

Critical agrarianism

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Commentary

Abstract

This paper develops the concept of ‘critical agrarianism’ to describe and advance the pursuit of land-based work as a means of realizing social justice and environmental sustainability. Encouraging new agrarianism to more carefully scrutinize its agenda, critical agrarianism celebrates the promise of a close working relationship with the natural world while insisting that a return to the land—*per se*—is insufficient. In the practice of linking people and land, past and present, critical agrarianism continually questions and reshapes the very category of agrarian, toward a more equitable and enduring prosperity. I revisit both canonical agrarian writing and its critics, pulling out ‘back-pocket tools’ that can keep critical agrarians on track in building our alternative futures. I then offer several case studies of critical agrarianism in practice, encouraging a move beyond idealized models of agrarian ties, toward an empirical account of who has actually been doing the work to put food on the table. Noting the historical gap between working the landscape and having a property or citizenship right, I call for an agrarianism in which practices—not land title—are the basis of material and social community. Furthermore, I suggest that agrarianism must extend its web outward rather than inward, forging connections to the work of land tenure reform, education, community development, immigrant advocacy and trade policy. To be a critical agrarian is not to preserve fixed social-natural ties, but rather to practice a powerfully open and dialogical engagement with the world and one another.

Key words: agrarianism, sustainable agriculture, agricultural labor, agrarian political economy

Introduction

Fifty-five hundred West Silver Spring Drive lies at the heart of inner-city Milwaukee; Henry County, Kentucky amid a quiet mix of farms and exurban homes. They are, you might say, on opposite sides of history. Written in the contrast of these two landscapes is the great tragedy of the American story: the continual separation of prosperity from those who have labored to create it. In both places, people have spent decades suppressing this tragedy; and when memories arise, they clash. Yet two men—one white Kentuckian, one black Milwaukeean—have begun telling a remarkably similar tale about the value of their Southern agrarian heritage. A thoughtful return to the land, they suggest, may hold the keys to a more just prosperity.

Urban farmer Will Allen and homesteader poet Wendell Berry both draw on agrarianism, a philosophical tradition with deep roots in Western history. As Laura Sayre writes, agrarianism is ‘the idea that farmers make the best citizens, that they possess an intrinsic virtue based on their close working relationship with the natural world and their independence from corporate and consumer

culture.’¹ The history of this idea is far from innocent; and yet, Allen and Berry have good reason to find hope in it. In this article, I take stock of where agrarianism has been, what its heterogeneous potentials are, and how it might be mobilized toward a more sustainable, equitable future.

I find myself writing this essay because I have so often felt torn: between the student farm and the seminar, the compost pile and the protest. I am convinced that much can be accomplished by hands in dirt, and I have been inspired by those who effect transformation through the way they connect land and people. I also deeply respect those who have come to critical analyses of agrarian relations through years of dedicated study, and who put themselves on the line to raise awareness of hidden violence and exploitation. Too often, these two deeply felt efforts are perceived as competing agendas: critics feel pressed to dismiss student farmers as avoiding structural problems, while student farmers are taught that critics do not do anything useful. And yet, I am surrounded by critical thinkers who have their hands in the dirt *and* their hearts in the struggle, who make things in a way that makes change too. What I am reaching for here is a language to talk about these mentors and comrades and

recognize their work. I hope this is a language that might empower those who have felt torn like I do, those who do not want to choose sides.

I am calling that language *critical agrarianism*, and this is what I mean to suggest with this term: in the practice of linking people and land, past and present, critical agrarians continually question and reshape the very category of agrarian, toward a more just and sustainable future. They push critique beyond being critical of agrarianism. Instead of seeing agrarianism as inevitably constrained by a narrow history, they ask what it has become or could be. Meanwhile, they push agrarian thinking beyond taken-for-granted assumptions about what exactly is or can be accomplished through tying people to land, insisting that we will have to continually make and remake these relations. Thankfully, thoughtful people have been pushing in these directions for a long time.

Old White Men and Property

To take a page from the critical handbook, it helps to know where ideas come from, the context in which they have developed. Histories of American agrarianism generally begin with John Locke's *Second Treatise on Civil Government*² and Thomas Jefferson's *Notes from the State of Virginia*³, political philosophies couched in the discourse of romantic poets. Such histories often proceed to J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's testimonial, *Letters from an American Farmer*⁴. All three merit a close read.

Locke's 'Of Property,' the fifth section of his *Second Treatise*, develops a labor theory of value on the basis of Christian theology, natural law theory and the institution of private property. 'Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property,' he writes. For Locke, the improvement of land through agriculture is mankind's God-given duty. Thus, the institution of private property inevitably arises (through the mixing of labor with the soil), and should be understood as natural. Agrarian rights, however, come with agrarian responsibilities. Locke emphasizes that individuals are entitled only to what they can use; and that the rest must be left for others. Locke's signal contribution to agrarianism, then, is a Biblically derived agrarian exceptionalism. Since it involves mixing one's labor with the soil, he holds, farming is a spiritually and materially superior form of work, the root of both personal wealth and personal salvation.

American President Thomas Jefferson, a farmer himself, would expand poetically on this agrarian exceptionalism, cementing in the American consciousness an image of the yeoman farmer as the bedrock of the nation's morality and democracy. 'Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a

chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue,' Jefferson writes in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in the midst of the Revolutionary War. For Jefferson, as for Locke, smallholder farming is both an individual moral necessity and a national political imperative. Working directly with nature to supply one's subsistence fulfills man's God-given purpose and maintains proper Christian values, while distributing property among many smallholders ensures a population of democratic subjects.

The year after Jefferson wrote these words, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur published *Letters from an American Farmer*, offering first-hand testimony of the emergent nation's democratic agrarian society. 'Here we have in some measure regained the ancient dignity of our species,' de Crevecoeur boasts. 'Our laws are simple and just, we are a race of cultivators, our cultivation is unrestrained, and therefore everything is prosperous and flourishing.' The *American Farmer's* romantic, closer-to-nature vision proceeds to a Lockean justification of private property as the natural reward for transforming 'formerly rude soil' into a 'pleasant farm.' Labor and soil, converted into property, beget political standing, expressed as citizenship. For de Crevecoeur, 'possession of the soil' is foundational to who we are as Americans. It not only feeds and clothes us, but has also 'established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens, our importance as inhabitants of such a district.'

A number of agrarian themes emerge from de Crevecoeur's text: ecological, political and personal. His principal focus, however, is on the material and spiritual benefits of decentralizing land tenure. 'Europe contains hardly any other distinctions but lords and tenants,' he writes. 'This fair country alone [the United States] is settled by freeholders, the possessors of the soil they cultivate, members of the government they obey, and the framers of their own laws, by means of their representatives.' Whether de Crevecoeur's promise of radical democracy was being fulfilled at the time is an easily contestable matter (a point critical agrarians must—and do—take up). Yet, in this Jeffersonian rhetoric lies an important kernel of agrarian political thought: the conviction that decentralized, distributed management benefits both 'nature' and 'culture.' As later agrarian thinkers moved beyond the project of nation building to address different concerns, this idea remained, rearticulated.

Back to the Land

Among the first to revive and thoroughly revise this idea were four prominent agrarian conservationists: Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson and Fred Kirschenmann. While 18th-century agrarianism had offered political prescriptions for prosperity, these

20th-century writers broadcast a message of moral and environmental crisis. The march of industrial progress, the conservationists warned, threatened the natural basis of the democratic citizenship promised by the nation's agrarian founding fathers. In order to preserve this virtue, they wrote, we must preserve our farmland, our farming heritage and, most especially, our farmers. These authors fought against industrialism on the one hand and wilderness conservation (a prominent contemporary critique of industrialism) on the other. Rather than calling for the unpeopled wilds celebrated by Thoreau and Muir, agrarian conservationists argued that the natural landscape benefitted from good human stewardship—perhaps even needed it. The most critical endangered species to save, they insisted, was the small-scale farmer, threatened by the industrial forces of concentration and large-scale mechanization. Leopold's answer to the industrial crisis was the land ethic⁵: a strong moral bond that compelled the smallholder to care for his property such that it would thrive for generations to come. Only by keeping such landholders on their working landscapes, Leopold wrote, could society cultivate this ethic—the true guarantor of lasting environmental and social prosperity.

The battle against industrialism portrayed by Leopold had been the 'farmer's problem' since at least the late 19th century, when rural Populist movements organized nationwide cooperative networks and supported a serious presidential candidate. Yet, when agrarianism roared back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it found a substantial new constituency for its critique of corporate concentration and monopoly power. Counterculturists galvanized by the Vietnam War and environmentalists awakened by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* stood ready to join the battle against 'agribusiness,' now understood as part of the military-industrial complex and a first-rate polluter. Thus, the new generation of agrarian writers reached well beyond 'farm people.' Berry^{6,7}, Jackson⁸ and Kirschenmann⁹ cast agrarianism in both moral and environmental terms as a simpler life, free of the social and environmental violence that so horrified 1960s youth. Thousands of young people, inspired by this promise, moved 'back to the land,' in search of an agrarian paradise. While the radical counterculture faded somewhat in the face of the Reagan Revolution, agrarian writing resurged in response to the most serious catastrophe of agrarian concentration since the Great Depression: the mid-1980s farm crisis. As great swaths of the rural population lost their farms and moved to cities, leaving behind towns too small to support schools, churches and corner stores, Berry^{10,11}, Jackson^{12,13} and Kirschenmann⁹ again called for preservation of the agrarian basis of American citizenship.

These back-to-the-land narratives share several features, reviving the themes of de Crevecoeur. After growing up in strongly agrarian, multi-generational communities they cannot yet appreciate, the protagonist-authors leave home to pursue some version of modern

prosperity. Disillusioned with the emptiness of urban life, they return home, only to find crisis: many people have left, and those who remain are struggling to make a living and hold onto their land. The project of the 'home-comer'¹², then, is to recover the heritage of self-sufficient rural lifeways, often from childhood memories of wisdom imparted by parents and grandparents. Such wisdom forms the foundation for rebuilding a sustainably prosperous community. While this conservatism fosters a healthy skepticism about the merits of various forms of 'progress' and has been a powerful lever of resistance against corporate and colonial exploitation, it runs the risk of becoming a rather broad-spectrum critique, which stymies democratic dynamism and desirable forms of change. If our only agrarian agenda is preservation, we are stuck with a denial that urban modernity can be generative (not just degenerate) and a defense of the 19th-century land tenure system (in which only elite white men owned property).

Agrarian (Pipe) Dreams?

Given these dangers, then, it is worthwhile to sharpen our critical tools, to make clear how agrarian discourse gets linked to inequitable land tenure and overly narrow political economic visions, to reveal these associations as contingent, and to empower ourselves to disassemble them. Rather than attempt an exhaustive survey of the growing critical literature on agrarianism, I turn to a few key works that make the points I have found most useful to keep in my back pocket.

Literary scholar Raymond Williams was one of my first such teachers. I read *The Country and the City*¹⁴ during my first semester in graduate school. Combing through hundreds of years of British agrarian writing, Williams pieces together a cautionary tale about moralities based on the contrast between 'rural' and 'urban.' He finds that unpalatable forms of 'progress' transform *both* country and city. Rather than fleeing cities in the hope of escaping social and environmental changes we do not like, Williams suggests, we should recognize that such changes are processes that interrelate urban and rural. We need to face them head on. Happily, the agrarian movement has incorporated much of this critique, moving from the back-to-the-land utopias of the 1960s to today's urban agriculture coalitions. Such coalitions—epitomized by the rise of food policy councils—engage directly with the social processes to which Williams refers, taking on the issues of housing, employment and education as well as growing food^{15,16}.

Also in my back pocket are the lessons of the Dust Bowl, first introduced to me by my grandmother, who lived through its hardships on a farm in Western Nebraska. American environmental historian Donald Worster¹⁷ thoughtfully chronicles this tragedy, warning that agrarian discourse can be used to convince people to

recklessly produce more and more. He finds that the Dust Bowl arose as agrarian ideals formed a thick cultural web around the economic imperatives of capitalism, fostering an unsustainable growth economy poorly suited to fragile prairie ecology. Taking this lesson to heart, then, we critical agrarians should not sign up for just any farm work party. It is not enough for all of us to labor; all of us must also take part in a democratic conversation about the way our labor is structured and what goals it should serve.

To this point, the third critical tool in my back pocket makes clear that just agrarian prosperity can never be achieved through individual efforts or self-sufficiency alone. Some of the work we need to do can only be done collectively. Thus, when geographer Julie Guthman¹⁸ goes ‘back to the land,’ she investigates not its environmental or moral merit, but the implications of its financial worth. Her research reminds us that even the most well-meaning agrarian practitioners confront the constraints of a financialized land market that does not share their values. Surveying organic growers in California, Guthman finds their dreams powerfully constrained by the reality of their rents and their debt. Even though many of these organic growers personally value environmental and social goods, Guthman discovers, the value of their land is based on market-determined ‘highest and best use.’ In order to avoid bankruptcy, then, they are forced into compromises—like monocropped organic strawberries—that allow them to earn high premiums while fulfilling some of their agrarian ambitions. Guthman’s work demonstrates why critical agrarianism cannot run from the key issues of land tenure and debt load (a point made also by Wendell Berry). Tenuous and expensive land tenure severely limits most wide-eyed agrarians, while debt often eviscerates the supposed virtues of fee simple farm ownership, even among seemingly secure white male family farmers. To make the changes we wish to see, we critical agrarians will need alternative land-tenure models that explicitly value public environmental and social goods. A critical mass of private property owners with a strong land ethic can never be enough. As Jefferson himself said, ‘while the farmer holds title to the land, actually it belongs to all the people, because civilization itself rests upon the soil.’

While such challenges cut across color lines, my fourth back-pocket tool acknowledges a particularly sobering critique of agrarianism: race. As Rachel Slocum¹⁹ has recently noted, agrarian projects can reinforce white privilege by ignoring the racial history of US land policy and reproducing structural and cultural ‘whiteness.’ Patricia Allen and Carolyn Sachs²⁰ make a similar argument. While the loss of white land in the mid-1980s was met with cries of foul, they observe, New Agrarians hardly noticed the 94% decline of black farm ownership over the course of the 20th century. Meanwhile, as far back as W.E.B. DuBois, African-American leaders have rightfully been quite critical of agrarianism, seeing it

associated with lynch mobs more than with freedom and democracy. Race—along with the land tenure—is one of the dimensions along which the concept must be thoroughly remade if it is to empower that just prosperity we critical agrarians are after.

To add a fifth and related back-pocket reminder, agrarianism needs to be attentive to gender inequity. As Sachs notes, ‘in the U.S. food and agriculture system, including the majority of family farms, men control land, capital, and women’s labor²¹, while women contribute significantly to the sector’s profitability as wage workers and as unpaid labor on family farms.’ Nipping gender inequities in the bud means asking what types of work we celebrate as ‘agrarian,’ who we label ‘the farmer,’ who we teach to use the tractor, and who is expected to do the unromanticized work of reproducing the agrarian household—that is, the laundry, the dishes, the taxes and the wage work that provides health insurance. We should not build our agrarian dreams on the backs of exploited and marginalized women.

Toward a Critical Agrarianism

Such critiques remind us that a return to the land—*per se*—is not necessarily a good thing. They provide a set of handy back-pocket tools to keep us critical agrarians on course as we build our alternative futures. Yet in veering from the blueprint of wholesale agrarian romanticism, we must not swing too far toward wholesale agrarian cynicism. Paying attention to history does not require us to see it as inevitably constraining. Rather, embracing the mythological quality of agrarianism that Williams so astutely identifies, we might recognize this storytelling opportunity as a powerful opening. Agrarianism is subject to multiple articulations, even radical retellings. It need not be co-constituted with a defense of 19th-century American property systems and power structures. Conservative political-economic stowaways may occupy the vessel of agrarianism, but they are not necessary to float its philosophy and politics. Indeed, careful attention to the agrarian stories we tell might well be one of the more effective ways of transforming relationships among land, people and memory.

My call for a critical agrarianism is thus intended to be generative and creative. It is a call for new forms of ‘linking up’ past and present, people and land. It is a call for linkages both more honest and better aligned with truly just and sustainable futures. Such a linking up begins with practitioners like Allen and Berry. It begins with efforts and histories already in progress but left out of mainstream agrarian discourse. Yet innovative members of the critical community—particularly those who have substantively engaged agrarian movements themselves—have something to offer too. Lawyer and critical legal scholar Eric Freyfogle develops a reformulation of agrarianism that highlights the key role of land tenure

and suggests ways in which private property rights might be constrained in the name of community and public goods²². Agricultural and environmental philosopher Paul Thompson argues that the agrarian project and the project of sustainability gain focus when viewed through each other's lenses. This engagement, he holds, pushes agrarianism toward a more humble ecological stance²³. Theologian and philosopher Norman Wirzba reorients agrarianism's gaze from past to future, declaring that 'its full realization still awaits us,' and calling on agrarian communities to eradicate trappings of oppression that continue to haunt the 'bonds of relationship'²⁴. While the writings of Freyfogle, Thompson and Wirzba are relatively well known to readers of Berry and Leopold, however, two other conceptual tools useful to critical agrarians are less commonly associated with the lineage of agrarian thought. These arguments—Melanie Dupuis and David Goodman's 'reflexive localism'²⁵ and Hannah Wittman's 'agrarian citizenship'²⁶—both help clarify what critical agrarianism looks like in practice.

Reflexivity and Agrarian Citizenship

Dupuis and Goodman²⁵ do not deal directly with agrarianism, but with a parallel concept also much maligned of late by social critics: localism. While local food systems are not by definition more just or sustainable, they acknowledge, a reflexive approach to them might well reap rewards. In turning to the local, Dupuis and Goodman suggest, we have identified a key pivot, a terrain to work on, a point of intervention. The next challenge is to pay close attention to the nature of such interventions. Instead of declaring 'let's have a local food system,' Dupuis and Goodman propose, we can ask 'what kind of local food system should we have?' Critical agrarians might constructively make the same move. Beyond the pronouncement, 'let's have *stronger* ties between people and land,' we can turn to the question of 'what *kinds* of ties between which people and what land?' What are we exchanging? With whom? What are the boundaries of our reciprocal communities? With whom do we share? Whom do we leave out? And whom do we leave less resilient?

If Dupuis and Goodman help us conceive critical agrarianism as fundamentally reflexive, Wittman²⁶ helps us see agrarianism from the perspective of the landless and marginalized, rather than the propertied and privileged. Brazil's *Movimento dos trabalhadores Sem Terra* (the MST or Landless Workers Movement), she writes, offers an articulation of agrarianism that activists in the Global North ought to heed:

By contesting the equation of property with citizenship, agrarian citizenship, as expressed and enacted by members of the MST, goes beyond traditional or liberal conceptions

of rights linked to individual property, production, or possession. Instead, it foregrounds new collective roles and rights for rural dwellers These are designed to ensure not only the economic survival and political demarginalization of the rural poor but also a broader conception of land stewardship as a social relation that involves all members of society. (p. 121)

Interestingly, personal connection of the sort encouraged by agrarians such as Leopold and Berry underpins this political struggle against the structure of land tenure in Brazil. The MST settlers Wittman interviewed 'suggested that an important factor mediating their ability to combine political activities with agricultural settlement practices and to survive as both small producers and political actors in the face of ongoing challenges to small-scale production in Brazil was the level of personal transformation that they had experienced as a result of the ongoing practical struggle to stay on the land.' One activist explained: 'if the body stops, the consciousness stops, it gets stagnant.'

Wittman's study thus suggests that heartfelt affective ties between people and land may prove central to the success of broader social struggles, because they reinforce (and are reinforced by) affective ties between people and people²⁷. Revising the Jeffersonian vision of multiple one-to-one tethers between farmer and landscape, such an agrarianism configures a dense socio-ecological network of community/human relations that is, in turn, tightly bound to the land. Thus, the MST's version of citizenship echoes Locke's insistence that agrarian rights be accompanied by agrarian responsibilities. The movement calls for 'using land in accordance with a social function perspective—providing food for the nation, respecting labour rights and the environment, and providing rural space for political action.' Moreover, the MST's agrarian citizenship challenges the absolutism of structuralist agrarian cynics as much as the absolutism of moralist agrarian romantics. Contesting the assumption that 'access to land alone will lead to the development of new forms of citizenship and rights,' MST agrarians insist that active agrarian citizenship must be developed through the everyday practices of people on the land, in their intertwined production and political activities. This includes a commitment to agroecological methods of production that sustain resources for future agrarian citizens.

Who is the Farmer?

Wittman's account of the MST illustrates what critical agrarianism looks like on the ground: how it is that agrarian practitioners can continually question and reshape the very category of agrarian, toward a more just and sustainable future. The MST settlers quoted in Wittman's article have clearly done this, contesting both the primacy of private property rights that dominates

Brazil's agrarian economy *and* the most prominent discourse of resistance, which focuses solely on access to land, rather than the details of everyday agrarian practices. The MST thus engages agrarian struggle while redefining what responsible agrarianism means. If writing the MST into an account of agrarianism is one promising move, where else might we critical agrarians look for inspiration?

One starting point for such an agrarianism is an empirical account of who has actually been doing the work to put food on the table. As Kloppenburg²⁸ proposes, we critical agrarians might reconceive the basis of agrarianism as the embodied knowledge based in this labor. Since those who work the land are not always (or even usually) those who own it^{20,29-34}, this shifts the discourse of agrarianism from one of property rights and conservation to one of resource access and social transformation. In the next section, I consider three American agrarian traditions in which land titles have not followed from land ethics. These traditions are based on the experiences of Latino farmworkers, Japanese-American communal farmers and sharecroppers, and African-American descendants of slaves and sharecroppers. By highlighting the extraordinary struggles of non-landowners to extend agrarian care, I hope to demonstrate that agrarianism has as much to gain by bringing land back to people as by bringing people back to the land.

Farmworker Agrarianism

Farmworker agrarianism complicates the basis of the typical agrarian narrative in two fundamental ways: the agrarian protagonist does not own the land he or she tends, and industrialization has not distanced the agrarian narrator from land-based labor. Rather, industrial agriculture works to keep the farmworker agrarian on the land, intensifying the labor process to the point of injury and even death, while making ownership nearly impossible. Amazingly, however, farmworker agrarianism is a robust movement: one which has led many Salinas Valley families to carefully tend subsistence gardens after working hours, enroll in programs to transition to organic farm ownership³⁵, and engage in one of the most effective anti-pesticide campaigns ever mounted³¹. Such agrarianism-from-below is not only possible, but uniquely effective in addressing the forces that give rise to the agrarian critique in the first place.

This critical agrarian potential is realized poetically in Elva Treviño Hart's *Barefoot Heart*³⁶, which bears interesting similarities to more canonical agrarian texts such as Wes Jackson's *Becoming Native to this Place*¹² or Wendell Berry's *Unsettling of America*⁷. A professional woman recalling her youth as a migrant farmworker, Treviño Hart mirrors Berry and Jackson in longing for her agrarian childhood. She feels a sense of loss in the city and

notices nature in the lovingly detailed manner with which de Crevecoeur describes his bees:

I found things in the dirt to be interested in. No toys; no one even thought of toys. An adult looking at the scene would have seen a child with not one thing to occupy her mind. But I found a thousand things to interest me: The dragonflies, the red-winged blackbirds with their shiny black bodies, brilliant red wings, and hopeful songs. No two leaves were the same on the trees at the edge of the field. The wind sighed like my mother as it blew through the leaves. The clouds endlessly changed and moved (p. 41).

Yet the message of Treviño Hart's memory is not nostalgia for a simpler, gentler past. Even her metaphors gesture to her mother's sighs, her father's pain. Treviño Hart's connection to and care for land persists in spite of the violent way in which her family is continually uprooted, not because they enjoy a secure foothold. Sometimes this care becomes frustration, as when her father's herculean, deeply felt stewardship of the family avocado tree cannot persuade it to produce fruit in the northern latitude to which fieldwork has forced him to relocate:

My mother smuggled an avocado pit home in her handkerchief . . . My father planted this tiny piece of his homeland and tended it like a first born son . . . Avocado trees don't bear fruit for seven to eleven years from the date of planting. But my father was undaunted. He just kept taking care of it . . . It bore five huge, delicious avocados . . . It never bore fruit again. After five more years of mammoth cave-like plastic coverings for the tree . . . my father let it freeze. And then he cut it down, bitterly resigned to his separation from Villaldama (p. 107-8).

Moreover, Treviño Hart's eventual homecoming does not find people gone (as Jackson's does), but still being exploited. The building she lived in has indeed been destroyed, but not because a conglomerate gobbled up the property. Rather, the government declared the outbuilding her family once called home 'unfit for human habitation.' Coming 'home' to a place that never acknowledged her as a full citizen, Treviño Hart finds her agrarian community still on the land, but structurally constrained from realizing its agrarian visions. Her agrarianism calls not for a return to a more innocent past, but for a restructuring of rights and belonging in the countryside.

Tomás Rivera's 'La Cosecha,'³⁷ a fictional story based on Rivera's own childhood as a farmworker, likewise illustrates how a strong, Leopoldian land ethic might thrive in the absence of property ownership. The story follows farmworker Don Trine—not a man with free time on his hands or an embarrassment of resources—as he makes his daily afternoon pilgrimage to stick his hand in the earth and feel the changing of the seasons. Harvest is almost over. Workers are preparing to travel to Texas for the winter. And yet, Don Trine tends a reciprocal, sacramental relationship with land he does not own, to which he may never be able to return. A young boy who

witnesses and replicates Don Trine's ritual explains, through Rivera's narrator, 'What he experienced and what he never forgot was feeling the earth move, feeling the earth grasp his fingers and even caressing them.'

Japanese-American Agrarianism

Japanese-American agrarianism similarly exemplifies the presence of a strong land ethic despite structural barriers to property ownership. Japanese farmers were barred from owning land in California by the 1913 Alien Land Law, which was strengthened in 1920 to prohibit leasing as well. Nonetheless, a surprising number of Japanese-American farmers persisted in the face of the discriminatory legislation, accepting higher rents and other disadvantages of their second-class citizenship and devising clever legal workarounds. As of 1925, almost half the Japanese population in California worked as small farmers. A far more serious setback to Japanese-American farming, however, arrived in 1942, in the form of the World War II policy of internment³⁸. Americans of Japanese descent were forced to resettle in one of ten camps, leaving behind homes, farms and businesses, to which most were unable to return. Incredibly, many Japanese-Americans maintained strong agrarian traditions both during and after World War II: caring for internment camp gardens and becoming sharecroppers after the war. In one particularly striking case, internees hired caretakers to ensure that a collectively farmed agrarian community would survive beyond internment³¹.

Valerie Matsumoto³¹ tells the story of this exceptional community, the Cortez Colony. Founded in 1919 by Abiko Kyutaro, the colony was self-consciously designed both to foster Jeffersonian agrarian virtues in new immigrants *and* to assert belonging in the face of overt racism and legal challenges to citizenship. As such, it was connected to several other Abiko-founded businesses, including a widely read newspaper, all of which aimed to protect Japanese-Americans' rights, explore new fields of urban and rural enterprise, and facilitate further immigration. Thus, while promoting responsible landedness in much the same terms as traditional agrarians, Cortez was hardly the stuff of defensive or nativist localism. Indeed, one of its primary aims was to successfully and materially contest such sentiments in rural California. Taking Locke at face value, the colony promoted agrarianism as a practice, conceiving it (much like the MST does) as a form of citizenship earned, not given.

Moreover, while aiming to cultivate personal connections and responsibility to the land (and the United States), Cortez was fundamentally collectivist, rather than individual. The colony mobilized agrarian ties as a means of communally overcoming the strictures of the Alien Land Laws (through collective ownership) and internment (by pooling resources and establishing a governance structure, then negotiating a trusteeship agreement with

white allies). Ties forged through deeply personal agrarian relations were mobilized to successfully resist racist attempts to economically and politically purge Japanese 'aliens' from the social body. As Matsumoto explains:

The combined efforts of the three Japanese-American cooperative associations—the Cortez Growers Association (CGA), the Livingston Fruit Growers Exchange, and the Livingston Fruit Growers—enabled the Issei and Nisei to maintain not only economic stability but also a remarkable degree of social cohesion during the evacuation. The growers' associations ensured that the Cortez Japanese-Americans would have homes to return to at the end of the war (p. 89).

Historians marvel at the great care with which Japanese-Americans tended the gardens and farms of assembly centers and internment camps, and the Cortez colonists were no exception. As Matsumoto notes, using the term 'victory garden' without a hint of irony, 'As soon as their shock abated, the Japanese-Americans set to work to improve their bleak surroundings ... victory gardens began to appear around the barracks.'

Yet, the most incredible expression of the Cortez colonists' agrarian care is perhaps the work they undertook when they returned from these camps to resume farming in their own 'home place.' They were not yet able to move back onto land still legally rented to white tenants. Their move back from internment was scheduled as hastily and heavy-handedly as their move there had been, making it impossible to plan ahead for the season. Undaunted, the colonists lived in rented army tents, cooked their meals outside, and worked alongside their much less-skilled white tenants throughout the grape harvest (racial hierarchies and anxieties still very much intact) before returning to their homes the following season. Despite a lifetime of such bitter agrarian memories, moreover, the older generation of Cortez colonists continued to express strongly felt love for their life on the land when Matsumoto arrived in the 1980s to record oral histories. Like Treviño Hart, the Cortez colonists held onto personal agrarian ties in spite of structural barriers and forced mobility—and in fact, mobilized their agrarianism to contest dominant political economies.

Miriam Wells³⁹ describes another exceptional instance of California Japanese-American agrarianism: Central Coast strawberry production. Unique among Central Valley strawberry growers, she finds, Japanese-American strawberry sharecroppers in the Pajaro Valley invested the most per acre, had the longest tenure on particular plots, systematically experimented with their farming systems, paid the highest and most stable wages, and used core workers for as many tasks as possible. Building long-term relationships with their workers (most of whom were Mexican), they planted crops with short-lived labor demand to provide work during berry lulls. Some adjusted schedules so that workers could move onto the apple harvest or draw unemployment when strawberry work ended. One grower interviewed by Wells even developed a

profit-sharing pension plan for workers who stayed with him for at least 7 years, speaking of their ‘symbiotic relationship.’ Clearly Berry-esque in their commitment to land and community, these growers were nonetheless leasers—not owners—of their land. As Wells’ analysis demonstrates, these renters were far more the agrarian guardians of this land than those who held its title.

For the Japanese-American Cortez colonists and strawberry sharecroppers, then, agrarianism was a means of contesting, not reinforcing, structural racism. Challenging naturalistic framings of agrarian belonging, they emphasized responsibility to community in practice over fixed blood-and-soil bonds, insisting that Japanese-Americans too had a ‘home place’ in the California countryside.

African-American Agrarianism

Among those who have established critical agrarian traditions, then, are several ‘imported colonial subjects’³³ whose experiences have been characterized as forms of slavery: Latino farmworkers forced by trade assaults and immigration policy into economic subjugation; Japanese internees imprisoned against their will and dispossessed of most of their property. That the term *slavery* is used by activists to drive home the seriousness of such exploitation, however, necessarily points us critical agrarians to the plantation history of the American South. African-American agrarianism, seemingly a contradiction in terms; has become one of our country’s most challenging and truly transformative movements. It not only remakes the category agrarian, but turns it completely on its head.

Two prominent African-American led urban agrarian projects, Chicago’s Healthy Food Hub and Milwaukee’s Growing Power, illustrate the significance of this shift. They revise agrarianism by celebrating their urban context and foregrounding matters of difference and inequity. Rather than looking to the past for means of recovering social capital lost or threatened, they embrace both old and new means of building social capital where it has been taken or forcibly dismantled.

As Meleiza Figueroa⁴⁰ explains, the Healthy Food Hub ‘seeks to pool the resources of its members and the surrounding community to “bring home healthier, tastier, fresher food for less.” This is achieved through collective purchasing of wholesale produce, as well as direct food production on rural farms in the historic Black farming community of Pembroke Township, Illinois, located approximately 60 miles south of Chicago.’

The way in which memory animates the Healthy Food Hub’s efforts powerfully links land and people, past and present, but in complex ways. Many Healthy Food Hub organizers moved to Chicago as children from agrarian lives in the Mississippi Delta. Their revival of collective buying practices and mutual aid traditions recalls this heritage, mobilizing it to improve the health of their

community. Yet, these activists are certainly not celebrating the ‘good ole days.’ Memories of the land are interwoven with memories of lynchings and oppression. Collective practices are rightly understood as traditions of independence from white—not just corporate—society. They remember ‘the Union League, which organized mutual aid networks amongst Black farmers to protect against attacks from white plantation owners’. They remember independent farming colonies like Mound Bayou, a ‘utopian experiment founded on notions of self-help and independence from white interference.’³⁸ Moreover, the move to Chicago is not lamented. Rather, like Williams, Healthy Food Hub organizers stress the linkage of city and country. Processes of dispossession have followed them from Mississippi plantations to urban food deserts in northern cities—and such processes also link them to global histories beyond their own community. Rather than idealizing a particular form or space, these organizers begin the project of decolonization from where they are, drawing on a heritage of collective practices to animate new articulations, more liberated agrarianisms:

So the sons and daughters of what used to be here in Pembroke—the largest black farming community north of the Mason-Dixon line came here and did not want to know how to farm. They did not want to know anything to do with dealing with the land...[My husband’s] father would say, ‘What’s wrong with you boy? You doing the very thing that we all ran away from. You down there growing food, what’s wrong with you?’ Constantly, we kept meeting this experience of people being in a lot of pain with the earth. So we all said, ‘what’s going on here?’ The very thing that we need to heal is the thing that all of us have been taught to no longer value. And so we literally buried the pain here...not only did we put the pain back into the earth, we also picked up our power, of our relationship with the earth. We have here strawberries for love and forgiveness. And calendula, for wound healing...fellows came from Uganda and Kenya, and they shared in it...and maybe we can begin to do a global process where we’ll release our colonialization and our suffering, and regain our power again.—Healthy Food Hub organizer, 6/21/11⁴⁰

As this organizer articulates, African-American agrarians must remake the category of agrarianism as a precondition of re-engaging with the land. Only through redefinition can injustice be addressed rather than furthered, wounds healed rather than deepened.

A similar project in Milwaukee brings me back to the contrast with which I opened, between canonical agrarian, Wendell Berry, and Growing Power’s charismatic leader, Will Allen. Much like the path taken by many Healthy Food Hub organizers, Allen’s road to urban food activism runs through a Southern agrarian childhood. His father was a sharecropper in South Carolina, descended from slaves. Thus, Allen’s notion of landedness is inextricably linked to the plantation economy of the American South and with racialized dispossession. Yet Allen’s memories reinforce both a hunger for social justice

and a strong affective bond with land, plants and animals. When the former basketball player settled in Milwaukee, he realized this brand of agrarianism in the form of a two-acre urban farm, situated in the city's working-class northwest side. Soil health matters just as much to Allen as to Berry, yet the urban farmer cites different reasons, and has employed different methods. 'When you're producing a quarter of a million dollars' worth of food in such a small space, soil fertility is everything,' Elizabeth Royte⁴¹ notes of Allen's operation. Allen uses red wigglers—worms—to churn out rich, copious compost on limited acreage. His ecology is urban, so part of Allen's agrarian connection is the six million pounds of spoiled food he diverts from landfills to feed his compost operation. His agrarianism, like that of Berry or Jackson, also involves banding together with similarly situated farmers. Yet the lines of difference and disadvantage along which this happen differ from those sketched in Berry's Kentucky or Jackson's Kansas. 'Allen was sharing his land with Hmong farmers,' Royte reports, 'with whom he felt some kinship after concluding that white shoppers were spurning their produce at the farmers' market.' In his own 'Good Food Manifesto for America,' Allen serves up an agrarian vision, not of reconnection or paradise returned, but rather of redemptive justice: 'It will be an irony, certainly, but a sweet one, if millions of African-Americans whose grandparents left the farms of the South for the factories of the North, only to see those factories close, should now find fulfillment in learning once again to live close to the soil and to the food it gives to all of us'⁴².

Conclusion

Allen's work is a significant re-articulation of agrarianism, but there is nonetheless a striking similarity between his words and those of Wendell Berry. Both begin by citing multigenerational personal agrarian histories, urging us to value ties to land and rebuild them if we have been alienated. Both appeal to universal human experience in describing the transformative possibilities of cultivation, celebrating the potential for literal common ground. That two such differently situated Americans find community and self-expression through this discourse should encourage us critical agrarians. We may be onto a language in which we can have truly democratic, socially transformative conversations. For the heart of agrarian thinking, as political theorist Kimberly K. Smith argues, is the notion of 'common grace,' which reminds us that we must work together to sustain our fragile social and natural worlds⁴³. Berry and Allen, Treviño Hart, Rivera, Cortez colonists, Japanese strawberry sharecroppers, and Healthy Food Hub organizers are all engaged in this work. Bringing the weight of their different experiences to bear, they dialogically sharpen and inform a commonly understood goal: shared agrarian prosperity.

In the process, we can change each other's minds. When a recent conflict pitted the Pembroke farmers against The Nature Conservancy for control of their land, canonical Leopoldians might have sided with the conservation organization. Yet many contemporary agrarians sympathize with the farmers. A younger Wendell Berry equated cities with crime and moral downfall, but now he works alongside Will Allen, sharing the podium with him at conferences and celebrating the achievements of Growing Power. The progress we have made in reframing each other's agrarianisms through a critical agrarian conversation is far from complete—but it is decidedly hopeful.

Moving forward, our strength must come from our honesty. If responsible agrarian work creates the social and environmental goods that underlie a just prosperity, do its rewards truly flow back to those with their hands in the dirt? Where have debt loads, discriminatory legislation and redlining impeded such socio-ecological reciprocity? How can we realize an agrarianism in which practices—not paperwork—are truly the basis of material and social community?

The final step, I think, will be to celebrate our agrarian possibilities without recourse to exceptionalism. We can claim value in the relationships we build, without claiming that farmers alone make 'the best citizens.' While acknowledging many real lines of difference, we must stop drawing the false divides of urban/rural, cultivator/worker and local/global that cut us off from our goals just as we stand closest to reaching them. Rather, as Williams, the MST, the Cortez Colony, the Healthy Food Hub and Growing Power encourage, we must extend our webs outward rather than inward, understanding our connection to the work of land tenure reform, education, community development, immigrant advocacy and trade policy. To be an agrarian, then, is not to preserve fixed social–natural ties, but rather to practice a powerfully open and dialogical engagement with the world and one another. Given the troubled histories that have shaped our engagement with the land, such a project will be rife with contradictions, which we must confront squarely as they arise. Yet we must not be afraid of the ever-imperfect state of affairs that awaits us in the dirt. In the words of Donna Haraway⁴⁴, 'I think we learn to be worldly from grappling with, rather than generalizing from, the ordinary. I am a creature of the mud, not the sky.'

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