple act of explaining to them my interests felt like I was already orienting them towards the answers I expected or wanted to hear. To limit this impact, I adopted a very neutral and detached approach to the interview process and committed to only asking clarifying questions.[410,411] It worked; I think. I managed to remove myself as much as I could to make space for another's voice and story to emerge and collect the insight I was looking for.

Sharing a little about me however felt essential as it was part of building reciprocity. [412] It didn't feel right having conversations and holding back while I expected others to share stories of personal challenges. Instead, I let my interviewees invite me to the conversation if they

[408] Collinson and Hockey, "Autoethnography: Self-Indulgence or Rigorous Methodology?"
[409] Corbin and Morse, "The Unstructured Interactive Interview."
[410] See the methodologies presented in the previous chapters, particularly Chapter 2.
[411] I would start with a simple prompt and let my participants take the lead. When I was interested in something they had brought up, I would nudge them with a simple "can you tell me more about this?"
[412] Corbin and Morse, "The Unstructured Interactive Interview."

wanted to. Some people were comfortable with me remaining pretty silent, but others asked about myself, my work, and my interests.[413]

Ethnographers Collinson and Hockey echo the discomfort I felt and argue that this silent ethnographer persona is problematic as it denies the huge role that the researcher plays in the participant's research experience.[414] This disembodied researcher we are pushed to become is one that obscures and negates our own limitations and refuses to acknowledge how we might be impacting the process. Because being blind to potential impacts and biases scares me more than the criticism I might receive for intentionally including myself fully in the research process for this third project, this time I chose to go the opposite way and clearly acknowledge my impact by making myself a co-author in the process. By answering Wendy's question and sharing with her the over-stories of agriculture I was aware of, I fully stepped into my role as a co-author. Additionally, I believe that in doing so I reassured her that I wasn't here to judge her responses but instead was committed to working together as equals.

This first part of the first interview allowed me to remember how my own awareness of large-scale over-stories could obscure the more local and specific over-stories my co-authors would identify. This realization reminded me of my choice to pay close attention to my impact throughout the process. I argue that the decision to be fully aware of my role in shaping the interviews and the responses that my participants might give allows me to clearly identify what aspects of my identity, experience, or personality might have affected the results of this study and the stories that emerged. Additionally, I argue that my willingness to join the participatory

[413] Most of the time, my accent was the first thing people would ask about. It would ground me back into reality and remind me that who I am, what I ask, and how I behave influence the responses I am given. People are curious. They wanted to know what brought me to the US and especially Wisconsin, where I grew up and how I got interested in sustainable agriculture.
[414] Collinson and Hockey, "Autoethnography: Self-Indulgence or Rigorous Methodology?"

process as fully as I expect the farmers to join helped in building a sense of trust and commitment to the project that strengthened our bonds, and ultimately allowed us to overcome the distrust that traditionally characterizes the farmer-researcher relationship.

Phase 1.2 – What is our Story about?

With the context for our story established, we were able to move the conversation towards a brainstorming of the story we would want to write together. While Betsy already had ideas about the kind of stories she wanted to workshop, both Wendy and Bonnie stated that they wanted me to help them find their stories. As a co-author, I understood that my role was not limited to the drafting and editing of the narrative piece like a ghost writer might be. As partners in this project, I knew that I had a responsibility in participating in the reflection and refinement of our original idea as well. As we were talking, I took notes of the topics that interested them, the values they expressed, and the concerns they voiced about the agricultural system. As an external ear, I was able to listen to overarching themes in their stories and as a storyteller and writer, I was able to imagine what these could look like as a narrative piece. As a result, both times I was able to offer a suggestion for a story that would allow us to include most of our ideas into one narrative. The process I went through with Wendy perhaps best illustrates our collaboration through the brainstorming stage.

Research notes Wendy - 10/11/2020

"Wendy had already stated that she didn't know what story she wanted to share and that she wasn't convinced she had anything worth sharing. I believe that this pushed her to share as many stories of others as she could, maybe to make up for her lack of confidence in her own story. As a result, moving into the second section of the conversation, I already had a sense of what kind of stories she related to, what aspects of the system they

brought into question, and what seemed to matter to her in these stories. I was then able to volunteer an idea. I felt a little uncomfortable taking control of the narrative in that way, but she had stated clearly that she really needed me to guide her and maybe take a little bit of control of the situation.

The story I proposed was one that I believed could bring together all the elements she had shown interest for in the stories she shared with me into a vision of her dream farm. I was happy to hear that she really liked the idea. In that moment, both of us were pretty ecstatic at the thought of it. I think more than just being interested in the content we could include, we recognized the success of our collaboration. Just then, we related. From a creative and maybe a little unconventional idea, we had been able to come to an idea we both liked and felt would be worth our time. We also came to the realization that our collaboration was working better than we perhaps could have expected. We had listened to each other, shared our ideas and values and the effervescence of the conversation gave life to an idea neither of us had really thought about previously. An idea that was the perfect coming together of both experiences, giving a new meaning and body to the idea of co-authorship."

While I expected this brainstorming stage to help unearth stories, it is interesting to note that none of the stories that emerged were the ones I had initially thought each farmer would bring up when I first invited them to join the study. Here I argue that the conversation that we had regarding the stories that interested us, and in which I happily participated, helped us uncover stories that truly embodied our collaboration while staying true to their individual experiences and particular sets of knowledge.

As counter intuitive as it might be for a researcher to intentionally influence the content of a conversation, Stoecker reminds us that the participatory research process should involve a dialogue and co-generation of knowledge.[415] I argue that co-authoring narratives with farmers allows us to fully embrace this dialogue, and I am convinced that the stories that emerged from my conversations with my co-authors are great example of co-generation of knowledge.

Additionally, I believe that the active listening that is required when preparing to write a story inspired by their experience allowed me to immediately show that I was paying attention to their input, caring about telling the story faithfully, and understood their experience. As a result, I argue that the process of thinking collaboratively about a story and my involvement in the conversation helped strengthen the feeling of trust that we had already built.

Lessons learned from Phase 1

Throughout these first interviews, I loosely followed a semi-structured interview script and paid attention to the questions that sparked good conversations and those which did not. I expected the semi-structured script to both be useful and limiting in these conversations. There were elements that really needed to be gathered to workshop our narratives and therefore questions that needed to be asked.

The section III about the audience in particular was one that needed to be specifically asked as the overall conversation would be unlikely to get to them otherwise. I asked my co-author to discuss who they believed would benefit from hearing this story, what they wanted the readers to remember and learn from this narrative, as well as what they wanted the readers to feel and be called to do after reading this piece.

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[415] Stoecker, "Are Academics Irrelevant?"

When working on a communication piece, no matter its format, it is important to remember that it must be adapted to the audience it is trying to reach and what it set out to do.[416] With this series of questions, I was able to collect information about the audience each co-author was writing for and the tone they wanted to adopt.[417]

Similarly, this more structured format of the interview seemed to fit the section about literary tools (V) quite well. I asked my co-authors to discuss their preferences when it came to the point of view of the narrator, the tenses to use when writing, metaphors they related to, and emotions and feelings they wanted to emote. Most of the time, they expressed some preferences for the point of view to use but not particularly for the tenses or metaphors. However, they did usually know exactly what they wanted the piece to feel like. Surprisingly – or perhaps unsurprisingly – my co-authors all chose to write stories of hope that would inspire the readers to ask for help and support, jump in and take the first step towards their dream farm, or build collaborations with local businesses. No matter the tone or the type of stories they identified as over-stories during our conversations, they wanted their stories to change the system by highlighting opportunities for collaboration and recognized how feelings of hope were most useful to convey these ideas.

On the other hand, the structured aspect of the sections about the context, the story to write, and the similar stories they had heard about did not always guide the conversation in the right direction, seem necessary, or appear adequate.

Knowing that each interview was a practice for the next and that the goal was for me to identify the best way to collect the information I needed, I allowed myself to be flexible with the way I was asking the questions especially when I could see that sticking too closely to the script

[416] Druschke et al., "Better Science through Rhetoric."
[417] A suggested list of questions for this initial interview is available in the appendices.

would be counterproductive.[418] After conducting all three of the initial interviews, it seems to me like the original interview script contained two types of sections: sections where specific and rather simple answers were expected and sections where complete retelling of stories were most useful. For the context section (I), farmer's story section (II), and similar stories section (IV), I recommend adopting an open interview style, as specific questions were less useful and tended to influence the type of responses I received. Indeed, here the semi-structured nature of the interview mostly limited my co-authors' ability to think out of the box or to tell me stories that they thought relevant to our narrative workshop but that maybe didn't exactly answer my questions. However, sticking to a more semi-structured interview style and asking specific questions was useful for the sections related to the audience (III) and the tools to use (V). With this in mind, adopting a mixed approach to conduct this first interview seems most useful.

III.2. Phase 2 – Building the narratives

After I conducted these first interviews, it was time to put all these ideas down on paper and actually start writing these stories. This following section describes the process of drafting the initial narratives, receiving feedback and editing the narrative together with my co-authors, and finalizing our narratives. This was the last phase of the process before evaluating it with my co-authors.

For this phase of the process, I imagined lending my time and my skills as a writer to my co-authors and planned to develop the first draft of our narrative using the elements we identified as important during our conversation. After working on this draft, I would send it to each co-author for review and start the work of collaboratively editing it.

[418] Lyon et al., "Maculate Conceptions."

Phase 2.1 – the initial draft

Thanks to the thorough conversation I had with each of my co-authors during Phase 1, enough had been defined during our initial conversations for me to have a pretty clear idea of the kind of stories I wanted to write. I nevertheless gave myself a few days before starting the writing of each piece. As a writer, I have learned that I am most efficient and successful after a few days of reflection. It feels like the time I took to reflect before I started writing allowed for the information I had collected to settle and organize itself into a story in my mind.[419] When I started working on the drafts, I used the notes I had taken during our initial conversation to support my writing and listened to the recording of the interviews when necessary.

For all three stories, I started with the idea of a scene we had imagined together to carry and support the narrative reflection. In two of the stories, these scenes involved characters interacting, but the purpose of these interactions wasn't necessarily to take the reader on a journey as much as it was to illustrate and embody the ideas and thoughts discussed throughout the piece. For the stories that involved some dialogue, I started by drafting the conversations and then moved on to include the more descriptive paragraphs that would carry most of the arguments the story was trying to make. As Wendy's story focused on her vision for her farm, the challenge was to include all the important elements without overwhelming the reader who already had to be able to distinguish the present from the vision.

> *Research notes Wendy – 01/27/2021*
>
> *"Bringing Wendy's immense vision to life through words required being very strategic about what elements needed to be included and in what order. In our discussion, ideas*

[419] In my experience, that's what the saying "writers write" really means. Although writing skills really come with practice, when it comes to coming up with stories, writers benefit from writing everything and anything that comes to mind. After a while and with tons of different scenes in mind, things just have a way of organizing themselves into one coherent story as our brains try to make sense of all the information.

> *were presented randomly as they came to mind. My first attempt at describing them was only partially successful. [Some] elements seemed to flow together quite well while others seemed really disconnected. For a moment, it almost seemed like I was bringing together multiple different stories while struggling to really relate them. It then became necessary to select what really needed to make it into the text and what had to be left out. This part of the process was challenging as I had to make the executive decision and hope that the choices I made wouldn't lead me to misrepresent the story we had decided on."*

As discussed earlier and as the research note above illustrates, this co-authoring process is one that really forced me to reconsider my place as a researcher, to question the distance we are encouraged to maintain with our participants, and to acknowledge the impact my choices as a researcher make. As I drafted stories that I believed would best carry the message my co-authors and I had picked, everything that I chose to include or leave behind made it clear how much influence I was having on the outcome of our story and the results it could have. Despite some of the discomfort I felt, it was part of the original design of this process and my co-authors were aware and glad that I would also have a voice in the story we would write.

This self-reflective process also made me realize my own expectations when it came to the relationship and power dynamic that would play out in this co-authoring process. As I was finishing the first draft for Bonnie's story, I was faced with the realization that I had to let myself and my work be seen even if imperfect. Despite how reflective I tried to be from the beginning, as the researcher in the project, I realized that I felt a level of pressure associated with my own

expertise and some anxiety to perform and be perfect. I quickly realized that to be a good co-author, I had to let go of these expectations and trust my partner and the process.[420]

Research notes Bonnie – 10/16/2020

"While writing the first draft of Bonnie's story, I had to allow the first draft of this story to be imperfect. What mattered most in that moment was to be able to write the story from beginning to end even if it meant writing sentences that I knew I would later rephrase, using words I knew didn't make my point fully, or not finishing sentences that were bugging me, and moving on. Most importantly, I allowed myself to leave holes in places where I knew I would need Bonnie's help. Other than recognizing this first draft as a first step in the right direction – as small or unsatisfying as that step may be – it made clear where my knowledge hit its limit and where Bonnie's expertise would be needed.

While some farmers might be more interested than others in getting involved in the writing process, it is crucial in any case to give them some control over the workshopping of the story. "Is the situation I described accurate?" "If you were in that situation, what would you do differently?" "Am I using the right terms here?" Researchers working to develop narratives using this process might have firsthand experience of the things they describe but it is important to remember that [here], the farmers are the experts when it comes to the information shared. In this case, the researcher's knowledge of the practices serves as a guarantee that what the farmers is trying to share is translated into the story accurately."

[420] Anne Lamott, "Shitty First Drafts," in *Language Awareness: Readings for College Writers*, ed. Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rosa, and Virginia Clark, 9th edition (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 93–96.

Although I designed this participatory process to address the power imbalances that can sometimes exist between researchers and research participants, I was a little surprised with how difficult it was for me to let go of the control I usually had and to make myself vulnerable to criticism. Early on, I had reflected on the hierarchy assumed during a research project, particularly regarding the different types of knowledge,[421] and I had designed a process meant to give the participants as much power to influence the research process and its outcome as possible, and as much as they desired. However, it also meant that I had to accept that I might lose some of the power I intrinsically held as a researcher. The need for me to rethink our relationship as one of true collaboration and co-empowerment made itself even clearer in the next stage of the process.

Phase 2.2 – Providing and receiving feedback

After drafting the initial stories, the next stage of this phase called for my co-authors and I to go through multiple rounds of editing until we finalized the narrative. Once fully drafted, I sent each story out to my co-author via email. The document I shared with them allowed them to leave comments and make changes or suggestions directly onto it. I suggested that they read the document and implement their changes before we met again to discuss this new version of the story.

Although the previous stage of the process had already illustrated the power of our collaboration and drafting our narrative had encouraged me to allow myself to be vulnerable with my co-authors, receiving their feedback solidified the importance of collaboration and vulnerability. As I received the first instance of feedback from Bonnie, I implemented a shift in

[421] Lockeretz and Anderson, "Farmers' Role in Sustainable Agriculture Research."

my own mind that helped throughout the rest of our collaboration and in my work with Wendy and Besty.

Research notes Bonnie – 11/15/2020

"When I opened the document on which Bonnie had made her changes, I have to admit I was a little surprised by the number of changes she had made. A few sentences into the reading of her edited version however, I realized that the changes and additions mostly made the overall story feel more real and relatable. The feeling of insecurity and self-doubt that these edits triggered was short-lived but had really been there. It provided another example of the challenge of accepting our imperfections and welcoming productive criticism in a collaborative project. Right there and then, I checked myself and reminded myself that this was the whole point of this research: for us to be co-authors and to learn from the process. In about a second, I saw the changes for what they really were: a sign that Bonnie had fully engaged with the process and made this narrative her own.

I can't deny that this realization made me a little emotional. I don't know. It was kind of beautiful because even though this still only is a draft, it is now undeniably a co-authored draft."

This first exposure to the reality of co-authorship took me by surprise, but I believe that these few seconds of doubt taught me a lot and allowed me to approach the writing of the co-editing of the other two narrative pieces with more confidence.[422]

[422] Lyon et al. (2010) report experiencing the same feeling of defensiveness when confronted with the feedback of farmers they had invited to join their participatory research project.

The many changes and comments that Bonnie had provided were a testament of her commitment to the story and the process. They also convinced me that my co-authors only had my best interest at heart and wanted this project to succeed as much as I did. It later helped me feel more comfortable sending my first drafts to Wendy and Betsy. However, in this process I realized how defensive and insecure I felt about my writing, which is something I usually felt quite confident about. It led me to reflect on some of the academic expectations I have come to embrace.

> *Research notes Wendy – 1/27/2021*
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> *"Co-authoring a piece with someone requires getting comfortable with the idea that our partner will see us as imperfect. It can be hard to accept, particularly for academics. But we already accept our collaborators as imperfect humans and through the co-authoring process, we build a sense of trust and appreciation. It convinces us that they will want the best for us and the story we are developing together, and will do what it takes to make it as good as it can with respect, kindness, and compassion. When the co-author is someone we're trying to impress however, being vulnerable like that can be particularly difficult."*[423]

The journal excerpt above illustrates particularly well the idea of the dialogue of solidarities introduced by Bell.[424] Here, the collaboration isn't only successful because both of the co-authors want to write an interesting story, although this solidarity of interest is essential. Instead, this common goal is in direct discussion with a solidarity of sentiments developed over the course of this process.

[423] Druschke et al. (2018) discuss how many graduate students approach writing with a lot of anxiety and extremely high expectation, only accepting for their work to be near perfect.
[424] Bell, "The Dialogue of Solidarities."

With each iteration of the research process, with each unfinished draft I sent to my co-authors, I gained confidence about this co-authoring methodology. I expected to feel more comfortable with the process as well, but the drafting of Betsy's initial story proved to be challenging and forced me to relinquish control even more and trust my co-author.

As I was writing this story, the narration and the dialogue felt disconnected. I realized that I maybe had too much to say to be properly carried by one interaction.

> *Research notes Betsy – 3/25/2021*
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> *"Like in Bonnie's story, I wrote the first draft of Betsy's story around an interaction between two characters. Unfortunately, the more I was writing this story, the more the narration and the dialogue felt disconnected. […] I played with the narrative for a couple of days without getting anywhere with it and started to get frustrated. Finally, I decided to trust my co-author in this project and sent it out to Betsy anyway. In my email, I made it clear that I wasn't satisfied with it and hoped that she could help me get unstuck or even suggest another idea for a scene to use to carry the story.*
>
> *This was a pretty difficult move to make for me. Working on the other two narratives, I had learned to accept that, as a co-authored project, it was okay to ask for help when I needed it. Although I feel like have learned this lesson by now, a big part of me feels like I am not fulfilling my part of the contract, like I'm dropping the ball. And it's not fun. In the academic world particularly, this feeling is one that I feel very uncomfortable experiencing. We all deal with impostor syndrome now and then as we are supposed to be experts and embody and ideal of excellence, but this isn't that. This is just work not done. This is just me hitting a wall and, in all honesty, having to face my co-author about it is a little challenging. Especially because expectations and assumptions about our*

relationship remain. That, and the fact that I don't want Betsy to think this whole research was a fluke because I can't come up with a good first draft for us…"

As uncomfortable as this first step of the editing process might have been, it was a very fulfilling one, especially as we reached the step of the process where my co-authors could exert real power and agency over the research and its outcome. Stoecker also reminds us that as strong as the imposter syndrome might be while conducting participatory research, our collaborators will "tell us when we screw up." He therefore encourages us to "think about the possibilities, give it a shot, and learn from it."[425]

As I could have expected, Betsy was very supportive and actually pleased with this first draft. She did not know how the story would be structured, so seeing this first version helped her solidify the outcome in her head. The conversation we had about the story and how to improve it was extremely helpful and Betsy ended up suggesting how to get the story to flow better.

Research notes Betsy – 4/14/2021

"She noticed that our story took place in a store entirely and didn't give us the chance to paint a picture of the farm for the reader the way the other two [narratives] did.
And she was right. Then and there, I realized that I walked us into a store and got us stuck there not knowing how to get out! […] We agreed to take the story back to the farm but rather than have the farmer enter the store, leave, and drive back home, I offered to change the point of view and write the story of a customer walking into the store and travelling all across town and to the farm on the recommendation of the local business owners."

[425] Stoecker, "Are Academics Irrelevant?"

With Betsy's direct contribution, I was able to have another go at our story and this second version was one that I was really happy with. More importantly, I was really glad I had turned to Betsy for help.

Once I had received all of the feedback by email and directly onto the shared document, I held conversations with my co-authors to discuss the changes they had made. With this conversation, I hoped to get more detailed feedback on the first draft of the story we had come up with and reiterate my interest in their opinion and ideas. With Bonnie and Wendy, the conversation revolved around some of the suggestions they had made to improve the flow of the story or make it more relatable to farmers. With Betsy, however, we focused on how to rewrite the first draft to be more engaging.

As I discussed the changes proposed by Bonnie with her, some parts of the stories appeared to be a little repetitive and I offered to implement her changes in a way that would also help the overall flow. I then asked her to take one last look at the story and make final suggestions if needed. After our second conversation, which focused on her initial changes, we used emails and a shared document to go back and forth until we were both satisfied with the narrative.

During these conversations about the editing of the stories, my co-authors and I often got side-tracked and discussed other topics we were interested in. However, in most cases, these somewhat unrelated conversations allowed me to better understand my co-authors, their values, and their concerns which ultimately allowed me to better represent them in my writing. Corbin and Morse explain that these "side trips" are often used by participants to take a moment to gather their thoughts.[426] In the case of my conversations with Wendy, our side trips revolved

[426] Corbin and Morse, "The Unstructured Interactive Interview."

around ideas of land ownership and home, which turned out to be really helpful to the improvement of the story we were writing.

> *Research notes Wendy – 01/29/2021*
>
> *"A couple of the substitutions Wendy suggested put an emphasis on this feeling of home and ownership. This led me to the realization that I could weave in the idea of home and ownership further into the text. We also discussed what the paragraph on housing should be about. If we had limited our revisions and interactions to the shared document edits and comments and the email thread we had started, we might have never realized the importance of this feeling of being home and the importance of making it a lot more palpable throughout the story."*

It seemed like every time Wendy and I exchanged an email, she could think of something she would like to present differently. She later told me that as time was passing, she was learning and growing her own vision of her farm. As a result, she appreciated the opportunity to have our narrative grow with her. Finally, we decided to call it done and agreed to stop making changes to it.[427]

Lessons learned from Phase 2

Both during our initial interview and afterwards via email, I reminded my co-authors that they were welcome to share with me any feedback they had and to make all the changes and suggestions they saw fit. While Bonnie felt comfortable directly editing the document, Wendy preferred to provide suggestions. Betsy provided very few comments on the actual document but had a lot of helpful ideas to share once we met again to discuss the story. It made me reassess my

[427] All three narratives are included in the Appendices of this chapter.

expectations of what made for good feedback and participation, as I realized that everyone provides feedback in different ways. Offering multiple ways for them to provide feedback probably allowed all three of them to feel comfortable getting involved.

Similarly, I quickly realized that the list of questions I had prepared for our conversations during the editing call was not as helpful as I expected it to be. I aimed to use it to ask my co-authors about the types of changes they had made and how they believed it improved the story. It helped me start the conversation with Bonnie, but we then were able to discuss our story without the script. With Wendy, these questions actually slowed down our conversation and perhaps made it sound like I expected Wendy to justify herself and the changes she had proposed. As soon as I realized how this script was negatively impacting our free-flowing conversation, I let it go and trusted that we could discuss our story without the need to be prompted. When discussing changes with Betsy, these questions proved utterly useless as we needed to reorient our story completely and the fact that she wanted to talk about her suggestions in person. Once again, the flexibility I allowed and the messiness of the iterative process had a positive impact.

Additionally, I believe that the regular back and forth that took place between each of my co-authors and myself allowed us to build rapport. We exchanged emails almost every week during the editing process and checked on each other as much as we checked on the writing. I am convinced that we all deeply appreciated this opportunity to build relationships and get to know each other better.[428,429]

[428] It is also important to remember that this research was conducted in 2020 and 2021, during a global pandemic that isolated many of us from our support system. I believe that the opportunities to connect that this research offered were greatly appreciated by all of us.

[429] While Wendy and I were still working on our story, we ran into each other at a virtual conference and decided to compare notes and reflections afterwards. Right then, I was made aware of how much stronger our bonds had gotten.

Finally, as I discussed earlier, the writing and editing process was one that forced me to fully acknowledge my impact as a researcher but also to accept the vulnerability that is required when co-authoring a piece. Both lessons are growing my understanding of my role as a researcher and shedding light on the underlying expectations and insecurities that academia creates.

III.3. Evaluating the process and its outcomes

Once our narratives were finalized, I wanted to get my co-authors' opinion on the process. As discussed earlier, this phase was divided into two parts. First, I wanted to give my co-authors the opportunity to give feedback on the process, the narrative piece we workshopped, and share with me some of the things they learned through this project. To do so, I held one final individual interview with each of my co-authors. Additionally, to evaluate the narratives themselves and provide more opportunities for my collaborators to discuss the process, I organized a focus group with all three farmers and asked them to read each other's stories. We then got together on a virtual call and discussed the narratives and the process.[430] For the individual interview as well as for the focus group, I prepared a few questions but applied what I had learned earlier in the process and allowed myself to only use them if the conversations needed to be reoriented.

Individual feedback

Having learned some lessons from our previous conversations, I started off the individual conversation with a semi-structured interview script and allowed myself to be flexible with it. We discussed their first impression of the project and their feelings about the brainstorming that took place during the first conversation. I asked them about their level of comfort and involvement in the writing and editing process and what they thought about the final narrative

[430] Wendy was the one who suggested this format and I want to thank her for a great idea!

we developed. Finally, I invited them to reflect on how the process had influenced their understanding of the topic we chose to write about.

Our conversations revealed the importance of flexibility. My co-authors all appreciated the flexibility allowed by the virtual format, the casual flow of our conversations, and the flexibility of the editing process.

Dynamic process for dynamic relationships

The original design for this research called for all of these interviews and conversations to be held in person. I had built rapport with all three of my co-authors by previously interviewing them on their farm and was looking forward to strengthening our relationships through regular visits to their farm. Unfortunately, before I was able to schedule my first in-person interview for this project, the Covid-19 pandemic sent us all into lockdown and made in-person research impossible. Although it took me sometime to readjust my research and most importantly my expectations, it quickly became clear that this virtual format would increase my flexibility and make participation and collaboration not only possible but perhaps more engaging. Both Bonnie and Wendy had to reschedule our first interview twice. Thanks to the virtual setting, I was able to accommodate them easily and doing so only increase their desire to work with me.

Research notes Wendy – 10/23/2020

"As unfortunate as the rescheduling was, they [illustrated the importance] of being flexible when working with farmers. If things had been different, especially regarding the current pandemic, I might have been visiting on the day the combine broke. […] I believe we still would have been able to hold the interview but I am now convinced that [Wendy] would have been distracted and I would have felt like I was imposing. Being able to

reschedule easily gave her the time to focus on the issue at hand. Afterwards, I know she was grateful for my ability to accommodate her."

Despite the distance, the virtual format allowed us to meet and see each other well enough to grow our relationship. Nevertheless, my co-authors acknowledged that things may have been different if we had met for the first time virtually for this project and didn't have an already existing relationship to build upon. They appreciated the flexibility that the virtual platform allowed and were glad to see our relationship grow over time through our conversations. This flexibility also allowed for our conversations to feel casual and friendly. Before each of our conversations about the research, I checked in with them as I would when catching up with a friend and this probably set up the tone for the rest of the conversations. My co-authors explained particularly enjoying the fluidity and informality of the interview process. They indeed explained that it allowed them to participate more easily and made them feel more confident about the importance of their own contribution. I also regularly stated that they were welcome to participate in the writing as much or as little as they wanted, and this convinced them of true participatory nature of this work. Bonnie, who had experience writing professionally and with editing, felt comfortable making changes to our shared document but explained still feeling like she had to contain herself slightly. This provides a good example of the collaborative nature of the process as both of us worked to provide useful feedback while navigating being co-authors.

If I were to repeat the process with farmers I don't already know, I would probably try to hold the first interview in person to build this rapport and continue the process virtually after that. This flexible methodology also made me realize how inflexible I had been in the past and what I might have missed out on because if it. For the two research projects I developed before this one, I conducted in-person interviews but did not consider using virtual platforms when our

meetings got canceled or whenever I was unable to drive to a certain area. Today, I would work to make these previous interview methodologies more flexible.

> *Final interview with Bonnie – 1/27/2021*
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> *I think that's where I felt comfortable working with you, and you made it really clear that I needed to take ownership. I feel like I did make some pretty huge edits in there [to] make it feel more personalized on my end. And I thought that process worked really well because you were really supportive. And that might be hard for some people, [laughs] who might be worried about stepping on toes or being overly critical of someone else's writing. But it was fine for me.*

Despite the regular reminders I gave of the importance of their contribution, everyone's feeling of inadequacy did not totally ease when it came to proposing changes to the work I had started. When discussing the editing process, Wendy echoed Bonnie's thought and expressed not wanting "to step on your toes too much." She made it clear that her edits should be considered more like suggestions.

> *Final interview with Wendy – 3/17/2021*
>
> *I felt comfortable. But I sometimes would catch myself thinking "oh, have I overstepped? Have I edited too much?" [I want] to give you the freedom that you need to write a good story. "Am I creating too many edits?" And I picture my edits as just being suggestions. You don't have to go with them if you don't feel right about it. […] These are just suggestions, take them or leave them. They're not set in stone.*

When asked how comfortable she felt editing the story I had drafted and providing feedback, Betsy explained that she didn't see herself as a writer and therefore did not really feel

comfortable offering changes or suggestions to my writing. This surprised me. Considering the nature of this project, I had assumed that all my co-authors were somewhat interested and used to writing stories themselves. I asked her then what had interested her in the project, knowing it would be mostly focused on the story writing process.

> *Final interview with Betsy – 04/28/2021*
>
> *I think it eased my fears a little bit, when you said that you would do the draft. It wasn't like, "I want you to sit down, and write a story." Everything that you expressed through the whole thing, was "we're going to talk, we're going to pull ideas, I'm going to start a draft of it." And that part was very like, "Oh, okay. Yeah. I can get behind that. I can do that." I think if you had come across as saying, "So, I'd like you to write your story. And we're going to research it. And, [I'm] going to pick it apart from a analytical research side of things." I would have been like, "Hmm. Not really interesting to me." [Laughs]*

It was very helpful for me to remember through Betsy's comment that some people are not writers but are still storytellers. Betsy was interested in sharing her story and offering to take charge for the writing of the story allowed her to be able to join the project confidently. Additionally, she appreciated being able to provide her feedback in person during our calls as she explained that she was the kind of person who after a long day of work, didn't want to spend time working on the computer. The flexibility of the process made it possible for all three of my co-authors to participate as much as they wanted during the revision process.

Interestingly, this flexibility also allowed for the concept of co-authorship to be adapted to the interest of each of the farmer who participated in my research. Wendy is the one who highlighted this point during our last conversation.

Final interview with Wendy - 3/17/2021

"Co-authoring is kind of a strange term because I think it can be read in different ways. But I guess I pictured exactly this. That you are the writer, I provide some content for you to write about, and we work on it together… verbiage wise, but you really are the author. And I know in other contexts, co-authoring means something totally different, where you are actually writing together, you know. Which I find to be quite difficult because writing is an art and everyone's perspective [of] art is very different, and styles are quite different. […] So, I really enjoy the process and I enjoy knowing that people want to write stories about or things that I enjoy talking about or dreaming about or thinking about. I was really attracted to the idea."

Her comment made me reflect on my own understanding and expectations about co-authoring and I realized that I perhaps started this project without a clear definition of co-authoring in mind. This however allowed all of the participants to choose their level of involvement and, as a result, of co-authorship.

As a researcher, I realize that it would have probably been important to clearly define "co-authorship" to the participants of the studies. However, Herndl et al. remind us that when discussing the farm, scientists tend to try and come up with clear definitions for all the elements they discuss (including ideas like 'sustainable' or 'local') while farmers are more comfortable with vague or fluid definitions of these terms.[431] As a result, I don't regret leaving this idea up for interpretation. I believe that it allowed each of the participants of this research to get involved and commit to this project as much as they were comfortable while also giving them the opportunity to take a step back or step into it further based on their availability and level of

[431] Herndl et al., "What Is Farm."

interest. I think this project ended up feeling like a flexible and comfortable one to get involved in as the rules for participation weren't so strict and inflexible. Additionally, the farmers involved with this project were comfortable letting me take control of the writing process. I believe that my regular reminders of their agency had convinced them of my good intentions and that their voices would be appropriately included in the story. It perhaps shows that this methodology for participatory research is successful in building a level of trust that can often be difficult to achieve among farmers and researchers.

Strengthening relationships

As this work was in part designed to address some of the challenges usually encountered when engaging in participatory research,[432] I believe that the depth of relationships we established through the process is one of the most valuable outcomes of this research.

The different steps of the process were intended to help us build rapport through recurring conversations. All three participants knew ahead of signing up for this project that they would be expected to meet with me multiple times over the course of a few weeks, but I still was relieved and pleased to see that the commitment they made to this research held over time. More importantly, I think their increased level of involvement in the project shows how the relationship we built encouraged further participation. The Discussion section of this chapter will further discuss the process of building a relationship through recurring exchanges.

An opportunity for them to reflect as well

As I imagined, the process of co-authoring stories with farmers was one that involved a lot of self-reflection and taught me a lot about myself and my place in the participatory process. When

[432] As a reminder, Lyon et al. (2010) say that farmers are constrained in their participation by the time commitment, their distrust of researchers, and their lack of confidence in their knowledge when providing feedback on a researcher's work.

I designed this project, I hoped it could also foster some self-reflection for the farmers involved.[433]

When asked to discuss whether this opportunity to write about mentorship had influenced her reflection on the topic over time, Bonnie explained that in general, the idea of mentorship was always on her mind and that it was perhaps why we ended up writing about it. She added that in the midst of a global pandemic and an overall very challenging year for everyone, mentoring WWOOFers and some of the other people who had visited her farm had been a highlight. Months after, they were still reaching out to her for guidance.

> *Final interview with Bonnie – 1/27/2021*
>
> *You know, [mentoring others] is something that I really do think I want to pursue more for sure. And it definitely did kind of start that cycle of thinking of [mentorship and teaching] and maybe I need to make that more central and my farm focus.*

Bonnie also discussed how telling the story of the informal mentorship she shares with Barb led her to rethink her understanding of the concept of mentorship.[434] "One of the things I've learned from it is that you can engage in mentorship on any level," she told me. While mentorship is traditionally thought of as a formal process, Bonnie's vision of it is now less based on the formality of the partnership and more on the willingness to provide support and answer questions.

> *Final interview with Bonnie – 1/27/2021*
>
> *Now I think [of it as] having a person in your life that is knowledgeable and willing to help no matter how often. So that did change for me. I realized that I can be a mentor to*

[433] Leavy, *Fiction as Research Practice*.
[434] Barb is a farmer whom she has come to mentor. Their relationship is the base for the narrative that Bonnie and I developed.

people, to a lot of people [laughs] in a lot of different ways. And so can anyone else, you know.

Yeah, that was a neat realization. And something that just feels good… to know that you have an impact in people's lives, and you could help them in any small way.

In addition to being more likely to see herself as a mentor to others, no matter the format of the relationship, Bonnie also explained that she paid more attention to the opportunities that came up for her to be mentored and ask for help and that she had started encouraging more people to become mentors as well.

When asked about her reflections, Betsy told me about the ways she had pushed her relationships with the small businesses in her town since we had started working together. Betsy's story was indeed inspired by a partnership she had imagined developing with a small business owner and by a group of local business innovators she had recently joined. When we started writing our story, Betsy had only attended one meeting of the innovators group and although she had planned on getting more involved, imagining with me what her networks might look like in a couple of years convinced her to take the steps to build her network.

Final Interview with Betsy – 04/28/2021

It's been exciting. Every time I leave, I'm like 'oh, I have new rejuvenated vigor for what I'm doing and how others can help me.' Because I know now that I have this email list that I can reach out to, and say, 'Hey, I have a question,' or 'I don't know who I need to connect with to get this done.' […] I've been more bold to ask.

Finally, Wendy's reflection was centered on the importance of storytelling and on the value of writing the stories down. Since we were writing a story about her dream farm and her goals,

Wendy's vision continued to evolve outside of our conversations. As her ideas and knowledge grew, she wanted our narrative to reflect that. For this particular story, Wendy and I implemented changes up until the last minute. When asked if she was satisfied with the final version, she explained that she would have kept modifying it if we hadn't decided to call it done. Now that it was set in stone – or rather on paper – however, she explained being excited about the opportunity to look back at it later as a testament to her ideas at a precise point in time.

> *Final interview with Wendy – 3/17/2021*
>
> *These were my thoughts at this point in time and they were important. How did they change? How did they evolve? Do I think they evolved in a positive way or a negative way? I do think that I will refer to this often, you know, after it's done because I'm curious. We wrote this a specific time in our lives.*

The focus group

For the focus group, I sent out the three stories to all of my co-authors and wanted to observe how the conversation would unfold between all three of them after they had had the opportunity to read each other's stories. They started to praise each other for the great stories they were able to write and discussed how despite their differences, they had been able to relate to each other thanks to them.

> *Research notes Focus Group – 05/07/2021*
>
> *Betsy who is a beginner farmer [said] she was able to see the potential of her farm through Wendy's vision and was reminded of the importance of mentorship by Bonnie's story. Bonnie told us that she was moved to tears by all the stories. She enjoyed the writing but most importantly, she was touched and reassured by everyone's strong focus on collaboration. Finally, Wendy was empowered by the knowledge that she isn't alone*

working to farm differently and to value her community. She sometimes feels isolated where she farms, surrounded as she is by conventional farmers, so reading these stories reminded her that she is part of a community.

From there, the conversation flowed very easily between my three co-authors. They discussed themes introduced in the story and had a long conversation about community and partnership, but also about mentorship and the challenges of land access. With all three of them being at different stages in their farming careers, they were able to relate based on the values they recognized in the stories while also being able to advise each other on the future or the path forward. Without having to prompt it, the conversation flowed to address all of the ideas presented directly or indirectly in these stories. I was really impressed by how comfortable they all were with each other and by how quickly the conversation shifted from the stories themselves towards more personal and perhaps meaningful topics. In a way, these stories acted as an opener into each other's lives and made connecting a lot easier for these three strangers. A couple of times throughout the conversation, they noted how things that came up in the conversation would have also made for great stories and agreed that they would love to read more stories like that.

Throughout this conversation, I mostly remained silent, nervous about interrupting a conversation that was otherwise flowing extremely well. They were relating to each other so much that they said that they could have imagined writing any of the three stories. This felt like a good opportunity to ask them a question:

Research notes Focus Group – 05/07/2021

When asked what they believe led them to choose the stories they wrote, all of them pointed towards me. Once again, having my impact on the research and its results acknowledged initially made me a little uncomfortable. But I quickly realized that they

> *weren't pointing at me in blame but instead recognizing my role in bringing these stories out.*

Rather than see their recognition of my participation in the writing of this story as an issue, I argue that my presence and my writing skills helped these stories emerge. Additionally, my understanding of the power that stories had to change systems allowed me to guide them towards the creation of meaningful and impactful pieces. In the end, all three stories embodied Saltmarshe's ideas of stories as light, glue, or web.

Wendy's story shone light on the future she imagined for her farm and the state of Iowa. As such, it encouraged Bonnie and Betsy to imagine the future of their own farms in similar ways, perhaps inspiring some ideas they had not yet thought about. Bonnie's story reminded Betsy and Wendy of the importance of mentorship. It encouraged Betsy to feel more comfortable asking for help and reminded Wendy of the importance of the support she could provide to beginning farmers. Betsy's partnerships with local businesses intrigued the other two and might have given them the idea to connect with one of their local small businesses as well.

As glue, these stories allowed these three farmers to build empathy and to connect quickly. The common grounds they identified as they were reading each other's stories allowed them to relate and the common thread of collaboration and regenerative farming helped them feel less isolated. Finally, reading these stories allowed these farmers to build a web that helped further their understanding of the complexity of the agricultural system. Wendy's story challenged the over-story of agriculture in Iowa while Bonnie's pinpointed the impact that large farming operations had on policies that in the end affected small farmers.

IV. Discussion

The stories we wrote have the potential to shed light, be a glue, and create a web but they also taught us a lot about collaboration, what makes for good participatory research, and the power dynamics at play.

The process of writing stories works

I argue that the process of co-authoring stories with farmers has proven to be successful. The three narratives that were developed in collaboration have been described by the farmers who read them as engaging, relatable, and thought-provoking. Both Wendy's and Betsy's stories have been influenced and shaped by the place where they farm and the communities that inhabit them yet they remained relatable to farmers in different parts of the Upper Midwest. These stories also meet the eight criteria that Leavy proposes to evaluate narratives: they create a virtual reality the reader can join; they promote empathy; they are structurally coherent; they offer some ambiguity; they contribute substantively to the dissemination of knowledge particularly as it relates to farmers' lived experiences; they are aesthetically pleasing; they have their own personal signature; and they appropriately address their audience.[435]

Additionally, the process of brainstorming a story, writing it, and editing it has encouraged a lot of reflection for me as a researcher, for the farmers individually, regarding our shared relationship, but also among the focus group of farmers as they were discussing their stories and how they related to each other. The process allowed us to recognize the value of each other's contribution and added to the respect and trust with had for each other. As we were wrapping up, I can confidently say that relationship had evolved from that of a researcher and a farmer to a real collaboration and even friendship. I therefore argue that this process has the potential to

[435] Leavy, *Fiction as Research Practice*.

deeply change the relationship between the farmers and researchers that implement it and encourage researchers involved in participatory research with farmers to consider how they can learn from this work and make their approach more transformative.

Additionally, I argue that the connection that bounded all three farmers after reading each other's stories is one of the most important outcomes of this process. While originally strangers, reading each other's narratives allowed them to relate and build a relationship much faster than I would have expected.[436] While they were all able to relate to the topics at the heart of each story, I argue that the emotions and genuineness that transpired from each story also fostered empathy and rapport among farmers who did not know each other and lived in different places. This process therefore provides a platform for farmers to think about their under-stories and for the emergence of narratives that can then spread through networks and across state lines. Indeed, as one of the stories developed in this study featured a member of the Woman, Food, and Agriculture Network (WFAN), they were consulted and consented to their story and name being included in the narrative. They later also expressed a lot of interest for sharing the narrative piece with the wider network.

Although all three of my co-authors said that they really enjoyed the process of developing stories in collaboration and are happy with the narratives we developed, they explained not being sure if the process would be interesting for all farmers. They acknowledged they own interest for storytelling and such creative approaches and questioned whether other farmers would relate to them as much.

[436] I have attended a few farming conferences and workshop and the first few minutes where we are asked to connect around a topic are always incredibly awkward.

Final Interview with Wendy - 3/17/2021

"There might be some [farmers] that are just completely turned off by this [approach] and [think] it's not real science or a real study, you know. So, I don't think it's for everybody, but I think it's for a number of farmers. […]

You just happened to find a person that loves dreaming and loves to read stories and think about storytelling as a real soft approach. Um, I don't know if I'm out of the ordinary or not, if there is a lot of other people that are like me.

Soon after sharing that thought with me however, Wendy got the opportunity to meet with Betsy and Bonnie who shared her appreciation for storytelling.

Additionally, as organizations working with farmers such as WFAN turn their attention to the importance of storytelling and encourage their members to work on sharing their story, I argue that this process of co-authoring narratives is even adapted to working with farmers who might not see themselves as writers. These organizations and networks regularly provide opportunities for farmers to workshop their own stories but attending these events requires the farmers to be available and to identify as writers and storytellers. While we were working on this project, WFAN for example organized a storytelling workshop to help farmers work on their story and help them communicate it. My co-authors received the invitation and shared it with me but decided not to attend. The workshop was well attended so Wendy can be reassured that there are other farmers interested in storytelling out there; she is not alone. However, these workshops are clearly geared towards farmers who already consider themselves as writers and might not be adapted to farmers like Betsy who are storytellers but not writers.

I therefore argue that an approach like the one tested in this study, that accommodates farmers schedules, focused on the goal of making under-stories emerge out of the shadow of

over-stories, and that doesn't entirely require of the farmers that they write on their own might make the process of writing a story more accessible. In addition, I argue that the relationship built through the process and the commitment I showed to my co-authors made it easier for them to make time for this research over time, particularly as their own workload increased at the beginning of the season.

Dialogue of solidarities

My co-authors' willingness to spend time working with me as their schedules were getting busier and busier is perhaps an illustration of Bell's dialogue of solidarities that I presented in the introduction and used throughout this dissertation.[437] Indeed, using this concept can reveal how this collaboration was made successful by both a solidarity of interest and a solidarity of sentiment in constant dialogue.

As I invited Bonnie, Wendy, and Betsy to join this research study, I shared with them my interest in storytelling and collaborating on the creation of a narrative. As we all understood how this process could benefit us, we shared a solidarity of interest. To try and convince them further, I reminded them of our pre-existing relationship and the bond we had established. Here, a combination of a solidarity of interest and sentiments can explain their decision to join the study.

During the first interview, both Bonnie and Wendy asked me to further discuss the goals of this study. In doing so, they perhaps meant to check that we still shared a solidarity of interest. Additionally, the preinterview allowed us to catch up and to develop our relationship and our solidarity of sentiments further. As we were discussing the stories we had heard and shared ideas for our own story in a very open and genuine manner, this first conversation allowed for a dialogue of solidarities that helped us gain trust in each other and the process.

[437] Bell, "The Dialogue of Solidarities."

Later, my sharing of the draft for our story quickly after our first conversation showed them how committed I was to the process and how much I cared about doing justice to their stories. I also reminded them about how much I valued their feedback and their opinion. In doing so, I showed a solidarity of both interest and sentiment. I argue that the renewed enthusiasm I perceived from all three of them afterwards is a direct response to the trust these solidarities had helped build. Throughout the whole process of editing and the rest of our exchanges around this process, we continued to build trust and to strengthen our relationship through a dialogue of solidarities.

Power relations and vulnerability

As I discuss the back and forth that strengthened our relationship, it is also important for me to discuss how the growth of these relationships unveiled underlying power relations I might not have initially recognized.

Indeed, one of the things that I attempted to do with this project is bring back balance to the researcher-farmer relationship. It was my understanding that the relationship between researchers and farmers is a complicated one often lacking trust and where power relations are imbalanced.[438] In giving farmers the co-author status and control over the story to be told, I hoped to help readjust this relationship. Doing so required for me to open myself up to criticism and relinquish some of the control that researchers usually hold over the research process. Additionally, I came into this project with an idea that it still needed developing and that I would strongly benefit from the input and feedback from the farmers I would work with, not only as co-authors of narrative pieces but also as co-creators of a new approach to interviews and

[438] Lyon et al., "Maculate Conceptions."

collaboration. As a result, I already felt somewhat vulnerable when approaching my potential co-authors with this idea.

I don't think I was fully aware of the vulnerability that would be required of me, but I believe that I still chose my initial participants with some unconscious understanding of what it would take to do this work and an idea of what would make it successful. As a young woman in academia, I have often experienced the strong feelings of inadequacy that come with impostor syndrome but never as strongly as when I conducted my first interviews. Between my lack of experience, my growing but limited knowledge of agricultural practices, and my lingering accent, I was pretty nervous as I conducted my first set of interviews. It didn't help that I had to drive to places I had never been to or spend hours alone in a field with men I had never met. I didn't realize it at the time, but looking back at it, I still wonder how safe it was for me to go by myself.[439] Then, as well, I had let my participants choose the location of our meeting and lead the conversation, hoping to build trust, make them feel at ease, and develop a relationship where their voice was valued. In doing so, I was already trying to keep our relationship balanced. What I did not realize though was that as much as I identified as the researcher in this researcher-farmer relationship, I rarely felt like I was the one holding power during these interviews. I was young, a woman, inexperienced, and spoke with an accent. Faced with older white men, experienced farmers, and individuals physically bigger than me, the power imbalance at play wasn't the one described by the literature on participatory research with farmers. It didn't help that I was asking them questions about their motivations putting an emphasis on the environment, community, relationships, and their personal preferences. When it comes to our

[439] Arendell (1997) discusses the risks that women put themselves into for their research. Risks that most of their male counterparts rarely experience or worry about. Reading this piece after conducting a series of interviews mostly with men opened my eyes to the risk I had taken as part of my research.

societal understanding of power and topics worth discussing, I can't help but think that I had only pulled out weak cards. All of the farmers I talked to during my first ever round of interviews were perfectly respectful and I never worried about my safety, but I clearly felt a shift in my levels of confidence as I conducted my second round of interviews, this time only with women. Maybe it was simply that I had gained experience and felt more confident when conducting interviews but with these participants, the relationship felt a lot more balanced.

I chose to invite Bonnie, Wendy, and Betsy to this research because I believed they would appreciate the approach and had interesting stories to share. But it's obvious to me now that I also invited to this study people with whom I felt comfortable getting vulnerable.

Probably like many researchers who discuss the potential biases in their sampling methods, I am a little uneasy with this realization. I don't believe however that it makes the results of this research any less valid. Instead, it sheds light on how challenging it can be for the participants – farmers and researchers alike – to be vulnerable around each other and how pre-existing power imbalances will be made visible and will need to be addressed. It's not to say that this methodology shouldn't be employed when strong power imbalance is at play, quite the opposite. Hernandez et al. indeed explain that the multivocality of a participatory piece can help overcome hierarchies.[440] This process, if adopted with a strong commitment to collaboration, deep introspection, and awareness of existing power struggles, has the potential to really promote learning and growth in individuals while strengthening bonds. You just have to be ready to be challenged.

[440] Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez, Heewon Chang, and Faith W. Ngunjiri, "Collaborative Autoethnography as Multivocal, Relational, and Democratic Research: Opportunities, Challenges, and Aspirations," *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32, no. 2 (May 4, 2017): 251–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2017.1288892.

I intended for this work to participate in improving the communication between researchers and farmers but through the process I realized that good communication isn't just about language. The reason why farmers and researchers talk about practices in different way is perhaps because they have had very different experiences of the topics. Working together closely on a project that actively seeks to put these ideas into words therefore provides an opportunity to share our visions and find common ground.

V. Conclusion

With this study, I set out to design and test a methodological process for co-authoring narratives with farmers. I aimed to support farmers in uncovering their under-stories and hoped that the process would foster reflection for both of us. I also hoped that it could help improve trust and communication between farmers and researchers. I argue that the process did what it set out to do and that the narratives that were produced are relatable and highly effective at connecting farmers. In doing so, they allow farmers to relate to one another and open the door for meaningful conversations that challenge the over-stories of agriculture.

The stories that were produced as well as the conversations they spurred later also illustrated these farmers' desire to connect, relate, and support each other. Despite the individualist narrative that many over-stories of farming support, farmers seek to connect. While writing stories and sharing them is important to the emergence of new narratives and movements, giving farmers the opportunity to connect with each other past the writing process is as important. Here, stories are ice-breakers and stimulate reflection, but real change comes from the connections that are built through stories and the implementation of these narratives.

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Appendices

1. Gantt chart

	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20	Jan-21	Feb-21	Mar-21	Apr-21	May-21
First interview Bonnie									
Narrative workshop Bonnie									
Evaluation interview Bonnie									
First interview Wendy									
Narrative workshop Wendy									
Evaluation interview Wendy									
First interview Betsy									
Narrative workshop Betsy									
Evaluation interview Betsy									

2. Suggested interview script for Phase 1

Part I - set up the context for your story and asks a couple of questions about your perception of the current agricultural system.

Part II - your story and its key elements. With this information, we will determine the content of the narrative piece to craft.

Part III - our audience and what you hope they will get out of it.

Part IV - reflection on the stories of others that you might have heard and that are similar to yours. This reflection will shine lights on elements of the story that need to be emphasized or reimagined.

Part V tries to identify some of the literary tools to employ.

I. The context

What is the main story told about the agricultural system, what issues do you see with it, and what do you wish people knew?

II. Your story

1. What story do you want to tell? What is it about? (imagine that you only have 5 minutes)
2. Why does it matter to you that this story is shared?
3. How does this story address the issues you identified with the system?

III. Your audience

1. Who do you believe needs to read your story and why?
2. What do you want your readers to remember from your story? What do you want them to learn from it?
3. How do you want your reader to feel after reading this story?

4. What action would you like them to take after reading your story?

IV. Composing stories (think of other people who have had similar experiences)

1. Are you aware of people who have had similar experiences? If so, what was similar? What was different?
2. How do you think we could use what their story teaches us to strengthen our story and the argument?

V. Literary tools

1. Who do you imagine narrating this story? What is the narrative tense?
2. Are there metaphors or analogy you have found useful when sharing your story?
3. What emotions and feelings are we trying to share with the reader?

3. Suggested questions for the individual evaluation interview

Phase 1

- What did you think of the idea when I first described it to you?
- How did you feel about the way our first brainstorming conversation was organized? Did we get to all of the important elements?
- How does your experience working on the co-authoring process compare to other research projects you might have been involved in?
- What would you suggest to improve this process?

Phase 2

- I developed the first draft of our story; did you find this helpful? Do you feel like I captured the essence of our conversation?
- How was the process of editing the text? Did you feel comfortable doing it?
- What would you suggest to improve the process of co-authoring this piece?
- Was the written format the best? What else would you suggest?

The Story

- What do you think of the story we developed together?
- Do you think our original target audience will find it helpful?
- Do you feel like the final story is a good representation of the conversation we had?
- Since we developed this story together, has there been time where it has come to mind for you/where you found it relevant?
- How has the process of thinking about and crafting this piece helped you understand your own experience? What have you learned about yourself or your farm in the process?

- The story we wrote together is about xxx, how do you feel about xxx a few weeks after writing about it?
- Would you recommend the process to others? Would you consider writing another story of that nature in the future, whether by yourself or with help?
- How has this virtual experience been for you?

4. Final narrative – Bonnie and Barbara

"Well, look at you," I say, as I join her by the beehives. "All pro and everything."

She giggles, nervously. In her bee-suit, she looks like an astronaut. I can't see her face, but I can feel her sense of accomplishment radiating.

I've known Barb for two years, but she has only been keeping beehives on my land for a couple of months. She told me last winter that she was taking bee classes and I was delighted when she asked if she could set hers on my farm. It felt like the perfect way to give back for all her help and to pay it forward, too. Without folks helping me along the way, I would never have made my way to farming.

"Yeah, I feel like I'm starting to know what I'm doing a little better," she says, as she finishes easing in the last frame. "The numbers are looking good and they're building comb!" For a moment she is silent, analyzing the hive. "It's like everything," she continues, gently replacing the cover, "there's definitely a learning curve, but I feel like I'm getting there. I'm just always scared to death I'm going to squish the queen!"

I laugh. "When you're learning to farm, everything has a steep learning curve." Barb is modest but determined. She is smart and she understands the value of accessing resources. But like many women, she needs to feel that she can learn—and take risks—in a safe space.

Barb is notorious for the phrase, "This may sound like a stupid question, but…". The thing is, there really are no stupid questions, especially when it comes to farming. I have always encouraged her to ask, and she has never hesitated. It's much better to be clear than potentially make a very expensive, or even dangerous, mistake. Farming has always been about learning from each other. Every farmer in history has learned their craft from another

farmer. If you're lucky, you're born into a farming family, in which your parents, grandparents, or some other family member passes on the wealth of knowledge, resources, and sometimes even land.

If you are like me—with hardly a gardener in the family, and no material or financial resources—you must seek out experienced farmers to teach you. I was lucky to have a lovely farm mentor, who supplied me with not just growing knowledge, but with a foundation of educational resources that extended my learning once I went back out into the world on my own. Denise made sure that I knew about—and had access to—a plethora of resources, conferences, books, farm tours, college extension workshops, webinars, field days, and so much more. The sources of knowledge are infinite. Whatever your question might be, someone out there has the answer... you just need to be willing to ask.

"You know, it's never really been a thing I thought I could do," Barb says, turning her gaze to the land around us. Wind is gently rustling in the leaves of the trees that border the field. "Farming, I mean. If you can call what I do farming."

I definitely do.

"Do you know bees are considered livestock?" she exclaims, as we walk back to the house.

"So… you're running a bee ranch?"

We both chuckle. I am now learning from her and it makes me smile.

"Maybe someday I'll have a homestead of my own, but for now, I'm just really happy that I can be involved, even in small ways. I know how hard it is for farmers, and I want to contribute to the cause; to be part of something good."

We've made it back to the driveway. Barb sheds her bee jacket and begins to reload her equipment into the car.

"I've always wanted to be part of the farming community. I don't really know how to explain it. Maybe it's the lifestyle. I just never really felt like I would belong. I mean, I didn't grow up on a farm. I've always loved talking to farmers at the Farmers' Market, but I didn't really know much about their work. I just knew it was important. I wasn't really sure how to help though, besides buying from them. And I know I'm not the only one. A lot of people want to help, they just don't know how."

"Yeah, and us farmers aren't always good at asking for help. Take it from someone who asks for help all the time."

She laughs, but I'm serious. I run my farm mostly by myself. There are just too many things on a farm that require more than one individual. I ask for help often, because I need it, but I don't like doing it. It makes me feel inadequate, even though I know how silly of a notion that is. After six years I still don't ask for as much help as I should.

"I do see what you mean," I continue. "Which is why it's so important to strengthen connections between those who want to learn and those who need help." For me, this was a huge take-away from working with Denise. Denise has been organic farming—and advocating for organic farming—in Iowa for over 40 years, a state that leads the country in conventional agriculture. She founded the Women Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN), which offers business resources and mentorship to women farmers in Iowa and Nebraska. She has run for political office twice (and almost won!). She's nearly 70-years-old, yet never seems to tire of mining the right kinds of resources—those that put many more sustainable farmers on the land, including sparing personal time within her own busy

schedule. She also started the women farmer's retreat, where Barb and I (and many others) met.

Mentoring with Denise through WFAN was an invaluable gift. What started as, from my perspective, a 10-week crash course in farming became a long-term mentorship and friendship. She didn't just teach me how to start seedlings and lay drip irrigation, she taught me how to look in the right places to find legal and financial support and how to connect with the community. Not only did she share her knowledge and network with me, she taught me the power of collaboration. While working as a mentee on her farm, we visited many other farms, mostly women-run, and it was always to help others and learn from them. We helped plant garlic with friends while their babies played in the dirt. We helped plastic a high-tunnel (the modern version of a barn-raising) with neighbors from all over the county and feasted afterward. We ran out of poultry feed, and called upon a neighbor friend who sold us some grain. We stayed a while and she talked passionately about her niche market selling Aronia berry products, while I helped her fasten labels on jam jars. These experiences really shaped how I approached my farm goals, and how I share this work with others.

Supporting other farmers in the area—particularly women and beginning farmers—felt right to me, but I don't think that's what most people are taught. We have this idea in America that farmers should do it all on their own. I don't think any of us really want to be alone like that, nor can we be, but that's the narrative we are accustomed to. The problem though, is that as small sustainable farmers, we're really vulnerable when we're on our own. And it gets harder and harder to compete with the huge conventional farms and real estate giants that consolidate the land and work on subsidies. Small sustainable farms cannot

possibly compete with the big ag corporations. When it comes to producing conventional pork for example, they're big, they're loud and their voices influence policies that benefit them, negatively impacting small, sustainable producers, as well as the mostly poor rural citizens who didn't ask for their neighborhoods to be compromised by air and water pollution.

People like Denise, who strive to strengthen the bonds among small farmers, and connect them with people who share their values and believe in their practices... these are the people who really make a difference. Sometimes, it's through big actions, like campaigning or bringing hundreds of sustainable farmers and local eaters together; sometimes it's through small connections. Sometimes it's both.

"I'm so glad I met you at that gathering," Barb says with a smile, echoing my thoughts.

"Yeah, I'm really glad too," I reply.

Barb and I connected at a women farmers retreat (which Denise insisted I attend and even sponsored my trip) and we became fast friends. It was an enlightening weekend. Annually organized with intent, the purpose is to network, share, and inspire one another. It brings together people from different regions and areas of focus, some being women farmers or ranchers, some simply supporters of farm women. That was two years ago now. Denise officially only mentored me on her farm for a couple of months, but in reality, the relationship we built through this mentorship opportunity still remains strong, six years into my farming career.

Now, I became a sort of mentor to Barb. After our first encounter, she expressed a great deal of interest in visiting me on the farm. The more time she spent on the land, the more she wanted to learn, and the more she wanted to be involved. Whether it was with weeding

or planting, she always helped joyfully and enthusiastically. She felt like it wasn't much, but it made a big difference for me. I loved sharing my passion with someone, and together we got a lot of work done. As she was assisting me on the farm, I tried to share with her all I knew. This felt like a fair exchange to me. It didn't seem like much at first, but I guess it did make an impact, because after some time, Barb asked me if she could establish beehives on my farm and come maintain them regularly. I offered space and to help her set them up but wanted to give her space for her own endeavor. I didn't know much about beekeeping back then, but now she definitely knows more about it than I do. The mentorship relationship we developed isn't as formal as the one Denise and I share, but it's made an impact nonetheless. It's provided opportunities for both of us, which I think is the most important thing.

There is something special about being able to pay it forward. I was lucky to benefit from Denise's knowledge, experience, and network, and now I feel like I can do the same for Barb and so many others. I'm still learning, of course, but who isn't? If my advice and access to my land can help others get started, then everyone wins.

"I really appreciate you," she says with a smile. "Thanks for allowing me to come here and share in your sanctuary. I love coming to this beautiful place and getting my "bee" therapy."

My heart feels full. "You can't even know how much joy this brings me. Your help has been invaluable, and I am very happy to share the magic of this place with you. And look! You've become a beekeeper!"

As she prepares to make the drive back to the city, I start hauling crates of flower arrangements to her car. Yes, everybody wins. I sell my cut flowers in the city, an hour and a half away, which is a huge time-suck for me. But Barb lives and works in the city, so

when she comes to maintain hives, she in turn delivers my flowers to the metro for me. She certainly doesn't have to. I would have agreed to the beehives anyway, but we both want to support each other as much as we can. And for that I'm incredibly grateful.

It's never been about the fact that I don't have to drive a three-hour round trip to deliver my flowers, or the amount of labor I save. Knowing I'm not in this alone makes a huge difference. Her support means more to me than I think she realizes. With her in the picture, I'm not as afraid of what could happen. I know I'm not alone. Through the relationships that we develop—with Denise, with Barb, and all the other farmers and community members we exchange services with—a strong support system is built. I can't help but feel hopeful.

I genuinely wish more people knew how much their support matters to us small farmers. It's easy to feel alone. We're drowning in work and undervalued by society, despite the infinitely hard work we do to feed people and protect the land. Every day being stepped on by big ag and buried under corporate policies that do not benefit us. So when people like Barb do something as simple as sign up for a CSA share, offer to come and help on the farm even for a day, or tell us they will vote for policies that support us... we don't feel so alone and we feel empowered to keep trying to be the good in the world.

5. Final narrative – Wendy and Barbara

I walk around examining the fence. Last time we had a storm like this, it tore down a significant part of the fence and we almost lost a couple of animals. Inside, the ducks start coming out of their coop. They seem to be doing fine and they don't mind the mud. I wiggle one of the posts to test it, but everything seems to be in order.

In the dark sky, I can see the clouds moving fast. The wind isn't as strong as it was a couple of hours ago but it's still ruffling the leaves of the young trees in the fields. They're resilient and flexible, they will be ok. A few hundred yards away, I can see Willa opening the door to one of the chicken coops. I'm glad she's here. On days like this, it's really nice to know I'm not alone on the farm.

Willa has been around for a little while, but I hope she'll stay for good and take on her own farm enterprise. We work well together. Partnerships can sometimes be difficult, but we've gotten to know each other quite well and I'd like her to make her way and call the farm home. I suggested for her to take on the chickens, but she is a little hesitant. I know she wants to farm; it's just a big leap to take. I also know that she really wants to grow herbs so I told her she could use a piece of the land to grow a garden and her business. She still needs time to decide and think things through.

I, on the other hand, can already see it. I close my eyes and it's right there in front of me.

Under the canopy of the trees planted at the edge of the property, she has set up dozens of rows of aromatic and medicinal plants. Chamomile, lemon balm, oregano, rosemary, thyme, valerian… Here, she grows everything you can think of. A little further, she has inoculated logs and will be harvesting her first mushrooms. All around, the trees have grown a lot. We

planted a thousand every year and now they are everywhere. In the riparian buffer, in alleys within annual cropping fields, along field borders and edges. It was hard work, that's for sure, but to say that it has paid off is an understatement. I remember when the hard winter winds would rush through the fields without any obstacle to slow them down, taking with them the neighbor's uncovered soil and eroding it miles after miles. Now, the trees are here to stop it from going too far and the strong northwest winter winds are slowed to a murmur. All throughout the nearby 130 acres where we live, they have taken root and completely changed the landscape. Where you used to be able to see out for miles, your eyes now cannot help but catch on the trees. The flatness of the land has been replaced by a relief of brightly colored leaves.

And if the lushness and the diversity of the landscape hasn't yet grabbed your attention, the sound of the land soon will. To the north, the creek is gurgling loudly. We planted trees and bushes all around the water feature, building a riparian forest buffer to improve water quality and protect the banks from erosion. The result exceeded our expectations, and the water is now brimming with fish and little toads. It feels like this area of the farm has taken a life of its own. Birds and other wildlife have made it their home, enjoying the berry bushes and the fresh water source. Their songs and other happy sounds are now a staple of the farm.

Sometimes, it almost sounds like they're competing with the grassland birds for the loudest on the land. No one is complaining though. There is something truly hypnotizing about the high-pitched songs of the warblers and the meadowlarks. The robotic sound of bobolinks always makes me smile and wonder what it is they're saying. On good days, you can even hear the call of the dickcissels or see pheasants walk across the prairie, wetlands, and buffers. We knew that seeding prairies would provide habitats for these species that had

been driven away by decades of monocropping, we just had no idea how many would end up calling our farm home. I guess they were right: if you build it, they will come.

The birds are not the only ones roaming the land, however. Farm partner, Luis, who manages the cattle herd and sheep flock, is moving them to new paddocks. There the cattle are grazing peacefully, enjoying a new section of the land every day and relishing on the diversity of the forage we have seeded while cooling down under the shade of oak trees. In the orchard, the harvest has ended and the pigs now get to eat the last of the fruits as they reach the ground. In the areas of the farm where the trees are still rather young, the chickens and ducks are gorging themselves on the bugs, slugs, and other insects.

It makes me happy to see animals on the land. That's how it's supposed to be, a full-circle agroecological approach to growing food. Or at least that's how things were here before the settlers came. A couple of hundred years and a genocide later, the land looks nothing like what it used to. All around us, fields of corn and soybeans stretch as far as the eye can see. For people driving on the highway, our farm stands out as an oasis of life and diversity in the middle of this unhealthy monotony of cash crops. Often, drivers slow down to look and consider what a different Iowa may look like on a large scale. We don't use a lot of machinery here. For us farming is about community and centered around people. It's hard work but people are staying healthy while doing it. We definitely don't need gym memberships.

I'm proud to say that the time when this land only sustained one type of plant and one family is long gone. The farm now hosts a diversity of food crops, animals, and people. The buzzing of the pollinators in the prairie is echoed by the buzzing of ideas around the meeting table. Everyone involved in the farm has the land's best interest at heart and recognizes the

importance of working as a community. It's not always easy working with so many people and personalities, but we all enter these relationships with kindness and compassion and with a desire to regenerate the land that sustains us. We share values, goals, and fond memories of working together.

I've gotten to know them all quite well. They've all shared their stories with me and told me about their dreams. For one, it was a dream of coming back to the Midwest after spending time living on the West Coast. Another dreamed of grazing cattle on cover crops and to help save the planet rather than endanger it. For others, it was a dream to farm on the land that had been forcefully taken from their indigenous ancestors. One was looking for opportunities to farm with others and another, for the opportunity to farm in the U.S. No matter what they hope to do, I try to encourage them and help them develop their enterprises and their own path. As a result, the farming practices on the land are just as diverse as the people implementing them. And no matter our past, our identity, or our level of farming experience, we all share the same goal of farming with nature and to regenerate the land to feed our community. And we know that collaboration is our strength.

All the people now working on the farm call this place home. My family's roots are deep on this land and many generations have worked this soil. Decade after decade, it has fed and sustained us. I knew it could sustain more than just our family, though. The many farmsteads still standing proud on the land we steward are proof that these 450 acres had been home to more than just one family in the past. Making them available to Willa and my other partners on the farms simply made sense. Just like the warblers and bobolinks in the prairies, my collaborators needed to feel at home on the land to fully express their love for it. For most of them, we just made the land available and they built their own nests, but a couple of times,

we established houses in advance hoping that the right people would come and call them home. It had worked for the birds so why wouldn't it for the people?

And we didn't stop there. We built high tunnels and the ability to grow garlic convinced Rainbow and Jonah to leave the city and establish their own roots on our land. We set up water lines and soon our community grew even more. The Michaels now grow vegetables that they sell in CSA shares and, after a couple of seasons, Willa partnered with them and added herbs to their baskets. The diversity of these boxes only reflects the diversity of the food grown on the farm. Grains, vegetables, fruits, nuts, herbs, mushrooms, meat… this land produces it all.

With all this food growing on the farm, it only made sense to open a restaurant where all these ingredients could be brought together into a delicious meal. Every morning, as the kitchen gets ready to welcome our guests, the delightful smell of Brazilian barbecue fills the air. All the food we cook has been grown right here or supplied by like-minded farmers nearby. I'm convinced the food tastes different because of it. There is something about the soil, the community, the respect for the land, that makes it special. And it's all enhanced and perfected by the use of traditional recipes passed down to us by the Brazilian grandmother after whom the restaurant is named. People come over from all around to taste our food and many only leave after hours of wandering the grounds, enchanted by how our vision for the land has transformed the place.

We also helped open a general store in our small town. A significant part of our community spent years buying their goods from dollar stores, but our farm collaborated with some other local food and artisan pioneers to bring all of our goods together to supply for our hungry community. Our community members know that buying locally not only helps the

farmers but also helps the rest of the town and we found that our small town can support locally produced foods and goods. It is resilience in the making!

I blink and it all disappears. The cold wind blowing across the land brings me back to the present. I take a deep breath in and I exhale with a smile. There is still a lot of work to be done for my dream to become reality, but the goal is clearer than ever before. It will take time, I know it, but we're already on our way. The young trees we planted are our benchmark. They are proof of our starting point, our place of change. Their growth over the next decade will guide our transformation and by the time the trees fruit, we will be well on our way to achieving this vision. I am so grateful for this journey and this awakening. It's up to us to plant seeds to create the future we want to be a part of.

6. Final narrative – Betsy and Barbara

"This one!" said the little boy, pointing at a yellow bar of soap with flower petals incrusted.

"Yeah?" asked his father. He picked up the soap and carried it to his nose.

"Yes! It's got flowers, and Mommy loves flowers."

"Then it's perfect."

The man didn't know much about soaps but this one smelled good and his son had picked it, it couldn't be a bad choice.

All around the store, tables were covered with homemade soap of all shapes and sizes. Piled like they were, they could have looked like fresh baked cookies on a tray. Elegant bottles lined up the shelves on either side of the room, their creative names handwritten on colorful labels. In one corner of the room, enormous glass jars containing liquid soap, shampoo, and lotion invited customers to think about the environment and refill their own containers rather than purchase new ones.

The man headed towards the register and handed the soap to the woman behind the counter. She was removing wilted leaves from a beautiful bouquet of purple and white flowers next to her.

"Very good choice," she said with a smile as she looked at the product they had chosen. "Do you know it's made with goat milk?" she asked the boy.

"I love goats!" he exclaimed joyously. "I got to pet one at the zoo once. And it ate popcorn out of my hand." He pulled out his hand flat in front of him, miming the act of feeding the animal.

"That's awesome," the lady responded. "Well, I raise goats myself and use their milk to make soap like this one. See?" She grabbed a little flier with pictures of goats on it from the side of the counter and handed it to the boy. "Is it a gift?" she finally asked the man before reaching for the wrapping paper.

"Yes, Lucas and I are shopping for Mothers' Day." He nodded towards his son.

"Ooh!" she exclaimed, while her hands folded the paper expertly around the block of soap. "Well, I'm sure your mom will love this. What else are you getting her?"

"Tea," little Lucas said. "Mommy drinks tea all the time! And flowers. Moms love flowers."

"They sure do." She smiled at him. "Well if you're looking for some really great tea, my friend Alice has a store just two blocks from here, at the corner of Main Street and First. It's the best around here. So good, I even use it in my soaps. And for bouquets, I'd recommend stopping by my friend Lucy's farm. She grows beautiful flowers. She made this one herself and also provided the flowers and herbs in the soap you just bought." She gestured towards the bouquet next to her.

"Thanks, but we'll probably just stop by the florist."

The father and son finished paying for their order and headed out the door. Hand in hand, they made their way to the tea store. The sun was shining bright and the little town was buzzing with life. People were enjoying the nice day after spending the whole winter inside. Lucas and his family lived just outside of town, in a little suburban neighborhood. They usually did their shopping at the mall west of here but today Lucas's dad had decided they would make a day of it and stop for lunch in town and shop around for their Mothers' Day gifts.

Lucas jumped over one more crack in the pavement before his father announced that they had arrived to their next destination.

They pushed the door to the small business and the bell jingled to announce their arrival. The many smells of tea and flowers reached them immediately. The mix of earthy and sweet scents put a smile on the little boy's face and he ran forward to open one of the jars. The long back wall was filled with silver tins containing loose leaf tea from white, green, black and herbal blends while a collection of handcrafted tea sets and cups sat by the large windows on the other side of the room. Tea farms as far away as China and Taiwan and even South Africa and Egypt were represented here.

Behind the register stood a young woman and next to her was another of the beautiful white and purple flower bouquets.

"Hi there," she said with a large smile. "Welcome to Alice's tea store. I'm Alice. Can I help you find something?"

"We're looking for tea for my mommy. She loves tea!" said Lucas who had already started smelling the teas. He put the lid back on a jar and opened the one next to it excitedly. He brought his face down to smell it and quickly backed up, a disgusted look on his face. He put the lid back on slowly and continued his exploration more cautiously.

With a laugh, the young woman came out from behind the counter and joined him. She took him around the store, asking questions about the types of tea his mom drank and suggesting ones he might like. Lucas's father followed suit, diligently smelling every tea his son told him to try.

After a while, they had picked out two they liked and headed towards the cashier.

"Daddy, we can't forget the flowers!" Lucas exclaimed, pointing at the bouquet on the counter.

"Don't worry, buddy, we won't," he reassured him.

"Actually, if you're looking for flowers," the woman said, "you should visit my friend Lucy's farm. She grew these flowers herself. We even have a deal for Mothers' Days. If you buy two bags of tea from my store, you get a 20% discount on one of her bouquets."

The man took another look at the flowers beside him.

"I've never seen some of these flowers," he admitted.

"That's because florists usually don't sell these. They are very fragile and don't handle the journey very well. But Lucy grows them locally so that's not an issue for her. That makes her bouquets quite unique."

"20% you say? And are these the same flowers we saw at the bath and body store?"

"Yes, they are!" she said with a satisfied smile. "Lucy grows flowers and makes bouquets that Katie and I expose in our stores. It's part of a partnership that we developed between business owners and farmers in the area. The local realtor also uses Lucy's flowers to decorate the houses he shows. In exchange, she got my tea included in a CSA box that the farmers in the area have put together. I also carry some handmade ceramic tea sets made by another local artisan. And Katie, who you have already met at the natural soap store, uses Lucy's flowers and my tea in her soaps. Her husband also sells goat cheese as part of the same CSA box."

"Wow, that's a pretty significant network you've got there."

"It is," she said proudly. "Lucy and I partnered a couple of years ago and worked to include as many other businesses as possible over the years. We all want the same thing: for

people to come by our town and visit our stores. So why not partner to support each other and encourage our customers to go check out all that our town has to offer?"

"That's a really cool idea. Where did you say her farm was located? Maybe we can get one of these pretty bouquets for Mom," he suggested to his son.

"Yes!" the little boy exclaimed.

"You can even make it yourself," the woman said as she entered their order in the system. "She has this cool flower bar where you can pick which flowers you like and she teaches you how to make a bouquet. Here" -she passed him a pamphlet- "there is a map on the back. But it's really close, probably 10 minutes from here. You should check it out."

Lucas carefully took the handle of the bag she handed him and they made their way out of the store, excited about the opportunity to drive through the countryside and see a real farm.

It was a beautiful drive. The road to the farm weaved around hills of lush grass and tall trees. Nothing like driving on the highway. Enormous red barn stood proudly against the dark green vegetation. On the side of the road, cows were grazing happily.

"Donkeys!" Lucas exclaimed as they slowed down to turn on a dirt road. A sign indicated that Viewpoint Farm was located up the hill. They drove through a stretch of forest, the little boy pointing at every bunny and bird he could see. Although Lucas's family house had a large backyard, it looked more like a patch of grass than a forest and the father was glad for his decision to take his son on a little adventure.

After a couple of minutes, they reached the end of the road and parked their car next to a house. Against the wall, a sign welcomed them to the farm. On the horizon stood large

white tunnels under which thousands of flowers were slowly growing and the hill behind the house was lined with vines, their leaves just beginning to uncurl.

As they got out of the car, a woman and a little girl came out from around the house, carrying baskets of pink flowers. Next to them, a black dog came running down the hill. Lucas started petting him excitedly as his father introduced himself to the woman.

"Your friend at the tea store told us we could get flower bouquets from your farm. She even gave us a coupon?"

"Yes, for sure. Let me put these down on the flower bar and I'll be with you. Actually," she said after a second, "why don't you come with us, I'll show you around."

"Pretty neat, this partnership you've developed with the business owners downtown, eh?" he commented as they started walking. "If it wasn't for them, I'm not sure Lucas and I would have driven here today."

"I know. I'm so glad you did," the farmer responded. "Alice and I have been working on connecting people like that for a while and this network has already provided us with more opportunities than we would have been able to get on our own. We carry each other's products and we encourage the customers to check out the other businesses and spend more time in town. It seems to be working, isn't it?" she asked with a smile.

He nodded with a small laugh.

"But it's not just about bringing in more customers," she continued as they were making their way towards a building on the side of the house. "There is something truly invigorating about working with other business owners, you know? Sure, our enterprises are very different, but it can be really eye-opening to discuss business practices, marketing strategies,

and even bookkeeping with a restaurant owner or a realtor. They're from completely different industries but they have a lot of great insight to share."

"It sounds like it. It also sounds like a lot of work though."

In front of them, the little girl was showing Lucas her favorite flowers and telling him about all the fruits and berries that grew on the farm. Raspberries were his favorite and he was sad to hear that they were not in season yet.

"It's a lot of work, yes, but so is everything else. And it's easier if we don't have to do it alone. In the farming community, we've started to recognize the importance of collaboration. Alice probably told you about the CSA. Well since we've all come together, we offer the most diverse CSA boxes ever sold in the area. So why not extend this collaboration to local business owners? Farmers care about the land but we also care about our community and our customers. I think we have a role to play in reinvigorating our communities as much as in feeding them or in protecting the environment."

She pushed the door open and the children rushed in. In the room, large tables were carrying baskets of flowers of all colors. Next to them lay fact sheets with information about each type of flower and what they were traditionally used for. Aprons were handed out and the work began.

After spending the afternoon at the farm, learning about Ranunculus and Anemone and many other flowers whose name they couldn't remember, father and son made their way back to the car, a beautiful purple and pink bouquet in hands. With Lucy and her daughter, they had gone out into the fields and picked flowers that Lucas had pointed out, guaranteeing his mom would love them. They had learned how to properly cut them, how to put together a good bouquet, and what to do to keep the flowers beautiful for days.

Lucas waved goodbye through the window as the car made its way back down the driveway. He had made his dad promise that they would come back soon to the farm where you could pick your own flowers. Mom’s birthday wasn’t far away after all.

Conclusion

As my time as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin comes to an end, I remember the many trips I have taken through the state and the rest of the Upper Midwest with fondness. Whether I traveled north to Minnesota for a conference or all the way to central Iowa to interview a farmer, each trip grew my understanding of perennial agriculture in the region and of the forces that shape the practices.

After visiting the Driftless Area of Wisconsin for the first time on a class field trip, I returned multiple times to ask agroforesters in the area about their motivations for the practice of agroforestry. They took me on walks around the land, showing me the trees that they had planted on keylines and told me stories that weren't commonly discussed, their under-stories. Given the opportunity to phrase their motivations in non-economic terms, their under-stories revealed the complexity of their motivations. They also suggested that the neoliberal capitalist system that supports most over-stories of agriculture limits our understanding of the motivations for the practice of agroforestry. They excitedly told me how agroforestry practices allowed them to grow crops that were suited for the land, protected the soil, and reduced their workload on the farm. In their eyes, these practices "made sense" and that made them attractive. They also told me stories of working in partnership with other agroforesters to learn about best practices and enthusiastically praised the community that had welcomed them and supported them, stating that it motivated them to continue practicing agroforestry. As I convinced them of my genuine interest for their approach to farming, they opened up to me and their under-stories revealed more personal motivations. They cared about the health of the environment and the local

communities, and they found that agroforestry provided them with opportunities to connect more spiritually with the land. They also shared with me their vision for the future of their farms and of the agricultural system as a whole. Discussing their motivations for the practice of agroforestry provided them with an opportunity to express their discontent with the common over-stories shared about agriculture and the dominant system that they reflected. Not only were they able to imagine a more just and sustainable future, but they also actively advocated for it and implemented practices on their land that they believed embodied their hopes for the future of agriculture in the Midwest.[441]

The under-stories that emerged from my conversations with agroforesters in the Driftless Area of Wisconsin illuminated the ways the dominant neoliberal capitalist framework in the US shapes our conversations, our practices, and the over-stories we share about agriculture. These conversations however also shed light on the many systems of oppression and exclusion that intersect and suggested the existence of many under-stories shaded by over-stories of agroforestry. Indeed, after hearing under-stories of agroforestry from mostly men farmers who owned their land, I grew curious of the challenges that women encountered when accessing land to implement perennial practices such as agroforestry.

The second part of my research allowed me to return to Northern Wisconsin and to explore parts of the Midwest I had never been to. With it came opportunities to learn more about perennial agricultural practices and to witness the power that networks of farmers hold. Each farmer under-story that was shared with me by the women I interviewed illustrated the impacts that supportive networks have had on women's ability to farm. Through these networks, they were able to learn about new practices, to ask for help when they needed it, and to build

[441] See Chapter 1 for the detailed results of this research.

relationships with other women farmers that shared their experiences. Importantly, the under-stories they shared with me illuminated how these networks made accessing land easier for these women, either by connecting them with sellers or helping them fund their purchases. Grateful for the support they had received when accessing land, farming every day, and as women in a men dominated industry, the women I interviewed explained wanting to give back to these networks and to support other farmers in return. Additionally, many of them told me about their desire to set up their farm in a way that would allow them to farm alongside others. From these under-stories emerged narratives of "paying it forward" and "farming collaboratively" that directly challenged the individualistic expectations of a neoliberal capitalist system and the heteropatriarchy. Through their networks, these women were not only able to offer and receive support, but they also were able to imagine, develop, and spread narratives that offered alternatives to the dominant discourse around agriculture.[442]

As I witnessed the emergence of narratives of agriculture through non-economic conversation and the use of supportive networks, I wondered how I could volunteer my skills and platform to assist farmers in communicating their under-stories and participate in the emergence of narratives of agricultures that truly represented the experiences and hopes of farmers. As a storyteller and a participatory researcher, I chose to design a process for co-authoring narrative pieces with farmers. I hoped that this approach would help farmers convey their under-stories while improving and growing the relationship between farmers and researchers. I designed this methodology to empower farmers to share their knowledge and chose to be particularly reflective as I implemented it with the help of three farmers. My co-authors and I met multiple times over the course of a few weeks to first craft an outline of our story and then workshop the

[442] See Chapter 2 for the detailed results of this research.

narrative piece itself. Through these exchanges, we learned about each other and identified stories and values we wanted to write about. The intentionality behind the design of the participatory process allowed us to build and strengthen our relationship over time and the many steps of the process made for the co-production of a story that combined our visions and shared under-stories that could inspire people. The narratives that we produced also served to foster deep reflection about my positionality and role in the research process. Additionally, these creative pieces allowed the creation of bonds between farmers who had never met before and could relate instantly after reading each other's under-stories.[443]

Throughout the three projects that I conducted for this dissertation, I paid attention to under-stories of perennial agriculture and observed how narratives emerged that challenge the over-stories and the dominant systems of power that support them. Whether they are uncovered through conversations about non-economic motivations, fostered by alternative networks, or intentionally produced through co-authorship, these under-stories can be used by the networks that support the expansion of perennial agriculture and agroforestry to spread knowledge and awareness.

I propose that many non-economic motivations exist for the practice of perennial agriculture, including a concern for the future of the agricultural system. These motivations lend themselves very well to the use of storytelling and narratives, as some of these tools can help convey the complexity of these motivations. Stories are also powerful tools of system change[444] and sharing under-stories of perennial agriculture can help raise awareness and encourage the adoption of the practices.[445]

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[443] See Chapter 3 for the detailed results of this research
[444] Saltmarshe, "Using Story to Change Systems."
[445] Orefice et al., "Silvopasture Practices and Perspectives."

Additionally, as illustrated by the results of both Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, perennial farmers value their communities and support each other in accessing knowledge and resources. This is perhaps intrinsic to the type of practices and the values they embody. Or perhaps, it is an indication that the under-stories of perennial agriculture are better shared freely. As perennial agriculture remains one of the under-stories of American farming, the perennial farmers I met are working hard to shed light on these practices and to get more people interested and involved. They share knowledge and help each other, offering their expertise in hopes that the under-story of perennial agriculture will spread and get traction.

As these farmers advocate for practices they believe in, they also question and contest the systems of power that have long shaped the narratives of agriculture and the practices they supported. The networks that organize and work to support them must keep these goals in mind as well as they evolve. The momentum that is building up around the practice of perennial agriculture is inspiring, but it also presents an opportunity for these networks to very intentionally consider the foundations on which they are built and to ensure that they promote just systems rather than the exclusionary ones that their members are challenging.[446] Settler colonial values and ideas, heteropatriarchal divisions of labor and visions of the family farm, and neoliberal valuation of land and resources are only a few of the systems of oppression that perennial networks of farmers need to work to distance themselves from.

As such, these networks can foster more just narratives and share under-stories of agriculture that are true to the Midwestern farmers and the history of collaboration among farmers in the region.[447]

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[446] Carter, "Women's Farm Organizations in the United States."
[447] Montenegro de Wit et al., "Agrarian Origins of Authoritarian Populism in the United States."

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