‘God made a farmer:’ Stewardship cosmovisions of the good farmer

by

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Abstract

In the Anthropocene, the Earth, farmers, rural communities, and eaters are suffering from the dominant, industrial form of agriculture. Because of the diverse impacts of agriculture for people and ecosystems, many have sought to better understand farmer motivations and behaviors. In the U.S. Midwest, "stewardship" has been shown to be a foundational principle of farmers' moral identities as "good farmers." However, much research tends to reflect more of an etic rather than emic understanding of stewardship, limiting our understanding of key questions about how and why farmers adopt or change perspectives and practices. Because stewardship has been shown to imply or assume a divine responsibility to care for something unowned, exploring farmer "cosmovisions" –their interconnected spiritual, natural, and social worlds–can better illuminate the heterogeneity within and between groups that may not conform normative scripts of religiosity, spirituality, or life philosophy. This project takes a process-relational approach to ethnographic interviewing to explore stewardship as a foundational principle, or value, among farmers across a diversity of farms and cosmovisions in the Great Plains of the Midwest U.S. This research identifies varied meanings of "stewardship" among three relatively distinct assemblages of principles and practices.

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Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to all of the farmers who extended hospitality to me, inviting me into their fields and homes, when I had nothing to offer in return. I am grateful to Dr. Sanderson, for allowing me to choose a thesis project of my own design, even when it meant more work for both of us.

Dedication

To Jack who inspired this project, and to Beth, who made it possible.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In the Anthropocene, the earth, farmers, rural communities, and eaters are suffering from the dominant, industrial form of agriculture (James, 2021; Stock, Carolan, and Rosin, 2015; Stock, 2021). Farmers are killing themselves at a faster rate than nearly every other occupation in the United States, 344% higher than the national suicide rate (Sussell, et al, 2023) and 544% higher than the global suicide rate (WHO, 2021). These same farmers and farmworkers are suffering from numerous acute and chronic illnesses from pesticide and fertilizer exposure including dysbiosis of gut microbiome, diabetes, obesity, cancer, cardiotoxicity, kidney disease, Parkison's Disease, autism, and reproductive/fetal harm (Galt & Asprooth, 2018). Farmers are the economic backbone of well over 400 counties across the country with their incomes (and taxes) sustaining local businesses, schools, and municipal services in those same communities (USDA ERS, 2015). As American agriculture declines, rural ecosystems become sacrifice zones (Heaberlin & Shattuck, 2023), while those left behind endure economic stagnation, resentment, and depopulation (Edelman, 2021; Wuthnow, 2019; Cramer, 2016; Johnson & Lichter, 2019). Those eating off the farm are not faring much better; 73.1% of adults and 41.5% of children are overweight, obese, or severely obese, while often simultaneously experiencing micronutrient malnutrition (NIH, March 15, 2024). At the same time, agriculture contributes nearly one quarter of all anthropogenic greenhouse gasses (Bennetzen, et al, 2016). Not only is the air being polluted, but waters as well. Across the world, wetland ecosystems on the surface and aquifers below are contaminated by industrial agricultural pollution, threatening human and ecological health (Mateo-Sagasta, et al, 2018). Agrochemicals alone have been linked to numerous acute and chronic illnesses including cancer, cardiotoxicity, obesity, diabetes, autism, dysbiosis of gut

microbiome, kidney disease, Parkinson's disease, and reproductive/fetal harm (Galt & Aprooth, 2018).

Because of the negative impacts of agriculture, many have sought to understand farmer motivations and behaviors. There is a growing realization that farmer identity is essential to understanding farmer motivations and behaviors, as well as understanding both the constraining and enabling aspects of social structure and culture (Bell, 2004; Burton, 2004; Saunders, 2016; Burton, et al, 2021; Riley and Robertson, 2022; Letourneau and Davidson, 2022). Burton (2004) found that the concept of the 'good farmer' is essential to how farmers construct and enact their identities. A significant facet of the 'good farmer' identity is morality (Burton, et al, 2021, p. 87-105). Farmers enact their morality through farming practices and are judged by others within the farming community based on a shared understanding of what it means to be a good farmer.

Despite the growing emphasis on morality in farmer decision-making, little work on the 'good farmer' has examined how farmer cosmovision intersects with and influences conceptions of the good farmer. Wright's (2021) work on *subtle agroecologies* reveals how social and physical sciences tend to exclude cosmovisions—the integrated spiritual, social and material reality that undergirds worldviews and ethics—from farming practice in research, even when they are inextricable from farmer identities. With many scholars, environmentalists, policymakers, and farmers turning to regenerative agriculture (RA) as a possible solution to the ecological, social, and economic ills of industrial agriculture, understanding the *regenerative mindset* becomes an especially relevant aspect of farmer cosmovision as it intersects with farming practice (Seymour & Connelly, 2022) .

This research draws specifically on the concept of stewardship as an entry point to analyze how farmers understand their identity as 'good farmers' in relation to their cosmovisions and farming practices. In doing so, it responds to Burton et al's (2021, pp. 79-82) call for research on the coproduction of farmer identity through moral and cultural values and farming activities among more-than-human actants, Darnhofer's (2016) call to focus on biophysical relations and relations of values, beliefs, and meaning to understand the drivers of diversity and change in farming practices over time, and Darnhofer's (2020) suggestion that new agricultural "research could highlight possibilities for other doings, emphasize diversity in farming practices, the creativity of farming emerging from the agency of humans and nonhumans involved in farming" (p. 522). In what follows, I review prior research on the 'good farmer, focusing especially on the concept of stewardship as a core feature of farming cosmovisions, and situating them within the wider sociological research on farmer identity and practice.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Stewardship(s)

In the context of American agriculture in the Midwest, a significant intersection of cosmovision and farming morality is rooted in the concept of stewardship. The majority of research on farmer stewardship reflects an etic rather than emic understanding of stewardship, limiting our understanding of how farmers perceive themselves especially in light of the cosmovisions from which a morality of stewardship emerges. Worrell and Appleby (2000) indicate that farmers often understand stewardship as an obligation to God enacted through responsible farming practice. How stewardship is defined and embodied is hotly contested due to the moral assumptions and practical consequences it carries. It is an especially interesting concept in that it has more than tripled in usage since the rise of neoliberalism, peaking out in the early 2000s, then gradually declining in usage (Google Ngram, 2019).

Figure 1. "Stewardship" Usage in Books 1960-2019 (Google Ngram, 2019)

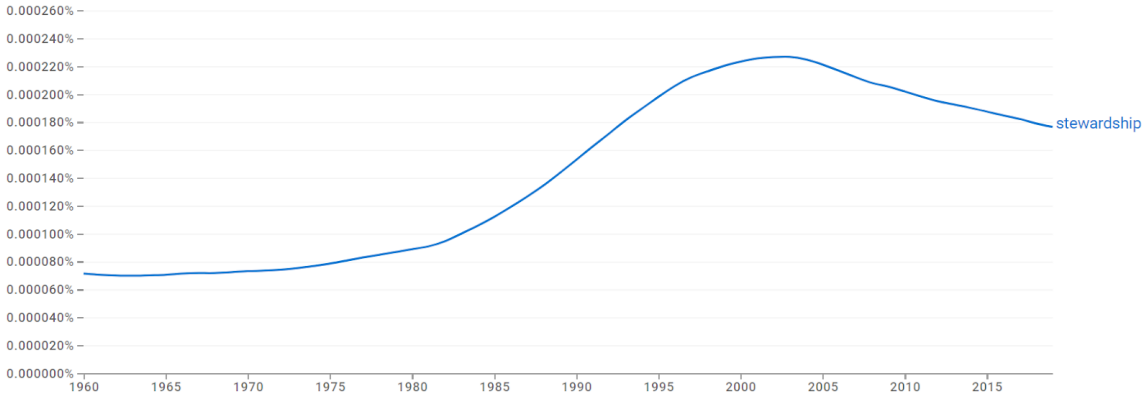


Figure 2. "Stewardship" Usage in Scholarly Articles from 1990 to 2016 (Enqvist, et al, 2018).

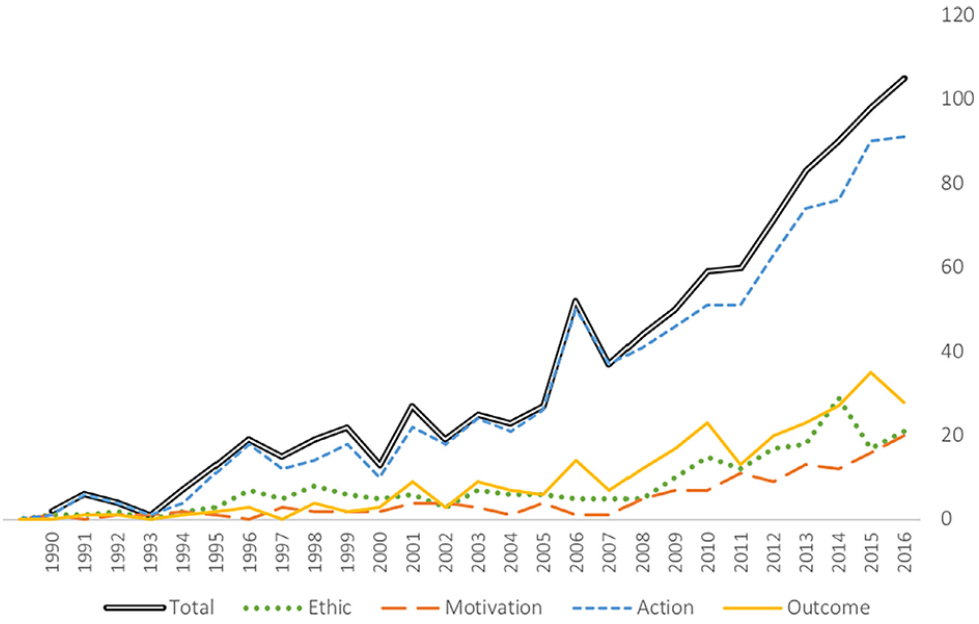


Fig. 1. Number of stewardship articles each year 1990–2016, and a breakdown of how many were coded into each of the four stewardship meanings. Some papers were coded as using more than one meaning, which means that the total number of articles any given year (double line) does not equal the sum of those for each meaning.

In academic use, stewardship took longer to rise in usage, but still remains a highly used term (Enqvist, et al, 2018). While the term is used widely by farmers and academics alike, we have employed the word for decades as concept for farmers we deem as good stewards which tells us more about the researcher's own value judgment or ethical and moral assumptions rather than exploring how farmers are defining and practicing stewardship for themselves (Enqvist, et al, 2018). Enqvist et al (2018) offers a review of how stewardship is used and defined by various groups, especially within academic literature. Brown and Mitchell (1998), Worrell and Appleby (2000), Chapin, et al (2010), and Bennett, et al (2018) offer definitions of stewardship that are implicitly or explicitly used by other researchers, resulting in a normative understanding of stewardship. For many farmers, especially in the Midwest United States, stewardship is a direct link between their cosmovisions and their farming practices, even if those differ widely in

meaning and application between farmers. West, et al (2018) suggest that stewardship can help us to understand and identify relational values of care. Despite the numerous etic descriptions of farmer stewardship, a few researchers however do expand on the emic perspectives of stewardship among farmers.

Among farmers, definitions and expressions of stewardship differ widely across persons and landscapes. Walter (1997) offers the "Steward" as an archetypal category of successful farming based on "a moral responsibility to sustain land resources" which he draws from years of articles in popular farmer magazine publications, allowing him to get closer to the perspective of actual farmers on stewardship. Thoms, et al (2019) found that though many farmers would agree on an abstract definition of stewardship, the practices of those identifying as stewards vary widely, fitting with Raymond, et al (2016) who also found multiple definitions and expressions of stewardship among farmers. This makes sense given that Lavoie and Wardropper (2021) show how a stewardship ethic can be assimilated into a larger productivist identity rather than farmers perceiving a conflict between productivism and stewardship. Reimer, et al (2012) found through qualitative research that many farmers expressed stewardship as a primary motivation, even citing their responsibility to God. VanWinkle and Friedman (2017) found a similar understanding among farmers of a divine responsibility as stewards to care for the land, which the researchers attribute to a legacy of New Deal propaganda. Thus for many farmers, especially in the Midwest United States, stewardship is a direct link between their cosmovision and their farming practices, even if those differ widely in meaning and application between farmers.

The Farmer Cosmovision(s)

In contrast to worldview, "cosmovision includes *assumed relationships between the spiritual world, the natural world, and the social world.* It describes the roles of supernatural powers, the way natural processes take place and the relationship between mankind and nature. Furthermore, the cosmovision makes explicit the philosophical and scientific premises behind the farmer's intervention in nature" (Haverkort & Heimstra, 1999, p. 15). Parks and Brekken (2018) define cosmovision as "perceptions of the world which organize [farmer] behavior" and suggest that its inclusion can better illuminate the heterogeneity within and between groups that may not conform normative scripts of religiosity, spirituality, or life philosophy (pp. 36-37). They use "cosmovision to consider the role of the natural, supernatural, and social within…farmers' worldviews, ethics, beliefs, and praxis" because understanding "the complexity of influences that shape farmer praxis through this framework informs a more holistic, nuanced view of farming activities" (Parks & Brekken, 2018, p. 36). They found that conventional farmers tended towards a mechanistic approach to farming that emphasized making a living, but also drew on a religious ethic to care for the land (ibid., p. 40-41). Among alternative farmers, they found an emphasis on the innate value of health, which depended on the interconnected health of the land, the product, and the consumer, inspired by spiritual motivations (pp. 41-42). Swiderska, et al (2022) argue that cosmovision offers a decolonial alternative to "definitions developed by western academics [that] reflect a more reductionist and positivist worldview," which limits our ability to explore interactions between farmer's beliefs and farming practices (p. 4). It also allows for a deeper examination of farming ontologies themselves which Campbell (2020) links with how the farm is perceived and acted upon. Mashingaidze (2016) defines cosmovision as "the worldview of a society that is deeply embedded in the way in which that society is organized and evolves over time" (p. 25). Dankelman (2002) defines it as "the way in

which communities understand life, the world and the cosmos; in which the relationships between the social world, the natural world, and the spiritual world are central" (p. 41). She writes that "cosmovision explains the ways in which natural processes take place and the roles played by supernatural powers" (Dankelman, 2002, p. 43). Haverkort (2021) presents cosmovision as the interactions of human, natural, and spiritual worlds which collectively form the lifeworld of the farmer; this conceptual integration allows for better explorations of the relations between farmers' beliefs and practices.

The academic community has historically marginalized alternative cosmovisions embedded in agroecological relationships, assuming sustainable farming practices can be excised from subtle agroecologies and the cosmovisions that sustain them (Graddy, 2013; Wright, 2021). The notable exception to this marginalization is the recent work examining biodynamic agriculture and indigenous knowledge in agroecology (Pigott, 2021; Rigolot & Quantin, 2022; James, et al, 2023; Toledo, 2022). Wright (2021) indicates that for many farmers,

> "agro-homeopathy, astronomy, biodynamic preparations, bio-electromagnetism, dowsing, eco alchemy, feng shui/geomancy, interspecies communication, intuition/direct knowing, love, mantras/ chanting, paramagnetism, planting calendars, prayer/intention, radionics, ritual, sacred geometry, Schumann resonances, sound/ultrasound, teacher plants/psychoactives, water dynamisation"

are significant but often overlooked aspects of the cosmovisions that determine agricultural praxis (p. 15). In James, et al's (2023) metanarrative analysis of agroecology, they find spiritual well-being to be a "crucial dimension of agroecological actors" (p. 1443). Toledo (2022) found spirituality within the ontological dimension to be omitted by researchers of agroecology, who

tended to focus on farming knowledge and practice. Contributions to religious ecology from Borde, et al (2023), Jenkins, et al (2017) and LeVasseur, et al (2016) offer numerous cases of the ways in which the invisible and metaphysical materialize environmental action, especially in agriculture. Explicitly linking stewardship morality to cosmovision allows space for exploring the supernatural and metaphysical when it is relevant to the farmer's identity and practices. The next several sections contextualize farmer cosmovisions of stewardship through the research on farmer identity and practice.

Ethno-religious Identity and Agriculture

Salamon's work reveals that a farmer's ethno-religious identity helps to define the ontology for what farming is and how it should be done. Salamon's (1980, 1985, 1992) research on farmer identity exposes the significant weight that culture (especially the conglomeration of community, ethnicity, and religious identity) alters market, social, and environmental actions of farmers. Her (1980) study found strong ethno-cultural influence on farm size, tenancy, and succession. Salamon's (1985) found that the farmers' ethnic and religious backgrounds influenced farm size, biodiversity, community involvement, and the weight of profit as a motivation. One group (Yankee-Protestants) viewed the land as a commodity that was exchangeable, while the other (German-Catholics) saw the land as "a part of themselves" like a part of their own body (Salamon, 1985, pp. 329-330). Salamon's (1992) further research found a multigenerational trend of one ethnoreligious group to enhance soil fertility while the other tended to deplete it and move on to greener pastures to plow. While Salamon does not explicitly address farmer cosmovision, it is clear from the different ways of seeing and being create different moral frameworks for farming practice. The Yankee-Protestant emphasis on profit, even at the expense of biodiversity and social community ties back to Weber's (2001 [1904])

Protestant-ascetic ethic which explicitly identifies the pressure to be a good steward by maximizing investment:

> The idea of a man's duty to his possessions, to which he subordinates himself as an obedient *steward,* or even as an acquisitive machine, bears with chilling weight on his life. The greater the possessions the heavier, if the ascetic attitude toward life stands the test, the feeling of responsibility for them, for holding them undiminished for the glory of God and increasing them by restless effort. (pp. 114-115).

Despite both groups farming in comparable economic and ecological environments, one cosmovision tended to prioritize family, diversity, and community at an economic loss, while the other tended to prioritize production at the expense of these elements.

Farming for Us All

While Salamon's work started with ethno-religious identity to explore agricultural families and communities, Bell (2004) started with sustainable farming practices to examine the culture that produced them. Using the case of Practical Farmers of Iowa, he found that the adoption of more sustainable farming practices tended to be part of a larger cultural shift that involved exchanging relationships and values along with the change in farming practices–a change in cosmovision. These agricultural conversions were often paralleled by a metaphysical conversion experience in which many farmers identified supernatural encounters with the divine in a moment of crisis. Additionally, what Bell found that many of the decisions and practices may have more to do with representations of the self than profit-maximization. He uncovered that much of the farming identity is enacted and embodied through practice, which was then observed (and often judged) by neighboring farmers within the community. Deviant farmers, however, sought alternative communities of practice to learn from others with similar values and

goals that they cannot find in their own communities. He described the network of farmers in the PFI making sustainable agriculture *socially* possible through open and critical dialogue with other farmers. Identity and practice are not static, but dynamic, mutually influencing each other through time.

Despite Bell's argument that sources of knowledge shape the farmer identity and practice, he minimizes the spiritual knowledge essential to many these farmers adopting more sustainable techniques for farming. He invalidates farmers' supernatural conversion experiences by labeling them as *natural conscience* (a socially constructed view of nature that sees it as apolitical) rather than validating the influence of *subtle agroecologies* within the farmer cosmovision and sustainable farming practice. One of the most valuable contributions of this work is his introduction of *dialogical pragmatism* to describe the widening scope of inclusion from just men to include women, animals, and ecosystems into the conversation which shapes farmer identity and practice (Bell, 2004, pp. 201-233). *Dialogical pragmatism* could be used to describe the openness many researchers have witnessed in RA. It is not just diverse dialogues about agriculture, but also conversations of reality, ontology, morality, and spirituality that shape the way farming is enacted.

The Good Farmer's Identity and Morality

Stewardship offers a helpful concept for exploring the link between 'good farmer' identity, environmental morality, and actual agricultural practice. The 'good farmer' literature emerged with Burton (2004), which revealed how productivism was rooted deeply in how agricultural communities defined what it meant to be a 'good farmer.' In this study Burton suggests that the symbolic value of a "farmer stewardship ethos" draws on Jeffersonian-agrarian

myths rooted in Judeo-Christian beliefs (Burton, 2004, pp. 209-210). Similarly, Stock's (2007) work on the 'good farmer' with Midwest organic farmers found stewardship and religion/spirituality to both be motivations for organic farmers, concluding that farmer's moral philosophies are inseparable from their farming practices, often framed through multiple conflicting mythologies (pp. 92-95). This was especially true in regard to farmers' perceived moral responsibilities to care for the soil and the health of their communities, which he described as a *reflexive production pattern* (Stock, 2007, pp. 95-96). Thus, among both conventional-productivist and organic farmers, stewardship presents itself as part of the farmer's moral framework.

Burton, et al (2021) suggest that a shortcoming in the 'good farmer' research is that morality has been underexplored due to the emphasis on technical aspects of farming practice. Stock (2020) offers a sociology of environmental morality which draws on Bell's (1998, 2004, 2018) *natural conscience*, Abend's (2014) *moral background*, and Farrell's (2015) *moral orders.* Abend (2014) and Farrell (2015) both point to the underlying worldviews, assumptions, and stories which inform the possibilities for moral decision making in human-environmental interactions. Farrell (2015) argues that narratives structure moral orders which are enacted and sustained (pp. 12-17).

Stewardship can be understood as a potent narrative for structuring the moral order of Western agriculture which has been and still is shaped by powerful outside actors such as the government and large corporations (Gray and Gibson, 2013; Vanwinkle & Friedman, 2017; Singer, et al, 2020). Hall (2024) suggests that myths can be used to help understand the "ideological, symbolic, and structural properties" that inhibit changes in agricultural practice (p. 3). Ellis's (2013) analysis which found balance, stewardship, husbandry, and dominion to be

significant components of a larger cosmological narrative of man's relationship to the land and animals based on an interpretation of Judeo-Christian scriptures. Peterson (1991) offers an insightful analysis of American agricultural mythologies which structure narratives for the moral orders of farmers. These myths reflect elements of stewardship (agrarian myth) and dominion (frontier myth and earth-as-machine myth) in farmer cosmovisions (pp. 302-306). Likewise, Hall (2024) found stewardship of the land to be a potent mythological narrative among farmers, yet it can also be supplanted by the moral imperatives of other myths such as 'feeding the world' (pp. 4-6). This stewardship narrative of the 'good farmer' is reified in popular culture like Dodge's 2013 Superbowl commercial which cycles through images of white ranchers feeding cows, churches, American flags, combines harvesting large monoculture row crop farms, white farmers and their families praying, a poultry Confined Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO), and children dressed as farmers who will become the next generation of stewards–many of the images featuring Dodge Ram trucks, of course–while Paul Harvey reads the prose 'So God Made a Farmer' which was first presented in 1978 at the National FFA Conference (Godoy, 2013). Despite the popularity of stewardship as a narrative for structuring the morality of agriculture, different cosmovisions lead to different expressions of this narrative.

The Regenerative Mindset

The *regenerative mindset* (Seymour & Connelly, 2022) presents an alternative cosmovision to reductionist productivism that characterizes the hegemonic Western ontology and will assist in understanding how farmers express stewardship in different ways. Despite the bleak outlook on the environmental, social, and economic problems of industrial agriculture, many suggest that RA could contribute to the solution (Çakmakçı, et al, 2023; Bless, et al, 2023; O'Donoghue, et al, 2022; McLennon, et al, 2021; Schreefel, et al, 2020). RA is typically defined

by process or outcome. Process-based definitions focus on RA practices like reducing disturbance or integrating livestock or while outcome-based definitions of RA focus on carbon sequestration or improvements in soil health (Newton, et al, 2020). Yet, there is a growing body of evidence that the farmers who convert to RA are not only converting their farming practices, but also their cosmovisions. Carolan (2006) found that barriers to sustainable agriculture are often epistemic (different kinds of knowledge lead to different farming practices) and sustainable farmers see and perceive differently than conventional ones, especially holding a more embodied and experiential knowledge, which fits with Salamon's (1992) farmers who saw the land itself differently based on ethno-religious identity. Miller-Klugesherz & Sanderson (2023) suggest that farmers who transition to RA have an openness in disposition, see more relationally how they are interconnected with the health of the ecosystem, and seek to work with nature. Gosnell, et al (2019) and Gosnell (2021) found farmers practicing RA were open to change, saw differently through experiential learning, were humble about past and present farming practices, and focused on the health of the ecosystem, desired to experiment, and trusted the farm ecosystem to correct imbalances. Gordon, et al (2022) found RA discourses emphasize openness, local context, systems thinking, cultural pluralism, deviation from industrial modes of agriculture, and more-than-human farm relations. In other words, RA farmers prioritize more than just production (Strauser & Stewart, 2024). Seymour & Connelly (2022) offer a helpful framework of the *regenerative mindset* which reflects the attributes of RA farmers they interviewed. These include attentiveness/observation, conceding control to regain balance, valuing of species, holistic approach, embodied/experiential learning, intergenerational thinking, and a greater sense of personal responsibility. Given RA's BIPOC origins, it should be no surprise that the regenerative

mindset would also carry with it many elements of indigenous cosmovisions (Sands, et al, 2023; Carlisle, 2022).

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Given the significant gaps in sociological research on emic understanding of stewardship among farmers and the interactions between farmer cosmovisions and their enacted moralities of good farming, this research project utilized ethnographic interviewing with a process-relational approach. In this section, I examine the historical development of process-relational philosophy to summarize its ontological assumptions. Then I explain how process-relational philosophy has been translated into sociological theory as well and its opportunities in social research. I subsequently transition to the details of my methodology for ethnographic interviewing. Finally, I conclude by describing my process and tools for data analysis.

Process Relational Philosophy

In the 20th Century, the academic field of philosophy largely abandoned metaphysics while mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead, began delving in (Whitehead, 1929). Since then, several others have worked to more clearly articulate Whitehead's ideas (Sherburne, 1966; Mesle, 2008; Kraus, 2019). Whitehead argued that essential to good science was a constant reexamination of basic assumptions of how the world works. Out of his extensive, and complex writings emerged a few key assertions. He opposed a Cartesian understanding of the universe which assumes that all things exist independently from one another as static substances (also known as essentialism), instead proposing a "process" ontology that assumes all "things" are "events" constituted by interrelated and interdependent other "events" (or systems–as this philosophy also draws on systems theory). This philosophy expects change rather than static essentialism since any shift in the relationship changes the event and also that event's relationship to other events. This shifts the emphasis from static being to active doings. There is no person outside of a context to which they are intricately bound and each person is an

unfolding series of events changing based on the relationships that constitute themselves. Thus the person who matures is a new event than the less mature events of years ago, yet this new event is interdependent on all prior events which form the foundation for the present.

Process Relational Sociological Theory

While process-relational theory is relatively new in the field of sociology, there are numerous elements of it in classical and contemporary theory. Vandenberghe (2018) argues that Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, and Gabriel Tarde are classical relational theorists, while contemporary relational theory draws on diffuse clusters of theories such as Harrison White's network analysis, Norbert Elias's figurational sociology, Pierre Bourdieu's critical sociology, John Dewey's pragmatism, Niklas Luhmann's systems theory or Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (pp. 37-43). The general process-relational theory can be found within the matrix of structuralism, processualism, interactionism, and symbolism (Vandenberghe, 2018, pp. 43-45). Processual sociology is the sociological offshoot of process-relational sociology Processual sociology assumes from the beginning that the social world is one of constant change, thus it is persistence that requires explanation and examination, rather than change (Abbot, 2016). Relational sociologists assume that relations rather than entities form the social world and therefore prioritize examining the relations between entities and the relations that make up entities. Relations between units are dynamic and unfolding ongoing processes, elements flow, and properties emerge out of relations (Emirbayer, 1997). Any social process is co-produced, emerging and demerging from particular relations between entities–which are themselves complexes of relations at smaller levels (Depelteau, 2018, p. 509). Depelteau (2018) writes that "process-relational sociology is the analysis of the emergence, the transformation, the

disappearance of multiple smaller and larger dynamic social fields happening through interactions between human and non-human interactants" (p. 510).

Linking the Process Relational Approach and the Ethnographic Method

Depelteau (2018) identifies that process-relational methods are undeveloped (p. 510), so this section presents a method to advance process-relational methodologies and should not be viewed as a static formula for other researchers to apply, but a dynamic process open to change and variation as it enters into new relations with other researchers. Vandenberghe (2018) articulates that process-relational methodologies replace "linear techniques of variable analysis for complex, purpose-built techniques that are able to catch and represent the multiple interrelations between people, groups, and institutions… emphasiz[ing] the mutual interdependence of the variables and dissolve entities into processes" (pp. 39-40). Abbott (2016) describes processual analysis as *lyrical sociology* in which there is no historical end in mind (in contrast to narrative) but is instead focused on the indeterminate present of momentary stories. He then explicitly links this with the ethnographic method, arguing that it is lyrical by nature of being written by a particular person in a particular moment and embodying personal engagement (Abbott, 2016, p. 106). Abbott (2016) even goes as far as to say that lyrical sociology "provides a far more effective sense of passing time than the inevitable tramp of narrative analysis. In lyric, we hear the whisper of possibility and the sigh of passage" (p. 111). Although data collection for this project occurred over the course of several months, each quote is presented its own moment, rather than part of a larger narrative headed toward some particular conclusion. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) argue that ethnography has a "distinctive concern with *process,* with sequences of interaction and interpretation that render meanings and outcomes both *unpredictable* and *emergent*" (p. 2). This complements the process-relational approach, as new findings emerge

throughout time spent in the field. Stewardship is not a static, singular ontological category that one can achieve complete saturation in understanding, but instead, a dynamic concept negotiated within a broader social context and enacted differently based on variations of symbolic relations emerging from it (Emirbaryer, 1997). Thus, this method, in alignment with process-relational ontology, lays the groundwork for *emergence within* the method, as the researcher, the methodology and the participants engage in dynamic and unfolding relations. Pollner and Emerson (2001) argue that a framing belief for ethnomethodology is that "society consists of the ceaseless, ever-unfolding transactions through which members engage one another, and the objects, topics, and concerns they find relevant." A long-term commitment to study sites across time offers a deeper understanding of consistency and variation, but the time limitations for a Master's thesis project, requires a compromise between both depth and brevity. Therefore, I chose to do ethnographic interviewing, which allowed me to engage participants at the sites of their farming activities, but could be supplemented by follow-up interview calls and completed with less time immersed in the field. Additionally, Desmond (2014) argues for a relational ethnography that focuses on "processes involving configurations of relations among different actors or institutions" rather than limiting itself to one group or space. Thus, the project allowed for inclusion of consumers, neighbors, friends, family, and even non-humans, as I participated and observed the other agents in the web of farming relations. Also essential to this relational method is building relationships, not just to enhance the co-creation of knowledge, but because relationships are inherently valuable, and social science has a long history of extracting data without pursuing mutual relationships. As Donati (2019) suggests, granular analysis is not for the sake of empirical generalization, but as an entry point for new possibilities. Additionally, Small (2009) argues that empirical generalization is not the point of qualitative research, but instead, it

is to contribute data and analysis that is theoretically generalizable. Ethnographic interviewing offers value for its depth as a foundation for further research in new contexts, rather than as a cumulative work that attempts to exhaustively generalize. Darnhofer (2016) calls for integrating social and ecological relations in process-relational agri-food research and (2020) emphasizes the agency of the farm, rather than just the farmer. This method draws on a new materialist understanding which grants and explores non-human agency in addition to the agency of humans, viewing matter as vital to the social field of analysis (Donati, 2019; Herman, 2016; Ferguson, 2016; Dwiartama & Rosin, 2014). While difficult to interview a field or a goat, this ethnographic interviewing took notice of the more-than-human farm relations and the agency of nonhuman entities in the farm system.

Multi-Sensory Ethnographic Interviewing

I entered the research field in the spring of 2024 and continued to collect data and add participants through the summer and into autumn using ethnographic interviewing. Interviewing allows the researcher access to people's interior experiences to learn about their perceptions and meaning-making, as well as offering access to the past, which though filtered through memory, is valuable for understanding how the present is constituted (Weiss, 1994, p. 1). I primarily interviewed on farms with principal operators, although some occurred in other places relevant to the person being interviewed, and included family, friends, or others who entered into the social field. Most of the field research also included farm tours led by the farmer, which were offered by the farmer rather than requested by the researcher. I also conducted follow-up interviews through additional visits to the field and/or video calls. I collected data in field research through near-verbatum quotations recorded in field notes. I employed near-verbatum quotations rather than jotting to better capture the particular language and vocabulary being used, and to assist

with recall during the transcription process since data collection often consisted of several hours of continuous field work at a time. Some of the participants also engaged in various media platforms which offered additional visual and audio data to guide my research inquiry, though none of it is featured explicitly in the data analysis. Zoom included features that allowed for recording and auto-transcribing. I cleaned each transcript by editing the text while watching and listening to the recorded interview to ensure accuracy. Except for a few moments of technical difficulty, all Zoom transcripts were verbatim. In moments of technical difficulty that created a break in recording, the transcript includes paraphrases written from jotted notes and/or memory which are distinguished in the text.

Although I had developed an interview guide before entering the field based on my initial review of literature, I drew on the processual nature of *abduction* to allow for theoretical surprises and adjustments throughout the research process. (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The evolving interview guide was inspired by participatory research which invited the participants into the process of the production of knowledge and empowered them to offer suggestions about what data they thought was important to be included. On my first visit with a participant, I would describe my research project, and then allow them to direct where the conversation would go and ask questions relevant to the information they presented. After doing this with a few participants, themes emerged which were then included in my interview guide for follow-up interviews. This iterative process continued throughout the summer, and even included talking with participants about language to use and questions to ask. Participatory research also allowed the researcher to participate in life with the subjects in a relational way beyond the 'passive observer,' to not only see farming, but to experience it, and to imagine it from the perspectives of the subjects. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

I entered the field with a single research participant, chosen as a unique and extreme case. I found the initial participant, "Jim," after following his farm/art account on social media upon the recommendation of a friend. After following this participant's social media account for over a year prior to this research project, this participant expressed a deep connection between his cosmovision and farming both in the art he produced, as well as the posts he made about farming. During the development stage of the research process, the researcher met the participant in person to learn more about him and inquire as to whether or not he would be open to participating in the project. The participant not only agreed to participate, but also helped to shape the experimental design for the study itself. What emerged was what Lyon, et al (2010) term *maculate conception*, to describe the messy and constrained, but valuable work of participatory research. Because of his personal interest in the project, Jim also offered to introduce me to a few other farmers who he knew well and thought fit well with my research question. He slowly introduced me to other farmers within his social field, which allowed me to use snowball case selection to identify more participants who linked their cosmovision and farming practice. This also allowed for exploration of the similarities and differences within one social network. Each farm system can be understood as a social ecology, and these linked ecologies form the social field I will be researching (Abbott, 2016, pp. 33-74). In addition to the initial participant, I was also enrolled in a university course on permaculture which introduced me to other farmers who overtly expressed their connections between good farming and cosmovisions. Finally, I drew on my own social network of farmers who I knew to be religious or spiritual. What emerged through this process was not three social fields of insulated linked ecologies, but a single social field of linked ecologies connected to one another through art, religion, farming, or kinship that I could not have predicted when I started.

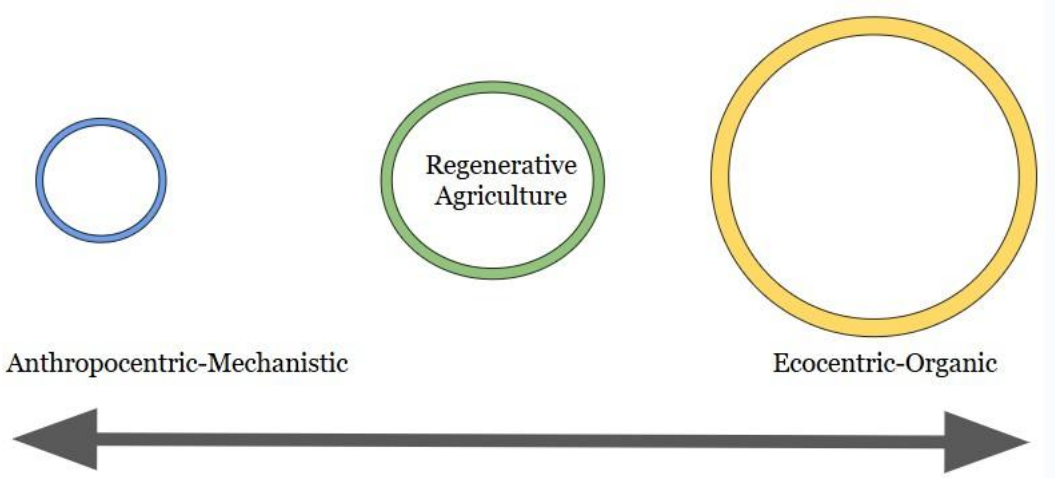
By the conclusion of the data collection, I had 18 primary participants between 13 farms across three states within the central Great Plains of the United States. The demographic information is as follows. Five of the farms included couples where both partners or spouses were included as participants (ten of the 18 total participants). Of the 18 participants, six told me they were not farmers, despite owning land and having a spiritual and material relationship with it, so I excluded them from my analysis. This left 12 participants at nine farms ranging from less than 40 acres up to 4,500 acres, all of which earned incomes from farming. Animal products included cow-calf production, meat (beef, lamb, goat, chicken, turkey, duck, pork), dairy (goat and cow), eggs (chicken), and fiber (sheep wool and alpaca fleece). Plant products included GMO, non-GMO, and heirloom row crops (corn, soybeans, wheat, rye, camelina, triticale), hay crops (alfalfa, timothy, brome, wheatgrass, "prairie," and several others), orchard crops (apples, peaches, strawberries), timber, and vegetables. Market outlets include wholesale commodity markets, contract commodity, direct market sales, and/or subsistence/non-market outlets. Six farms were rural and the other three were periurban (within 30 minutes of a metropolitan area). Participants had higher than average education with nearly all of them possessing Bachelor's degrees (though not necessarily in agriculture) and five participants possessing advanced degrees. Ethno-racially, most participants identified as white and non-hispanic. For religious/spiritual identity, nine identified with some form of Christianity (including Evangelical, Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, Mennonite, and German Baptist Brethren). The other three participants had previously identified with Christianity and/or attended Christian churches, but departed from that as their cosmovision evolved, now claiming no categorical religious identities while perceiving their spiritual lives to be significant.

Throughout the data collection period, I kept a reflective journal to outline key themes, connections, and surprises that emerged. After reflecting on field work, I would discuss observations and exchange analyses with my major professor. These analyses would pose new questions for inquiry with each subsequent ethnographic interview. After the data collection process was completed, typed transcripts from field notes and Zoom interviews were uploaded to Atlas.ti for coding. Some codes were directly related to the research question, some emerged through the reflective journal analysis, and others did not present themselves until combing through the data once it was uploaded to Atlas.ti. In the data analysis, I strove to emphasize the entangled relationships of human and non-human interactants (Darnhofer, et al 2016), yet also acknowledge the limitations of the English language which tends to affirm substantialist rather than relational descriptions of reality (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 283; Elias, 1978, p. 111-122; Whorf, 1956).

Chapter 4 - Analysis

In exploring stewardship cosmovisions of the good farmer, I found that abstract conceptions of stewardship were generally similar, emphasizing caring for the land that God gave and caring for other people. However, in practice, two distinct approaches to stewardship emerged. This is consistent with Raymond et al (2016) who found a common "higher-level orientation" towards stewardship, despite differences in particular landscape values and practices (p. 180). The two distinct approaches to stewardship that emerged aligned with the framework for farmer cosmovisions presented by Parks and Brekken (2018) and Merchant (2005). Parks and Brekken (2018) depict worldviews on a continuum from mechanistic to organic, and ethics on a continuum from egocentric to ecocentric. In my own research, I have elected to use anthropocentric rather than egocentric because egocentric is more offensive and less accurate to the farmers I encountered on that end of the spectrum. Figure 3 illustrates these cosmovisions on a continuum.

Figure 3. Scope of Stewardship Care in Farmer Cosmovision



On the one hand, anthropocentric-mechanistic farmers tended to hold a more production-led paradigm of stewardship, which entailed a narrower scope of responsibility to care. Important to

note is that a mechanistic cosmovision does not necessitate the use of large machinery. This approach to stewardship complemented Raymond, et al's (2016) *production frame* and *instrumental frame* of stewardship (p. 177-179). On the other hand, ecocentric-organic farmers tended to hold a more ecologically-led paradigm of stewardship, which entailed a wider scope of responsibility to care. Another important note is that organic here does not indicate USDA Certified Organic, but instead denotes the living interconnections like that of an organism, rather than the static categories of a machine. This approach fits with Raymond, et al's (2016) *environmental frame* and *holistic frame* of stewardship (pp. 177-179). Notably, farmers who practiced RA tended to fall in between the other two types on the continuum. In this sense, RA farmers represented syntheses of the two emergent conceptions of stewardship. Located in the middle of this continuum, RA farmers often displayed some of the tensions and contradictions associated with transitions from industrial agriculture, and anthropocentric-mechanistic models of stewardship, to more ecocentric-organic models of stewardship.

Common Definitions of Stewardship: Caring for the Land

I found that abstract conceptions of stewardship were generally similar, emphasizing caring for the land that God gave. This spiritually motivated "farmer stewardship ethos" was also shared by Burton's (2004) productivist 'good farmers' (p. 209-210) and Stock's (2007) organic 'good farmers' (p. 89). Jerry, an anthropocentric-mechanistic farmer summarized 'A good farmer takes care of the land.' Similarly, Nancy, a regenerative farmer suggested that "If you go back to the more original [translations of the Bible], they say that you're to steward the land, that you're to care for it, that you're a caretaker." Furthermore, Andrew, an ecocentric-organic farmer said "We were given the responsibility, you know, at the unfolding of creation of the Bible story, to take care of. That's the original stewardship in the truest sense of the word." This understanding

of stewardship fits with the "caretaker" discourse of stewardship identified by Peterson (1991) which he traces back to Jeffersonian agrarian rhetoric (pp. 293-296), and Vanwinkle and Friedman (2017) attribute to New Deal propaganda. The potent stewardship myth of a divine responsibility to care for the land persists between groups of farmers across cosmovisions and transcends actual farming practices, which are significantly different between groups.

Anthropocentric-Mechanistic Good Steward: Caring for a Return

The scope of the anthropocentric-mechanistic cosmovision of stewardship care was often limited to where it offered a potential return on investment. This reflects Lavoie and Wardropper's (2021) conclusion that stewardship can be assimilated into a Bourdieusian capitals framework where the farmer seeks to maximize their interconnected cultural, social, and economic capitals. These farmers emphasized providing the necessary land care to maximize yield. The drive to maximize yield was perceived as a way to glorify God by increasing the land's productive capacity. Care for the land was primarily reserved for privately-owned property, which ensured a greater return on investment. These farmers perceived a conflict between humans and their environment, and felt humans must be given priority at the expense of the ecosystem. The emphasis on caring for people over the land justified a narrower scope of care for the land. Although they voiced prioritizing people over the environment, human relationships were typically appraised for their potential economic return. The human and nonhuman creatures who offered no potential return did not always warrant the same level of investment.

Maximum Glory Through Private Ownership

Stewarding the land meant providing the necessary care to maximize yield. Thus care was primarily limited to chemical application and erosion prevention. Jerry said:

> ‘A good farmer takes care of the land. I leave it better than I found it. That’s why I’ve put in all these terraces. There is ten inches of black ground and then a clay pan subsoil. I want to leave it better for the next generation. It’s more fertile now than when we started. They told us when we moved here to expect no more than 60 bushels of corn, 50 of wheat, and 30 of beans. For a number of years, we have been getting 200 bushel corn, 100 wheat, and 70 beans. The best I’ve had is 232 bushels of corn per acre on a whole field. My goal is 300 before the Lord takes me home. I should probably get 250 first, but I’ve got goals. Just ‘cause I’m 80 doesn’t mean I’ve lost my zest for activity. We’ve learned things–We didn’t have the ability to no-till when we started because we didn’t have herbicide. Soil is key–it’s the sustenance that sustains mankind. You can’t let it wash down the hill; that’s not good stewardship. When we moved up here, we had no idea we’d have this much land to farm. If I can, I try to farm in a way that glorifies God with what he gives us.’

This stewardship cosmovision reflects that of Salamon’s (1992) Yankee-Protestant farmers which prioritize profit over biodiversity. Despite three decades from Salamon’s work and over a century from Weber’s (2001 [1904]) analysis, the Protestant-ascetic ethic of stewardship persists, correlating a singular focus on production with God’s glory. For these farmers, lower levels of production diminish God’s glory and waste the land’s potential. Their God is not glorified by ecological diversity and does not expect farmers to limit yields and profits for the sake of other creatures.

The most paradoxical finding was these farmers' emphasis on ownership. Despite the lynchpin of stewardship being understood as being the caretaker for land owned by God, these

farmers expressed that they could not offer the same level of care to land that was rented as land that was owned by themselves. Brian comments:

> 'Land is a limited resource. I favor ownership over renting because with renting, it reduces stewardship. You have to work with landowners, and you can't put investment in that land. I like to own it so I can improve it.'

Jerry concurs with Brian:

> 'In South America, land is owned by the rich folks in the city and farmed by tenants…that's where we might be headed in this country. People that own it are more likely to take care of it. Sometimes farms get so big that they don't have time to treat it like their own and the land suffers. It may not affect you, but it will affect your children and grandchildren. It comes back to stewardship.'

Thus although appealing to a biblical understanding of stewardship, these farmers actually reflect the capitalist assumption that only private property is worth investing in, for its ability to offer a return. This echoes the myth of Hardin's (1968) *Tragedy of the Commons* article which assumes that all people will over extract from unowned land, but not from land that is their own because "this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman" (pp. 1244-1245).

Anthropocentric Ecological Conflict

Despite voicing care for the land, and feeling an obligation to care for it, these farmers expressed more of a competitive relationship with nature that emphasized a hierarchical distinction between "nature" and "people," with people taking priority. They did not perceive an incompatibility between caring for the land and waging war against "pests" with herbicides, fungicides, or insecticides. This conflict synthesizes both Peterson's (1991) *frontier* and *earth-as-machine* discourses in which the farmer must overcome the threatening forces of nature with

technological solutions. Both of these myths fit within a cosmovision of divinely ordained *dominion* which Ellis (2013) suggests help farmers overcome the incongruence faced when "symbiotic relations" of care were challenged (p. 438-439). This incongruence is the tension Gray and Gibson (2013) identify between being "stewards of God's earth" and "treating the land as a resource" (p. 94). When I asked John if he had a religious ethic for spraying, he told me:

> "In terms of whether or not I would use a specific insecticide, because I think it's less Christian–no. I mean, I just follow the law, and that's sufficient. But it doesn't bother me in the least to kill things if they're damaging the crop…I'm much more of a Genesis person where it's like, 'Well, you know, we've got responsibility, and we have authority.' So maybe that is a thing. You know, I actually think that I have some authority, and it's okay for me to kill things."

This reveals how unintentional casualties of chemical use are acceptable losses to maintain production. Neutral and even beneficial insects are outside the scope of care for these farmers. Just as unintentional harm indicates the narrower scope of care, so does unintentional benefit. When asked about caring for wildlife on his land, Brian said:

> 'When everyone was growing milo, there were pheasants everywhere, but now that there is more corn and beans, there aren't as many pheasants, but now deer are everywhere because of what we grow now. I don't understand why some species should be prioritized when some species will always thrive when the land is being farmed.'

Both harm and benefits to non-pest species were coincidental. These farmers were unlikely to alter their farming practices in relation to other species that fell outside of the scope of the stewardship cosmovision, which reserved care primarily for the entities that increase productivity. Another facet of their competitive relationship with nature was the belief that they

had to choose between people and nature, with people taking priority. Hall (2024) describes how the 'feed the world' myth gives farmers permission to sacrifice their land stewardship ethic with a "moral obligation to feed a growing population" even if it only feeds the ethanol plant (pp. 5-6). As John voiced:

> 'I am willing to put the burden on the land rather than people. I would rather kick the can down the road so that people now can eat. A bad farmer is someone who prioritizes the earth over people.'

Similarly, Brian concluded that:

> 'In contrast to some people, I don't worship the land. It will be destroyed some day-all these things will be burned up. It's God's job to destroy and our job to take care of what he's given us. Land is something God made for his glory to grow food, but it's not a person…People are more important than the land. It's something to be used.'

While believing that "land is something God made for his glory to grow food," Brian also recognized only minutes prior that:

> 'Most Midwest farmers don't raise food–that's why these food fads don't affect us–it's feed and fuel. We grow anything that's bad to eat. [He jokes] Maybe I should get a sign on my combine that says *Drink Pop*.'

Anthropocentric, or human-centered, morality offers a socially acceptable justification for having a narrower scope of care for the farm ecosystem. Although emphasizing the need to prioritize people over the environment, stewardship care extending to social relationships reflected the scope of care for the land–it is more worthy of care if it can yield a return. John says:

> "A kingdom business is where you consider the interests of the customer, and profits are not the only motive. It's about blessing the customer. The components of that are taking

> good care of the land, good care of the people here, other items that are not 'buy low, sell high.' It's why I'm willing to talk to people. I don't get paid for that. Then they come back as customers."

John reflects that including people in his scope of care can improve profitability (i.e. despite research participants being unpaid, I became his customer as a result of his participation in my project). On the other side of the same coin, some people are not included in the scope of care when the cost of care does not enhance social or economic capital. When asked about how Brian's pesticide drift might affect his neighbors' trees, Brian told me:

> 'If vegetable or organic producers don't want to get their crops wiped out, they should not move to the Corn Belt to start a farm.'

The organic farmer, neighboring trees, and wildlife are outside the scope of the anthropocentric-mechanistic cosmovision of stewardship care because they have nothing to offer in return. It is not that these farmers do not care as some may stereotype, but instead that they perceive fewer things necessitating care. While the anthropocentric-mechanistic farmers' stewardship cosmovision primarily cares for production, the ecocentric-organic farmers' stewardship cosmovision presents a different understanding of care.

Ecocentric-Organic Good Steward: Holistic, Empowering Care

The ecocentric-organic cosmovision of stewardship was a holistic endeavor of care for a local, more-than-human ecosystem for its own sake. Unlike the anthropocentric-mechanistic farmers, the scope of care for people and the land often extended beyond the potential return on investment. Their wider scope of care led them to be more critical of term stewardship because of its usage by farmers and corporations who care less about stewardship than about justifying themselves. This resulted in more reflexive conceptions of stewardship which tended to enhance

the agency of other creatures by giving up power and hearing the other members of the farm system. Rather than perceiving a conflict between people and the environment, these farmers believed that improving the health of the system as a whole improved the members within it and that by improving the health of individual members, the whole system also became healthier. The focus of these farmers on interconnected health, openness toward the ecosystem, and giving up of power were consistent with attributes of the *regenerative mindset* introduced by Seymour and Connelly (2022) and supported by others (Gosnell, et al, 2019; Gosnell, 2021; Gordon, et al, 2021; Gordon, et al, 2022; Miller-Klugesherz & Sanderson, 2023). This wide scope of care extended to improving unowned land for the health of the ecosystem, the farmer, the livestock, and landowners.

Reflexive Stewardship

These farmers critiqued stewardship as a term farmers use to self-justify their extractive farming practices, although they were also willing to incorporate it as a term for their own understanding of care. These farmers recognized and resisted Gray and Gibson's (2013) powerful network of actors shaping the narrative of stewardship for their own economic interests at the expense of the environment and farmers. Gabe commented that:

> "I think for me looking back at my life as a farmer, and always being told that I was a steward, and I was doing God's calling–religion telling me that, the government telling me that, and I mean everybody told me that–and that what I was doing was being a steward of God's creation. But when I started falling off that wagon…and we started planting some cover crops and doing some things differently, and the farm starts to explode in life, you know dozens and dozens of new species of insects return which are a farmers biggest nightmare and that just is followed by birds and different plants and new

> weeds, and all this stuff, but if you just stop and listen to that, which is happier, you know, a field of corn or a field with something besides corn? And I realized that I was a lousy steward."

As governments, transnational corporations, and religious institutions redefined stewardship to fit their agendas, these farmers developed an ambivalent relationship with the term and with the powerful actors using it. As resistant users of the term stewardship, they introduced other terms that they felt better reflected their relationship to farming such as husbandry or agroecology which emphasized personal health as well as the health of livestock, the ecosystem, and customers. This reflects the moral care of what Stock (2007) refers to as *reflexive production patterns*, which he describes producers shaping their farming practices by what they would desire as ethical consumers (p. 96). As a result of this ecologically driven approach to stewardship, these farmers were unwilling to place their own financial burdens on the land and force it to produce an income. Andrew said:

> "We've prostituted the lands here in America from the onset of it…when you make a piece of dirt–its value is found in what it's able to produce or provide–That would be the same as doing that to people, which we do, and have. Their value is reduced or determined by only a few things and not all of the things. How is it useful to us? And so when it comes to the idea of owning a piece of land and in order for me to even own it, I have to pay taxes on it. So unless I have a job that I'm producing that money, I'm going to make the land do that. It's a burden on the land that sucks blessing out of it."

Andrew had a job despite making a viable income from farming to avoid putting economic pressure on the land. These farmers believed that focusing on investment only for the sake of production is not good stewardship because it fails to include *all of the things* in the scope of

stewardship. These farmers recognize the innate value of all components of the farm system and desire to care for all of them, each for their own sake. They perceive a conflict between prioritizing productivity and valuing the whole since other valuable components are sacrificed for the sake of maximizing yield.

More-Than Human-Agency

While all of these farmers earned an income from farming–in other words, they were not "hobby" farmers–they let the revenue flow out of the ecological limits of the farm, rather than overcoming the ecological limits to maximize production. While these farmers acknowledged their economic obligations and limitations, they sought to let the ecology lead the farmer in decision making rather than being led by the economy or need for control, fitting with what Seymour and Connelly (2022) described as "conceding control to regain balance" (p. 236). As Gabe said:

> "Today I'm trying to get to a point now where I understand that the best manager of this farm is the farm itself. I don't know what it needs or wants; it can tell me, and I can help, but it knows what it needs. It's not my job to think I know that… And we as humans will be more than fine; we will have everything that we need. We'll have all the medicine, all the food, all the music–everything that we need is here."

These farmers enhanced the agency of the farm ecosystem by listening closely to the ecosystem members and "relinquish[ed] a masculine approach to farming based around control, simplification, and domination of nature" (Gosnell, et al, 2019, p. 8). This fulfills Bells' (2004) hope for a *dialogical pragmatism* which suggested including other species in the conversation with the farmer to shape farmer identity and practices (p. 201-203). Jim said:

> ‘We need to allow the land to have a voice…I received an invitation from the soil to hear the latent voice of God from creation, but now it's much more than that… Listen to what the land is saying. Everything has a voice.’

When I was with Linda watching her sheep graze in a pasture, she said:

> ‘These are great moms. I can put the sheep anywhere. I mow the lawn with sheep. We’re always listening. What are they saying? Where are they moving? We move them two to three times per day.’

This care for creatures was not just limited to listening but even extended giving up power in agreements they made with their farm ecosystem members, such as not killing some animals after they lose their productivity, or not harvesting during drought. This ‘ancient contract’ is described in Ellis’ (2013) analysis of the concept of husbandry among cattle farmers (pp. 436-438). While Jim never kills laying hens, his small amount of land is limited in how much forage it can provide for his goats, especially during a drought. When I asked him which goats were his favorites, he said:

> ‘I had to get rid of my favorites because they were too old to milk and breed and I can’t run a geriatric goat dairy. It’s a difficult decision because you have tried to give them a good life and built a relationship with them and it feels like you’re stabbing them in the back...I see them as contracts–or covenants–with the animals and people on the farm. But there are all kinds of compromises… You tell them the same kind of things you do when you kill them–that you gave them a good life–and hope that is enough… Because they are members–because of the contract–I as the farmer am part of that contract too. You don’t make decisions for the sake of one animal. You have to work with the limitations of the whole farm.’

This contract not only reflects the farmer giving up power, but also the holistic approach to decision making identified by Seymour and Connelly (2022, p. 237). Although the farmer gives up power in this contract, he or she still holds the most power, making life and death decisions that other creatures have little to no say in matter.

Health Beyond Borders

These farmers were seeking health first for their farm rather than production first. Health as a primary motivator for choosing particular farming practices is consistent with Stock's (2007) organic farmers (p. 91). Rather than seeing a conflict between humans and the environment in which people are more important than the land, these farmers saw that human health was only possible through ecological health. This reflected a *narrative of balance,* which Ellis (2013) discovered among cattle farmers who believed that their care for land and animals was mutually beneficial (pp. 434-435). These farmers were also far more concerned about the health of the product they produced as well and the health that it granted the human consumer, which was also observed by Parks and Brekken (2018) among alternative farmers (p. 41). Linda said:

> "For me, it was always about the health of the animals, and just knowing when they're satisfied, and when they're happy, and all of those things. And so the change to the property from when we arrived here 'til now has just been amazing as we watch the animals just become more healthy, ourselves become more healthy as we heal the land–or as the land heals itself–whatever that is. Whether we're here as stewards, or whether we're here as just participants in this system, it seems like slowly, everything is just changing.

Their scope of care reflects intimate relationships with the ecosystems where they dwell, even mourning ecological losses on land they do not own. Andrew spoke of some land he rented to pasture his cows that was sold for housing development:

> "[It's] not that land can't bless you with a house on it because it can–But at that point the dirt is covered…It's like it's crying out. I don't know, you can feel it almost…Each year we'd have less pasture as they developed another section of the development to where I was there for the last season in that valley where animals would actually run on the ground. So the evolution of it…and I've got pictures of it kinda as the years have gone by and I look up now where I used to load cows out at the houses that are there now…It's a loss."

This care transcends personal ownership and potential economic return, as these farmers pursued healing owned and unowned land, as well as hospitality for nonagricultural species. As Jim and I watched his flock grazing on the steep slopes of a railroad borrow pit on a neighbor's property, Jim said:

> 'The sheep and goats get the joy of being on it. My neighbors get the joy of watching them from their porch. I get the joy of watching them rebuild the ecosystem. There's a lot of neat levels there.'

While the anthropocentric-mechanistic farmers struggled to justify investing in the improvement of unowned land, the ecocentric-organic farmers often worked to improve not only their own land, but also the land of their neighbors because of the holistic benefits to the ecosystems, the farmers' livestock, the farmers, and the landowners. It does seem however that this is more possible for livestock farmers than row crop farmers since row crops extract nutrients from the soil while livestock tend to deposit them.

Regenerative Agriculture Good Steward: Value Maximizing Care

Among RA farmers, stewardship reflected a synthesis and tension between anthropocentric-mechanistic and ecocentric-organic definitions, fitting as a moderate or middle ground between the two approaches to stewardship. While still carrying a more capitalist mindset of investment and return, these farmers revealed that they held numerous value streams, with economics being more marginal. This could be understood as maximizing value rather than maximizing yield. Other value streams focused on relationships, ecological diversity, and unpaid research participation and knowledge exchange.

All of these farmers used the term "restoration" to describe their stewardship of diverse value streams. Hannah says:

> 'We're just the steward taking care of it for a small portion of that land's life. Often the term is relegated just to land, animals, and nature, but should be attributed more towards people and communities too. It means caring for something that isn't yours as if it is yours. You're not the owner, but maybe the investor, and your return is based on the care you invest… As Christians, how we treat people and how we treat the land–the Bible tells us. Stewardship of people is about restoration and those unfun things in relationships.'

Although anthropocentric-mechanistic farmers used similar language to the regenerative farmers with a capitalist framework for stewardship, the scope of care was wider for the regenerative farmers who were often motivated to improve relationships, ecological diversity, service, and productivity. They were also willing to walk away from leases, markets, customers, and yields if they came at a significant cost to the other value streams. This reflects the regenerative attitude that "goes beyond production" (Strauser & Stewart, 2024, p. 5).While taking care of the land for anthropocentric-mechanistic farmers meant erosion prevention and weed elimination, for

regenerative farmers, it also meant increasing soil organic matter, sequestering carbon, creating habitat for insects and songbirds, and increasing species diversity of both agricultural crops, and nonagricultural species in the farm ecosystem. They identified more interconnections between the health of the soil, the crops, and the ecosystem than the anthropocentric-mechanistic farmers, yet were less driven by how the end product contributes to the health of the consumer compared with the ecocentric-organic farmers.

Ecological Productivism

These farmers were motivated to work with nature, and patterned their farming practices off of ecological systems, which they believed enhanced production and profitability, consistent with what Gosnell, et al (2019) discovered (p. 9). Nancy described her cow-calf operation:

> "We have changed from calving in January and February, when it's brutally cold and we always had a loss of at least 10% to pneumonia and scours, to calving in April and May, which is the same time that the deer fawn, and so it is birthing in tune with nature, and we have an amazing survival rate. We lose one a year instead of, you know, 10. That unfortunately, just happens, no matter how careful you are. But I think that's being a better steward."

Although willing to lose a little yield for the benefit of other organisms, these farmers still emphasized that ecological approach needed to pay off in order to maintain long-term viability. These farmers wrestled with how much yield could be lost for the benefit of the farm ecosystem, yet also felt the threat of financial expenses. As Hannah emphasized:

> 'You may have noticed in our mission, money and profits wasn't there, but the fact remains that we need to make money…You live to keep your banker happy first because he can take the land faster than erosion.'

This group viewed agrichemicals as an exception to ecological patterns rather than the standard operating procedure. These farmers experienced the tension that Gray and Gibson (2013) identify between environmental stewardship and business management (p. 93). Speaking of "spraying down," Jeremy said:

> 'There's plenty of room for both science and technology. There's purpose and freedom in that. I also want to be mindful of the disturbance it's creating. I first want to rely on biology for the goals I want to achieve. Due to the Fall, sometimes there is a need to overcome biology with technology.'

This draws on both the cosmovisions of a world created in ecological balance among the ecocentric-organic farmers and of the ecological conflict perceived by the anthropocentric-mechanistic farmers.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

This project set out to explore morality as a facet of the 'good farmer' identity through the concept of stewardship to tap into farmer cosmovisions and how they shape farming practices. Because stewardship has tended to be defined from an etic rather than emic perspective, this helped to inform how farmers define and enact stewardship. A key finding that emerged was a common surface-level definition of stewardship as 'care for the land' which diverged into two cosmovisions for farming practice which fell on a continuum which reflected Merchant (2005) and Parks and Brekken (2018). The anthropocentric-mechanistic cosmovision prioritized caring for a productive return on investment, and the ecocentric-organic cosmovision prioritized more-than-human holistic health. Another key finding was that RA farmers fell on the middle of this continuum, reflecting the tensions between "conventional" and regenerative agriculture. This leads us to the theoretical and practical implications of stewardship as a structuring narrative for morality, the regenerative trajectory, and environmental agency. We will then turn to the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as the directions for further research, before concluding by addressing a myth of our own.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Under the umbrella of farmer identity and practices, this project sought to understand how farmer cosmovisions relate to their farming practices. I used a process-relational approach to ethnographic interviewing to explore how different farmers defined and enacted stewardship moralities across the Great Plains of the Midwest United States. I discovered a common definition of stewardship despite significant differences in how that ethic was embodied, with two poles on a continuum ranging from an anthropocentric-mechanistic cosmovision to an ecocentric-organic cosmovision. The scope of stewardship grew wider with more ecocentric

ethics and more organic worldviews—more ecocentric-organic cosmovisions. The RA farmers in the project fell on the middle of this spectrum, possessing the attributes of both poles.

The first implication of this study is the significance of stewardship morality in how farmers identify and enact being a 'good farmer.' Exploring stewardship offered an emic understanding of the concept among farmers that remained under researched and peripheral to other work on farmer identity and decision making. Stewardship functioned as the anchor point on which their *moral orders* (Farrell, 2015) and *moral backgrounds* (Abend, 2014) hinged. Farmers' ontologies for what the land is and what good farming is emerged, in part, from their understanding of this structuring narrative of stewards given land to care for by God. More importantly, however, is the reality that farmers can draw on the same myths and still come to contradictory if not antithetical conclusions about how to practice good farming. By myth, I mean powerful stories that shape the way people view the world regardless of whether or not they are "true," making no attempt validate or disprove. While Farrell's (2015) work on environmental morality revealed two structuring narratives that produced rather homogenous results, the stewardship myth can produce both chemical-intensive monocultures and holistic agroecological systems. This indicates that while myths and narrative structures play a role in shaping farmer morality, they are by no means the root cause or single source. Stewardship appeals as an inspirational structuring narrative drawing from a Judeo-Christian background that remains malleable enough for a wide range of farmers to assimilate into their pre-existing understanding of what it means to be a good farmer.

A second implication of this study is the potential of the regenerative trajectory. In an era of unprecedented environmental harm, especially from chemical-intensive approaches to agriculture, many have suggested that RA is a radical solution. My own data suggests that RA is

the more moderate compromise of productivism and holism, yet the regenerative farmers and ecocentric-organic farmers reflect many common attributes of the regenerative mindset. The results of farmers taking the regenerative mindset to the extreme of holistic health are significant. These farmers had a drastic reduction in fossil fuel usage, a dramatic increase in carbon sequestration, and an improved quality of life, not just for humans, but also for domestic and wildlife as well. The movement from economic demand to ecological supply reflects a mending of the metabolic rift driven between capitalism and ecosystems (Foster, 1999; Foster, et al, 2011). Despite farming in the Anthropocene, these farmers offer hope of what can be done in the present. Relevant to this process of change is the idea of trajectory. Jeremy, an RA farmer with a few thousand acres in production said that 'Regenerative is about trajectory–is there continuous improvement year after year?' This is someone who grew up as a farm boy tilling his father's fields to maintain a two-crop monoculture of continuous wheat and alfalfa. He then transitioned to no-till after a couple decades of farming. A couple decades after that, he has numerous cash crops, relies extensively on cover crops, has introduced acres of pollinator plots on the borders of his fields, and is experimenting with perennial rest for his fields to restore soil through a diverse mix of grasses, legumes, and forbs. Gabe, an ecocentric-organic farmer has been farming a couple decades longer than Jeremy. Gabe grew up farming row crops conventionally on thousands of acres. He then spent decades implementing more and more RA practices, still in a large-scale row cropping operation. Now in his sixties, he has transitioned to farming a couple hundred acres with a diversified perennial forage system with numerous native and domestic plant and animal species in his farm ecosystem which tells him what it needs rather than the other way around. Hannah recognized the head start being a new farmer gave her family on practicing RA since her childhood:

‘Because we came in new to farming, we were allowed a fresh perspective. Our farm is more diverse than neighboring farms, but the main difference between their farms and ours is that they are 5th or 10th generation farms and we are part of the first generation.’ That being said, she still acknowledged that ‘Sustainability isn’t something we have arrived at yet either. It’s something we keep working towards.’ All this points to the significance of the trajectory that the regenerative mindset starts farmers on. That is not to say all farmers will keep moving on this spectrum, nor that farming practices at the far end of this spectrum will be homogenous. Mapping this trajectory of the regenerative mindset complements the work of Miller-Klugesherz and Sanderson (2023), which depicts the front halve of a timeline of farmers transitioning from conventional to regenerative agriculture, where some farmers are further along in their ‘addiction recovery’ than others. While it is unreasonable to assume that the trajectory of the regenerative mindset would be linear or chronologically consistent, it seems that once farmers convert cosmovisions, they will likely continue to move further towards holistic health and further from chemically-dominated productivism, especially as they can afford to due so.

Another significant implication of these findings is a greater understanding of environmental agency, especially among various groups of farmers. Within the regenerative mindset, there is greater openness, especially to the ecosystem as well as a desire to work with it and trust it to restore balance resulting in enhanced agency for the non-human members of the system (Gosnell, et al, 2019; Gosnell, 2021; Gordon, et al, 2021; Gordon, et al, 2022; Miller-Klugesherz & Sanderson, 2023). This conversion to the regenerative mindset resembles the conversions observed by Bell (2004), which he attributes to his concept, *natural conscience*, where people attribute their morality to the apolitical forces of nature, but are really enacting a morality from a social construct of nature that masks its influences. Too often environmental

sociologists, like the anthropocentric-mechanistic farmers, are plagued by their human-centered worldview, assuming that ecosystems are inert and possess no agency of their own to shape human morality and decision making. While everyone carries some social construct of nature around, we cannot allow that to nullify matter's own agency. Instead, the ecocentric-organic farmers reveal that ecosystems have tremendous capacities to repattern human beliefs and practices, especially the more open and attentive people are to the ecosystems they occupy. Process-relational, new materialist, and more-than-human approaches to environmental social research offer the tools and assumptions necessary to recognize the environment as its own social and material force in society, rather than just a social construct.

The transformation of farmers growing deeper into the regenerative mindset and thereby becoming more open and able to understand their ecosystem could be understood as a process of *vernacularization.* Vernacular is often used to describe the local language or dialect which is rooted in and sprouts out of a particular region or local context, in contrast to the imposed language of the empire or the colonizer. Vernacular is of Latin origin—the language of the Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church, and the root *verna* was a term used by the Romans that meant a "home-born slave" (that is to say, if you were not born in Rome as a Roman citizen, you were instead a conquered, colonized, and/or enslaved "barbarian" or "pagan"). Vernacular was the language of slaves and people patterned by life outside of the empire. Vernacularization then is the process of learning the language—the patterns—of ones' own local geographic and ecological context, in place of the language of Empire. The U.S Department of Agriculture, Land-Grant Universities, the Farm Bureau, Bayer, Smithfield, John Deere, and all the other powerful actors at play use the language of empire—production, yield,

feeding the world, conquest, control, and even stewardship. Decolonizing this language however doesn't come easy. As Gabe describes,

> 'The hardest thing for me was unlearning forty years of farming… Everything is communicating. The only species not communicating is us. The Indigenous people communicated with the land. We have the knowledge. Your land is speaking to you; are you listening?'

Those who listen to their land hear new languages teaching them new patterns and customs for how to think and enact their farming according to their local context—new agri-*cultures.*

Strengths and Limitations

I now pivot from the theoretical and practical implications to the strengths and limitations of this study. A strength of this study was that purposive case selection ensured a diversity of farm types, with variations of products, practices, scale, genders and cosmovisions. As a result, however, this intentionally limited participants to farmers that also indicated a spiritual component of their perceived reality. Because a cosmovision assumes relationships between the spiritual, natural, and social worlds, the very definition excludes secular-materialists from participation, leaving their notions of stewardship untouched in this study. Another limitation of purposive case selection as well as a fewer number of cases eliminates the possibility for empirical generalizability. However, this is common for qualitative research, which is not intended to offer empirical generalizability, but for theoretical generalizability, to which this study contributes. While some participants were nonwhite, most of my participants were Western white farmers influenced by American Judeo-Christian culture. This limitation was a shortcoming snowball case selection, especially in a region with such a high proportion of white farmers. Racial and ethnic-minority farmers likely have different structuring moral narratives for

farming, but those went beyond the scope of this study. A structural limitation of the study was that of space. Although I spent hundreds of hours doing ethnographic interviewing with numerous pages of field notes and follow-up transcripts, choosing which data to include and exclude from proved to be a difficult task to keep this study to a reasonable length. While striving to reflect each participant accurately, no one is reducible to a couple of quotes, and behind each one is a beautiful and complex person who had more to say than I could fit in my analysis.

Future Research

The implications of this study as well as its limitations direct us to my suggestions for future research. This leads me to call for more research on the RA trajectory. Especially fruitful would be gathering oral histories from older farmers who have been implementing several principles of RA for many years. This could potentially unveil the long-term progression of the regenerative mindset shaping farming practices. However, given that present memory of the past can alter details of the actual past, longitudinal studies of farmers' practices and cosmovisions (or mindsets) could also be insightful for our understanding of the movement on the regenerative trajectory over time, and overcome some of the limitations of the oral history methodology. Additionally, given stewardship's potency in shaping the environmental morality of farmers, engaging other structuring narratives such as the Malthusian 'Feed the Word' myth addressed by Hall (2024) or the 'Tragedy of the Commons' myth which affects how farmers and potentially non-farming landowners relate to rented cropland and pasture, could offer new insights into how farmer-environmental relations.

Toward a Post-Apocalyptic Environmental Sociology

While many farmers are shaped by the myth of stewardship, it would seem the apocalyptic myth is equally salient among environmental sociologists. I position the relevance of this research in light of the end of the world–peak oil or climate disaster or species extinction–demanding radical solutions from farmers and governments to prevent social and ecological collapse. But what do we do if the apocalypse already happened? The lobbyists of chemical companies write our agricultural legislation, and executive orders eliminate federal environmental efforts while we frantically offer scientific policy suggestions that continue to go unheeded. The extinct species are gone forever, and so are all the farmers who already killed themselves. The world has already ended. Perhaps it is time to let go of the apocalyptic myth and embrace a post-apocalyptic one. After one participant, John, spent his career seeing the end of the world in numerous countries working for USAID, he drew inspiration from a post-apocalyptic mantra from Martin Luther that he hung up in his orchard's farmstand: 'Even if I knew that tomorrow would come undone, I would still plant an apple tree today.' I do not believe regenerative agriculture or even the regenerative mindset will save the world, but that does not mean there is nothing we can do. Research itself holds the potential to germinate agroecological improvements. At the end of my time interviewing Brian from the buddy seat of his combine during corn harvest, he said 'Hopefully you can come out again next year. These questions have really made me reflect on what I am doing.' Similarly, after interviewing Hannah, she said 'The main reason I wanted to do this interview is so it would make me think.' Curious and gracious interviewing holds the potential to make any farmer a reflexive farmer without coercion or incentives from the state or its economy. So whether you are headed to the 'south forty' to interview a farmer or plant a tree, take your first step into the ashes of this post-apocalyptic world.

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