

# The Yeoman Myth: A Troubling Foundation of the Beginning Farmer Movement

**Abstract:** Aging farmer demographics and declining agricultural trends provoke policy makers, farmer advocacy groups, and food system scholars to ask, “Who will do the work of farming in the future?” One response to this concern has been the rise of a “beginning farmer” narrative, where the goal of creating new farmers emerges as a key aspirational food systems reform mechanism. In this vision, young and beginning farmers will seize the transitioning lands from retiring farmers and bring with them an alternative system that is ecologically minded, open to new innovations, and socially oriented. Given the flurry of governmental, nonprofit, and private sector activity spurred by this vision, this article asks, what are the ideological drivers of the beginning farmer construct, and what are the consequences for the goals associated with a

just food system transition? Invoking the concept of mythology, this article examines the character of the American beginning farmer narrative. The narrative is shown to appeal to a particular land use vision, one based on ideals of individual land ownership, single proprietor farming, neoliberal logics of change, and whiteness. In a sense, the beginning farmer movement embraces a yeoman mythology, a powerful force underwriting the American dream. The consequence of this embrace has problematic outcomes for the transformative potential of a politically engaged beginning farmer constituency. Embracing alternative imaginaries and mythologies may be a first step in forging a new farmer movement that provides equity across socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

Let me speak to you as a familiar, because of all the years I’ve cherished members of your tribe. ... I remember the uniqueness of every intern, WWOOFer, and summer weed-puller who has spent a season or two on our family’s farm. Some preferred to work without shoes. Some were captivated by the science of soils, botany, and pest management. Some listened to their iPods, or meditated, or even sang as they hoed and weeded, while others found no music among the bean beetles. A few confessed to finding this work too hard, but many have gone on to manage other farmers or buy places of their own. In these exceptional souls I invest my hopes.

— BARBARA KINGSOLVER IN *LETTERS TO A YOUNG FARMER: ON FOOD, FARMING, AND OUR FUTURE* (KINGSOLVER 2017: 15)

**We believe there is a movement happening in our generation.** That many of us are drawn to the concepts, beauty, simplicity, and personality of a well-loved place from yesteryear ... a place we call: the farmhouse. A place that is less about the farm, and more about the house.

**We believe that we are coming full circle.** That we desire a more authentic lifestyle, similar to those lived out in the households of quieter times—where family values prevailed; ingredients were simple; mason jars, quilts and shiplap were commonplace; neighbors were friends; and where time well spent trumped task lists.

—MISSION STATEMENT, *THE FARMHOUSE MOVEMENT MAGAZINE*

## Who Will Farm?

Aging farmer demographics and declining agricultural trends provoke policy makers, farmer advocacy groups, and food system

scholars to ask, “Who will do the work of farming in the future?” After years of steady increase, the average age of farmers in the United States is now over 58 (USDA 2013). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that 370,000 farmers have departed from the farm sector between 1982 and 2012 (USDA NASS 2014). Farmland also continues to disappear. As pressures intensify to use land for other “productive” purposes such as housing or infrastructure, farmland acreage nationwide has decreased (Ikerd 2013; Olson and Lyson 1999). A recent report on farmland loss estimates a loss of 31 million acres between 1992 and 2012 (Sorensen et al. 2018). In California alone, 1.4 million acres of farm and grazing land were lost between 1984 and 2014, a decrease of about 50,000 acres per year (State of California Department of Conservation 2015). Much of the remaining farmland, as aging farmers look to retirement buyouts, appears to be up for grabs; the most recent national census of farmland ownership reveals that 10 percent of farmland owners expected to dispose of their farm properties by the end of 2019 (USDA NASS 2016).

The dominant government, nonprofit, and farmer movement response to these trends is encapsulated in the goal of “creating new farmers” (US Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry 2010; Bittman 2015; NSAC 2017).<sup>1, 2</sup> It is a broad call-to-action that emanates across political and geographical domains

and emerges as a key aspirational food systems reform pathway (Figure 1). In this vision, young and beginning farmers will seize the transitioning lands from retiring farmers and bring with them an alternative system that is ecologically minded, open to new innovations, and politically engaged. A beginning farmer movement could, the idea goes, simply facilitate new farmers to go out onto the land and create an alternative, more sustainable agricultural landscape. This outcome occurs without having to reform the logics of the corporatized agricultural system, avoiding the “lock-ins” (Smith, Voss, and Grin 2010) that plague proposals to change the global agribusiness food regimes (Hinrichs 2014). It is a hopeful narrative that is repeated in academic articles, alternative agriculture conferences, USDA policy platforms, and in the popular press (Niewolny and Lillard 2010; Freedgood and Dempsey 2014; Jablonski et al. 2017; Bradbury, Von Tschamer Fleming, and Manalo 2012; Bittman 2015; Stock, Darby, and Hossler 2018).

The worry over the devaluation of the plummeting numbers of farmers is not new. Wendell Berry’s *Unsettling of*

*America* is a well-known polemic about industrial agriculture’s push toward the hollowing out of US rural livelihoods (Berry 1977). There, Berry laments the loss of family farm agrarian culture spurred by the government’s embrace of industrial agriculture and corporate consolidation. What is new is a decidedly entrepreneurial rebranding of farming as youthful agrarianism, aimed at capitalizing on the contemporaneous expansion of direct-to-consumer and “good food” market share. Seizing this market, proponents argue, opens a window for new small-scale, alternative, sustainable production arrangements to emerge and establish.

This narrative, however, risks becoming an uncritical trope. How the “beginning farmer” theory of change is conceptualized and its consequences for farmers and rural livelihoods demand critical examination. Just as agricultural sociology scholarship has warned of the ready embrace of “good food” interventions (DeLind 2010), it follows that the same critical lens should be applied to the existing beginning farmer approach as a theory of change.



FIGURE 1: An image from the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture Growing Farmers Initiative. A heading reads, “One-third of American farmers are over retirement age; only 6% are under age 35. Our Growing Farmers Initiative helps beginning farmers succeed.” The webpage directs users to apply for a five-day “entrepreneurial intensive.”

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This article examines the dissonance between the aspirations of the beginning farmer movement and the challenges of twenty-first-century agrarianism. I explore the discourse and logics of the movement's key actors and practitioners to show how the movement embraces a decidedly neoliberal and entrepreneurial vision of agriculture. I contend that beginning farmer aspirations provide a narrow imaginary of agrarian life, grounded in concepts of individual improvement, technical agricultural proficiency, and private property ownership. This imaginary is symbolized by the myth of the yeoman farmer, a prominent feature of the rural idyll that fuels logics of meritocracy and individual triumph over nature. The "yeoman myth" expresses norms, values, and imaginaries of what farming is and should be. The myth instructs us that farming is an individualistic, heroic endeavor, typified by anachronistic white landowning families who overcome hardship through grit, perseverance, and marketing ingenuity. The problem with this mythology is that in a world where agricultural systems are well known to be in crisis, it narrowly defines the types of people who can and should farm and the types of farming that should be done, and it sanitizes the acceptable strategies put forward to form pathways into the agricultural sector. In what follows, I aim to interrogate the yeoman myth's suitability to drive the purported aims of rural renewal expressed by the beginning farmer movement, paving the way for an exploration of alternative mythologies for a more emancipatory and systems-oriented beginning farmer agenda.

I first lay out the importance of mythology in shaping rural life, then describe the particularities of the yeoman farmer imaginary. Having described the structure of this imaginary, I trace the discourses of the beginning farmer "movement" in the United States through an analysis of key institutions, mission statements, writings, public interventions, and media accounts in an effort to reveal the key logics involved with "creating new farmers." I then show how the dominance of the yeoman new farmer ideology ultimately limits the potential for a broad coalition of beginning farmers to transform the food system by rendering invisible the most pernicious structural barriers to entry such as inequitable land access and narrow training pathways. Interrogating this narrative, I hope to show how the dominant approaches to supporting new farmers are problematic, and even damaging, to the publicized transformational goals of the movement.

By way of conclusion, I argue that the perennial structural problems associated with twenty-first-century agriculture confound beginning farmer aspirations of rural renewal and thus demand structural intervention rather than entrepreneurial

pluck. The result is a policy mismatch where publicly funded and nonprofit beginning farmer programs, narrowly aimed at technical capacity building, merely benefit the elites of the beginning farmer landscape. Considering these contradictory outcomes of beginning farmer narratives and activities, I offer suggestions for reworking the beginning farmer aspiration toward a movement (and a mythology) that is power aware and politically engaged.

## The Yeoman Myth

The concept of a myth is commonly formed in two ways: a narrative expressing a commonsense morality and a fable with a structure and morality that are ultimately misleading (Christman 1994). Myths give shape to ideas, give credibility to certain normative actions and relationships. A powerful myth thus legitimizes a range of activities while ostracizing others, and by doing so shapes and obscures reality. For social constructivists, myths play a causative role in creating realities, as myths expressed through performative and representational actions bring the world into being (Blomley 2013). Thus, myths and their performative re-expressions play a key role in motivating action and expressing morality.

The first expression of the yeoman farmer as myth was most likely through Henry Nash Smith's account in *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Stemming from religious conceptions of morality and the domination of nature, Smith describes how the yeoman myth was instrumental in providing the justification for westward expansion. Crucially, Smith identifies that the unique feature of yeoman mythology was the yeoman farmers' ability to freehold: "The crux of the matter is the ownership of land, which constitutes independence" (Smith 1971: 136). They were a group of white male landholders who were thought to be self-sufficient, egalitarian masters of their domain, and thus ideal participants in a democracy during the eighteenth century (Scholl 2008). The yeoman farmers are often associated with a Jeffersonian ideal of agriculture and civic life, where the rural landholders were seen as self-sufficient and insulated from urban mercantilism (McEwan 1991). Jefferson, a key trafficker of the yeoman myth, managed a plantation and had no experience as an owner-operator. Thus, even at the outset of American settler colonial agrarianism, the yeoman ideal was a vision of rural life, deployed by urban and landowning mentalities like Jefferson's and other members of the merchant class with designs for westward expansion. Smith notes the submission to an 1840 *Hunts Merchant's Magazine* by Connecticut merchant James H. Lanman that

extols the political and militaristic virtues of a rural America populated by individual freeholders:

The agriculturist, removed from the pernicious influences that are forever accumulated in large cities, the exciting scenes, which always arise from large accumulations of men, passes a quiet and undisturbed life, possessing ample means and motives thoroughly to reflect upon his rights and duties, and holding a sufficient stake in the soil to induce him to perform those duties both for himself and his country. It is to the truehearted and independent yeomen of a nation that we look, in times of national danger, to uphold its institutions, and to protect themselves in preserving the principles of the state. (Nash 1971: 142)

The “yeomen” were thus idealized as the moral protagonists of such key narratives as American agrarianism, the rural idyll, and the heroism of westward expansionism.

Of course, the yeoman myth is ripe with contradictions. The portrait of a heroic journeyman obscures the history of ruthless pillaging that accompanied westward expansion (Grandin 2019). Stories of Herculean individual accomplishments often ignore how the agrarian system was shaped by legal decree. The commitment to freehold obscured the necessary dispossession of land and the exclusion of non-white men from the ability to own land based on colonial constructions of property (Manzella 2017). In particular, the deployment of the yeoman myth must be understood as co-emerging with chattel slavery in the colonies (Gordon-Reed 2000). Letters from Jefferson to James Madison indicate that the boosting of a rural yeoman population was designed to soothe landless workers’ unrest of the sort that led to Bacon’s Rebellion in the late 1600s (Morgan 1972). In Virginia, tensions between the plantation elite and the agrarian workforce were reduced by the adoption of chattel slavery and the creation of a new white smallholding class:

A free society divided between large landholders and small was much less riven by antagonisms than one divided between landholders and landless, masterless men. With the freedman’s expectations, sobriety, and status restored, he was no longer a man to be feared. That fact, together with the presence of a growing mass of alien slaves, tended to draw the white settlers closer together and to reduce the importance of the class difference between yeoman farmer and large plantation owner. (Morgan 1972: 28)

While the yeoman myth has always been associated with Jeffersonian democracy, self-sufficiency, and independence, it also has always been tied up paradoxically with slavery and class differentiation. Notably, the groups of agriculturalists referred to as American yeoman farmers were identified conceptually as distinct from the landed gentry in feudal Europe because of their libertarian self-sufficiency. Yet, they are now widely understood as completing their agricultural tasks with

a broad deployment of slave or indentured labor as well as state-sponsored land acquisition and subsidized water and transportation infrastructure (Scholl 2008).

Despite its inconsistencies and paradoxical underpinnings, the yeoman myth has proven to be a durable and powerful imaginary of American agrarianism (Mariola 2005; Minkoff-Zern 2014; see Figure 2). It is an imaginary that has not faded but perhaps crystallized into a more complete expression within beginning farmer narratives. Built upon the visions of frontier heroism and westward expansion, one of the key features of the yeoman rhetoric has been to transform agricultural challenges into narratives of individual triumph and sacrifice (Peterson 1990).

The power of this myth shapes the logics and policies designed to fulfill the ideal of the self-sufficient farmer. The yeoman ideal is thought to be the rhetorical driving force behind such policies as the Homestead Act, where citizens were granted the right to claim up to 120 acres of public land at substantially subsidized rates. This act, resulting in 420,000 square miles of new private landholdings, was central to the formation of smallholder private property regimes and individual home ownership (Neufville and Barton 1987). Of course, the eligible recipients of these properties were white men, a pattern that extended into the mid-twentieth century with a series of land donation and ethnic exclusion acts (Taylor 1982; Clay 1999). Thus, the yeoman myth plays a role in constructing structural land access barriers to “create and maintain racialized outcomes in society—reinforcing group-based advantages and disadvantages” (Ayazi and Elsheikh 2015: 7).

Embracing the yeoman farmer imaginary entrenches ideas of ‘correct’ forms of agrarian life and ‘ideal’ forms of farmer identities and is inscribed into law to match these conceptualizations. This narrow vision has direct implications for the types of interventions aimed at reversing the aging US farmer population. As the next section will demonstrate, those who are seen as viable, even desirable, newcomers will match the yeoman myth closely: white, privileged, self-sacrificing, Herculean. In the yeoman myth, new farmers simply need assistance to help them learn how to farm and how to set up farming businesses. Place the right type of hard-working individual on their own plot of land, so the logic goes, and they will prosper. If the yeoman myth is indeed driving beginning farmer narratives and imaginaries, what are the consequences for farmer livelihoods and policies? The next section examines key beginning farmer discourses to demonstrate the yeoman myth at play in beginning farmer aspirations and its consequences for American food systems.





FIGURE 2: Early young farmer imagery found in a recruitment brochure for a Grange Hall Association meeting.

GIFT FOR THE GRANGERS. J. HALE POWERS & CO. FRATERNITY & FINE ART PUBLISHERS, STODOLSKY & CO. LITH., C1873. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION

Who are thought to be beginning farmers? How do beginning farmer imaginaries shape the systems designed to support them? To answer these questions, I employ discourse analysis of key institutions, policies, national news media, and food literature that engage with beginning farmers. These sources were selected based on six years of dissertation work on beginning farmer issues that led to a familiarity with protagonists of the beginning farmer theory of change across the United States. This work began with 33 in-depth interviews and participant observation at a farmer training incubator in California dedicated to creating pathways to proprietorship for current and former farm laborers. Of the interviews, 19 were current incubator program participants and seven had recently transitioned to farming independently off-site. Of 26 farmers interviewed, 21 were former immigrant farmworkers. Eight beginning farmers were women, while 18 were men. Seven staff members at the incubator were also interviewed for triangulation. The results of this work are described in Calo and De Master (2016). To understand beginning farmer policy, I analyzed five years of the programs receiving funding from the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) to understand how farmer perceptions of key challenges aligned with policy interventions. The results of this work are described in Calo (2018). These inquiries, including participation in multiple food system conferences and working groups focused on new entrant farmers, the production of synthesis academic collaborations on the beginning farmer issue (Carlisle et al. 2019), and the consumption and production of national food reporting, provide the basis for argument.

Examining the prevailing beginning farmer discourse—articulated through a sample of key media, nonprofit activities, and imagery being propagated—reveals a narrow interpretation of the imaginative space for beginning farmers. I will demonstrate that prominent beginning farmer visions uncannily replicate an old American agrarian imaginary of the self-sufficient private property owner, the yeoman. The dominant embrace of the mythology has consequences in shaping pathways for the establishment of beginning farmers.

#### THE BEGINNING FARMER MOVEMENT: AN INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

Fledgling federal policy directly aims to support new farmers, most notably through the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) that has paid out over

\$150 million in training grants over a 10-year period. The BFRDP operates by funding proposals from universities and nonprofits that propose beginning farmer support activities. Nonprofit, research, and extension activities also promote new farmers. The Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, for example, hosts an annual “Young Farmer’s Conference” in the Hudson Valley in upstate New York. Another organization, the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project at Tufts University, whose mission is “working with new farmers to build strong businesses, expertise in the field, and a resilient food system,” focuses on the capacity building of new farmers. Both produce guidebooks, hold frequent skills webinars, and direct new entrants to existing resources (Agudelo and Overton 2013). Farm incubators, like the University of California–Santa Cruz Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems, offer long-term farm apprenticeships. There, aspiring farmers spend six months living on the 30-acre campus farm, completing one thousand hours of practical and technical instruction. Overton (2014) identified 62 operational farm incubators (subsidized spaces for new farm businesses) in a national survey. Agricultural lobbying groups, like the National Sustainable Agricultural Coalition, produce policy briefs targeted at strengthening federal beginning farmer legislation.

Across this network of institutions and movements, all of these groups subscribe to the notion that without promoting the entry of new farmers into agriculture, the trends of disappearing farms and aging farmers point toward an irreversible, inevitable depreciation of agrarian life (Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture and Hodgkins 2017).

#### BEGINNING FARMERS HAVE TRADITIONAL WISDOM AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SAVVY

One group carrying the banner of beginning farmer aspirations is the Greenhorns, operating out of the Hudson and Champlain Valleys in upstate New York and now Maine. Their mission is to “promote, support, and recruit young farmers in America” (Greenhorns 2018). The Greenhorns began with a feature-length independent documentary about the burgeoning beginning farmer movement. The group now publishes a variety of media, runs farm training workshops, and supports knowledge sharing among aspiring farmers. The group started the “Farm Hack” program, in which young farmers share their agricultural innovations online, like a solar-powered chicken plucker and a “moveable landworkers cabin” (Greenhorns 2017). In 2015, the Greenhorns delivered 6,400 pounds of organic produce from Maine to Boston via a Revolution-era schooner. Its founder and board member



Severine von Tscharnher Fleming, interviewed for the 2010 *Grist* article “Meet a Young Farmer Leading a Greenhorn ‘Guerilla’ Movement,” commented:

Jefferson knew. Washington knew. The new agrarian movement knows. ... We have the advantage of youth. Brave muscles, a fierce passion, and probably pretty savvy marketing insights. We have the advantage of eager eaters, dilapidated (but standing!) barns, plus sophisticated e-networks to access seeds, nursery stock, rare livestock breeds, training opportunities, season extension technologies, etc. ... We have a country that needs us to step to the plate, swing that pick, and plant the future—now! (Hoffner 2010)

For the Greenhorns, the youthful beginning farmer movement is at once a return to the wisdom of an agrarian past and a high-speed embrace of the technically proficient and business-savvy moment (Figure 3).

#### BEGINNING FARMERS WILL SUCCEED WITH THE RIGHT INDIVIDUALIZED SKILLS

An emphasis on the technical and entrepreneurial strategies of the beginning farmer movement is in part driven by the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. The program mission reads:

The primary goal of BFRDP is to help beginning farmers and ranchers in the U.S. and its territories to enter and/or improve their success in farming, ranching, and management of nonindustrial private forest lands, through support for projects that provide education, mentoring, and technical assistance to give beginning farmers the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to make informed decisions for their operations, and enhance their sustainability. (NIFA 2016)

In the mission statement, the program is revealed to focus on providing the technical assistance required so that new entrants

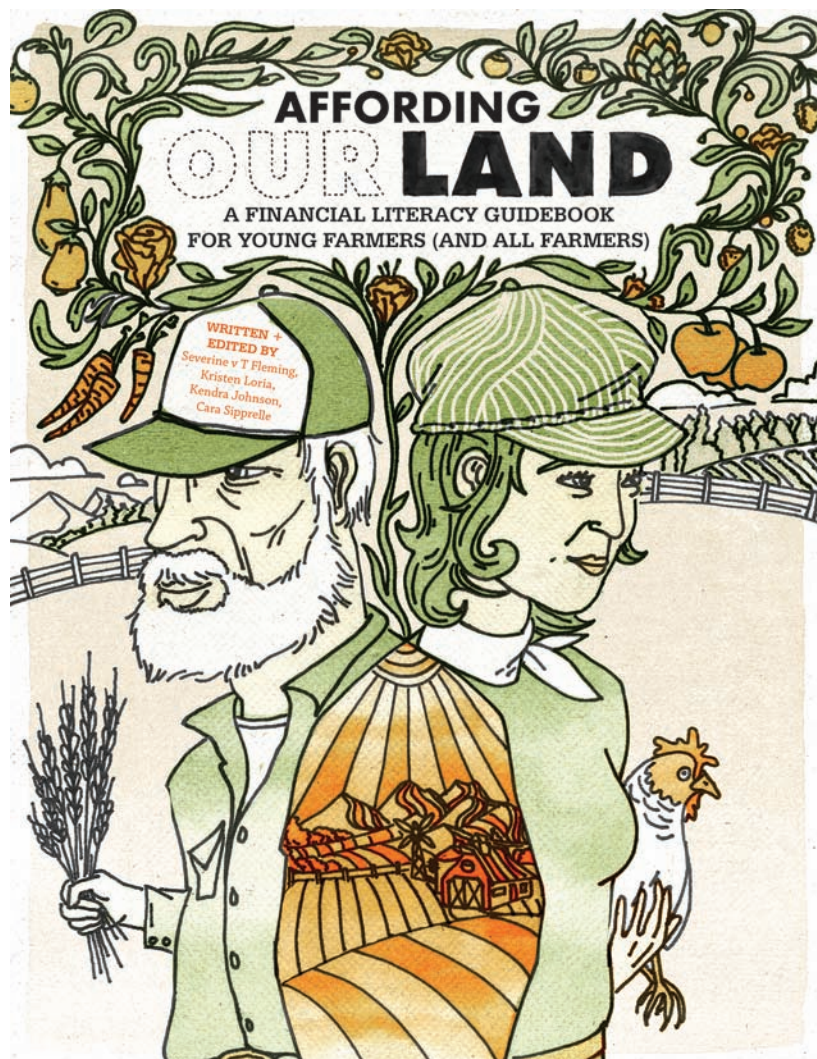


FIGURE 3: A Greenhorns financial literacy guidebook.

COURTESY OF THE GREENHORNS © 2014

can survive the turbulence of launching new farm operations. Analyses of the BFRDP show the program takes on a decidedly entrepreneurial and business management tact, with 97 percent of programs providing support in business management and 94 percent of programs delivering training in marketing (NSAC 2017). The BFRDP, by primarily delivering technical training in horticulture and business management *as means* of solving beginning farmer challenges, is characteristic of what science and technology scholars and educational philosophers describe as a knowledge deficit approach, a decidedly apolitical behavior change strategy achieved through the expert delivery of information (Valencia 1997). This approach establishes an expert/lay construct in the beginning farmer landscape, places the burden of change on individual farmers (“blaming the victim”), entrenches a logic of competitive advantage, and ultimately absolves structural deficiencies (Calo 2018). Importantly, this approach to the beginning farmer program aligns neatly with neoliberal visions of agrarian activity, where farm families compete for efficiency gains and market share as individual firms.

#### BEGINNING FARMERS ARE EDUCATED, WHITE, AND DRIVEN BY ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Beginning farmer narratives are frequently represented in major journalistic outlets (see Bittman 2015; Markham 2014; Graves 2018; Christian 2015; Hirsch 2014; Meehan 2018). Typically profiling a few representative farmers, the articles dependably lay out a problem of aging farmers in America, then depict a bucolic story of innovative young farmers as the hope for the future. Imagery of white, smiling couples is deployed. The first paragraph always starts with a wistful image of manual labor. In these narratives, we are instructed that beginning farming is very difficult but beautiful work, designed to make a “difference” in the pursuit of ecological and social goals.

In a *Washington Post* article in the business section entitled “A Growing Number of Young Americans Are Leaving Desk Jobs to Farm,” the trope of the beginning farmer unfolds:

Liz Whitehurst dabbled in several careers before she ended up here, crating fistfuls of fresh-cut arugula in the early-November chill. The hours were better at her nonprofit jobs. So were the benefits. But two years ago, the 32-year-old Whitehurst—who graduated from a liberal arts college and grew up in the Chicago suburbs—abandoned Washington for this three-acre farm in Upper Marlboro, Md. She joined a growing movement of highly educated, ex-urban, first-time farmers who are capitalizing on booming consumer demand for local and sustainable foods and who, experts say, could have a broad impact on the food system. (Dewey 2017)

Here, the young, white heroine of the story is identified by her college education and her choice to take up farming. The article briefly mentions that through a recent purchase

of land she is a property owner and her residence, also owned, is also adjacent to the farm property.

As in the farmer profile above, a *New York Times* article about young, second career farmers in Oregon focuses on the alternative politics of the new farmers in question:

Now, Mr. Jones, 30, and his wife, Alicia, 27, are among an emerging group of people in their 20s and 30s who have chosen farming as a career. Many shun industrial, mechanized farming and list punk rock, Karl Marx and the food journalist Michael Pollan as their influences. (Raftery 2011)

The article paints a picture of beginning farmers motivated by politics and a fruitful rural existence and bolstered by the foodie culture.

The environmental ethic of the beginning farmer ideal is also a common theme of media representations, notably niche in their readership. In the environment-focused *Orion Magazine* the author probes at the motivations of a young cohort of agrarians (most of whom the author met while at Middlebury College) in “The New Farmers”:

The two are part of a growing demographic of young, beginning farmers—farmers by choice, not by heritage—who have committed themselves to small-scale agriculture. Often with strong educational backgrounds and urban or suburban upbringings, these young people have chosen their vocation over many other options available to them, and, like Miller, they’ve done it largely out of a deep environmental ethic. (Markham 2014)

#### BEGINNING FARMERS FARM BY CHOICE TO RESTORE THE YEOMAN IDEAL

The narrative of city dweller turned (temporary) rural laborer, describing its challenges and charms, is central to the beginning farmer aspiration. Kristin Kimball, an urban journalist who decided to take up the work of farming in upstate New York, chronicles her experience in *The Dirty Life: A Memoir of Farming, Food, and Love*. This device is put forth by heroes of the good food movement such as in Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. Kimball, describing her first experience on the farm in an NPR interview, said of farmwork, “When I started doing the work, I was shocked at how viscerally I responded ... I think that ... human beings are in some way hard-wired to be agrarians.” Kimball’s comments are notable because of how clearly she links notions of identity with the values she sees needed in the effort to repopulate rural America:

Farming is our vital connection to the earth. If you believe that is important, hold this place here in rural America. Be the yeoman; provide your family and your community with that one thing we all share in common, three times a day—food. If you are not there yet, begin. If you



are doing it, then be brave, find your scale, the scale that is right for you. (Kimball 2011)

These depictions are examples of a particular impression of what it means to be a new farmer that dominates media coverage, policy-making, and the beginning farmer movement writ large. They frequently tell a story of an individual who is motivated by environmental change, someone who forgoes an urban life for rural activity, someone who is self-made and well educated, someone who lives on the farm that they own. The heroes and heroines of these farmer narratives embrace farming as a social change mechanism. With a focus on alterity in relation to the industrial agriculture system, they aim to create self-sufficient foodsheds that do not rely on mechanization, synthetic inputs, or long-distance trade. They are characterized as carrying out innovative farming mechanisms, like the planting of perennials, intercropping, and animal crop rotations. Importantly, the farmers profiled in these popular narratives are often young, white, and well resourced (Alkon and McCullen 2011).

## Blind Spots of the Yeoman Myth: Land Justice and Knowledge Deficits

An immediate concern is how the embrace of such antediluvian agrarian mythology attends to the challenges faced by beginning farmers at the bottom of a capitalist and industrialized food system. In particular, the dominant approach to “creating new farmers” maintains two crucial blind spots: How will these new farmers actually get onto the land? And in parallel, what kinds of farmers have the ability, in practice, to benefit from the projected ownership transition of American farmland? The fundamental problem of gaining land access pervades beginning farmer life, particularly for farmers who do not fit the yeoman myth, and current policy and nonprofit sector interventions fail to address this issue.

### LAND ACCESS DYNAMICS

As niche markets for organic, sustainable, and local foods in urban centers create an opening for new direct-to-consumer enterprise, farmers must increasingly chase land use in peri-urban and urban fringe environments in order to reach these markets more readily. In an era of rapid suburbanization, even exurbanization, these lands are also highly sought after for residential use, and increasingly threatened by other urban encroachments (Ruhf et al. 2003; Ruhf 2013; Plaut 1980). The predictable result is a land access dilemma for new entrants: In order to access the markets of the direct-to-consumer and farm-to-table ideals, farmers must operate in

spaces of maximum land value *and* suboptimal land quality (Johnson 2008). This dynamic, along with financialization and consolidation, results in farmland rental as a dominant land tenure model for beginning farmers (Calo 2016). Thirty-nine percent of all farmland is rented, and in some counties this rate of rented farmland increases to 60 percent when grazing lands are excluded (Bigelow, Borchers, and Hubbs 2016).

As tenants, farmers have less autonomy to make long-term management decisions on their land—decisions that have broad implications for farmer incomes, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility (Calo and De Master 2016; Ulrich-Schad et al. 2016; Petrzela, Ma, and Malin 2013; Reganold et al. 2011). The realities of the land access dilemma run at odds with the owner-operator ideal associated with a yeoman mythology. While the imagery and discourse of beginning farmers imagines Jeffersonian smallholders, in reality tenant farming and the dynamics associated with being a low-income renter dominate. Even when a new farmer is successfully able to acquire title to the land, the transaction often requires a substantial line of credit, expressed as the norm through the National Young Farmers Coalition’s “Finding Farmland Calculator” (NYFC n.d.). This webtool, funded through the BFRDP, begins by accepting a value of farmland property, then walks a user through anticipated tax rates, credit burdens, and farm business liabilities as a way of describing the financial risk and “creditworthiness” of individuals purchasing farmland. A graph on the right of the webtool slowly changes as the user enters in potential sources of financing, reflecting the required loan burden to achieve the purchase and the consequent interest payments. The calculator, offered as an intervention for beginning farmers seeking land to farm, entrenches the concept of individual property ownership in farming, where it is reasonable and fair to enter into complex and burdensome mortgage arrangements.

Access to land based on one’s ability to gain credit reliably and pay back long-term mortgages limits the autonomy of landowning farmers and highlights how racial determinations of “credibility” shape patterns of land loss and acquisition (Williams and Holt-Giménez 2017). The Farm Service Agency made race-based determinations of credible applicants that favored white farmers, sending their black counterparts into cycles of debt and eventual land loss, a process revealed in the historic case *Pigford v. Glickman* and subsequent legal battles to receive just compensation (Cowan and Feder 2013). Census estimates reveal that 8.3 million acres of farmland controlled by black farmers have been lost between 1910 and 2012 (Orozco, Ward, and Graddy-Lovelace 2017).



FIGURE 4: Twenty-first-century young farmer imagery found in a resource brochure from the National Young Farmers Coalition titled “Finding Farmland: A Farmer’s Guide to Working with Land Trusts.”

COURTESY OF NATIONAL YOUNG FARMERS COALITION © 2015

and rates of farmland loss among black farmers is greater than loss rates among their white counterparts (Penniman 2018).

The historical land exclusion acts, combined with ongoing practices among lenders, landlords, and agricultural training pathways, have all led to an extremely racialized pattern of land ownership (Ayazi and Elsheikh 2015), with implications for who gets to decide who gets to rent land and in what circumstances. The last USDA census measures that 97 percent of all agricultural land is owned by someone who identifies as white. As land access is increasingly mediated by landlord-tenant interactions, the social and cultural capital required to secure tenure favors educated, mobile, and second-career or “hobby” farmers (Sutherland 2012). Socially disadvantaged farmers of color, facing structural discrimination, undergo additional barriers to entry. Being undocumented, for example, prohibits access to any direct federal beginning farmer supports.

Realtors may screen potential clients based on race, or landowners may choose to rent to farmers who match their view of “legitimate” candidates (Calo 2016). As the yeoman myth tends to make the challenges facing new entrants rather technical in nature, the socially mediated features of land access, capital acquisition, and legitimacy in the eyes of landed actors indicate that the structural power-laden barriers to entry play an outsized role.

Furthermore, while much scholarship on beginning farmers depicts the expected transfer of agricultural land to new ownership as an opportunity for food systems transformation (Agudelo and Overton 2013), there is no guarantee that land transfer will favor new entrants. In fact, trends of farmland consolidation (Heffernan, Hendrickson, and Gronske 1999; Howard 2016), institutional financial investment in farmland (Fairbairn 2014), and the increasing rates of family trust instruments (Bigelow, Borchers, and Hubbs 2016), all indicate that a suite of powerful actors will outcompete new farmers in land acquisition. The land access dilemma and its consequences for beginning farmers threatens to dead-end the growth of the beginning farmer movement.

#### KNOWLEDGE DEFICIT MODEL: THE LIMITS OF FARMER TRAINING INTERVENTIONS

The flagship Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program is a key example of a knowledge deficit intervention in that it seeks, through its funded programs, to solve problems faced by new entrants with technical and entrepreneurial training opportunities (Calo 2018). The consequences of such an approach to expert-driven problem solving is shown to be an increase in disparity among the different forms of new entrants trying to start a farming enterprise. As all participants in these programs may gain some technical skill, socially disadvantaged farmers still face access barriers that are structural in nature. Meanwhile, privileged farmers, with the cultural capital to navigate structural barriers, reach higher levels of farming success, increasing disparity that is based on social location rather than merit. All the while, the notion of beginning farmer success as a narrative of individual self-improvement is reproduced.

An immediate reaction to the critiques of the knowledge deficit model is to defend the merits of technical training. Young students need to learn, young families need to be taught how to eat well, and young farmers need to learn how to fill out a business plan, correct? As an academic researcher who often presents learnings outward in a unidirectional fashion, it is hypocritical to warn of the deleterious effects of such a tactic. But rethinking the logics of this approach to social

intervention forces one to reconsider the foundations of technical expertise and the limits of scientific reason. This reflection alone can be quite powerful in reorienting perspectives with respect to who can be agents in beginning farming. A career agricultural technical extension specialist, on reading about the knowledge deficit model, wrote to me:

I spent a decade as a consultant focused on developing education opportunities for farmers and ranchers almost always funded by some government agency. Your article really articulates why in my long work life focused on “Helping farmers and ranchers, (mostly small), who want to keep farming to make a living” I have so few specific examples of success. I knew perfectly well that simply training farmers in business management, or marketing, or risk management, or food safety, or soil management was not the real problem they face. But I too had to make a living and knew what was likely to get funded. (Personal communication to author, 20 December 2017)

The hubris often found in the sciences is the unshakeable faith that through adequate delivery of observed truths, the world will change for the better. But even a cursory glance at the projects of intervention in the beginning farmer case shows how entrenched values and visions of agriculture and society are embedded into the knowledge deficit model. In fact, the individual improvement character of the model aligns ever so neatly with the yeoman farmer myth.

The yeoman myth, by focusing on the technical merits of individual entrepreneurs, has the effect of silencing the structural barriers that shape agricultural livelihoods. Yet because the myth dominates in the American imaginary, nonprofit, academic, and public policy interventions attempt to fulfill a wistful agrarian dream. The result is a grand mismatch of intentions and consequences, where beginning farmer interventions fail to address entrenched structural barriers to entry, such as land access and structural racism. The result is seeing unironic ads for multimillion-dollar ranches in *Modern Farmer Magazine* and reading the empty materialistic platitudes of *Farmhouse Movement Magazine* while in the checkout line at Whole Foods. For those who farm by choice, with the resources to support their second careers, the myth prevails. But for broad sections of farmers, a focus on pathways to land ownership and commodity agriculture belies alternative visions of agricultural production.

### Discussion: Why “New” Farmers Anyway?

Is the beginning farmer movement a useful construct for food systems transformation? The stated goal of creating new farmers, which is what motivates this article, is paradoxical. What does it really mean when a call emerges, urging the need for a new class of something? The concept of newness

invokes something without prior existence. Newness is thus about absence. In the case of asserting a need for new technology—GM-drought-resistant crops, for example—the call is specifically for something novel to emerge where *previously there was none*. This certainly is not the case with farmers. Farming cannot have existed for over ten thousand years without young people or people new to doing agriculture joining in. There is certainly a long history of many generations of new farmers within the United States alone.

Rather, the new farmer story is actually about multiple losses taking place in the past 40 years. Beginning farmers are “needed” because of the powerful forces that have emaciated the farm sector, creating a wholesale departure of farms, farmers, and farm livelihoods from rural areas (Lobao and Meyer 2001; Brown 2018). These forces include the broad structural moves that encourage rural to urban migration, consolidation of farmland, the turn toward productivism, and the infiltration of neoliberal logics into agriculture. The result is a missing generation (or two) of farmers, such that the creation of more farmers is now uncritically seen as “needed,” rather than the repair of the driving economic and social forces that restructured the agricultural sector and left it in such a perilous position.

The next time a prominent policy maker or food systems reform advocate launches into a call for new farmers, it is worth asking, “What happened to the old ones?” In other words, in order to “create” new farmers who will not quickly vanish or merely meet elite demand for organic foods, the *forces* that provoke loss of dignified and durable farming livelihoods must be identified and addressed.

#### THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF FARMING LIVELIHOODS

“Structural forces” are the social determinants of farming livelihoods. They are the policies, markets, politics, technologies, epistemologies, and cultural values that shape prevailing societal visions of agriculture. It requires much untangling to understand how each of these social determinants operates and interacts. One thing is clear: an observed effect of these social determinants is the threatening of dignity, productivity, diversity, and sustainability of farming life. Encouraging new entrant farmers into this dynamic makes no sense at all—it is akin to sending lemmings over a cliff.

The dominant beginning farmer logic, the yeoman myth, merely serves to create more individual farmers who are destined for descent. The incubators, marketing workshops, and training sessions that beginning farmer programs are built upon are, at best, a parachute of sorts, easing new entrants in their descent to the bottom (Jones et al. 2009). A perverse



feature of the current beginning farmer construct implores the creation of new farmers without seeking to reform the very structures that force farmers out of the sector. It seems like a poor bargain.

Newness also makes invisible the moments of struggle, resistance, and oppression that discourage the establishment of agrarian livelihoods among farmers of color. The focus on new farmers and on technical improvement silences manifold power imbalances across the food system. By describing the challenges of farming as a purely technical matter—as a knowledge deficit issue—the beginning farmer paradigm suggests that the structural racism at play is not important and ongoing (Leslie and White 2018).

I do think that beginning farmers have transformative potential in the food system. But it is *because* their challenges intersect with large, policy-driven challenges such as access to land, historical and present-day racial discrimination, and tenants' rights that beginning farmer success, adequately conceptualized, could mean system change. On the other hand, viewing beginning farming as an extension of the yeoman myth risks obscuring the deeper, embedded challenges in our food system. For in that vision, beginning farming is a lifestyle choice for the privileged, which elite consumers will support.

How might the beginning farmer aspirations become more transformational? Based on the blind spots of the current yeoman ideal, I offer two logical points of advancement toward a determinants approach.

#### LAND ACCESS COULD FRAME THE BEGINNING FARMER MOVEMENT

In 'high stakes' peri-urban farming landscapes, new entrants are perhaps better understood as vulnerable tenants. While horticulture is certainly practiced on the land, issues of tenure security, autonomy, and mobility influence a farmer's ability to derive benefits from their labor (Hachmyer 2017; Calo and De Master 2016). Instigating, deriving, acquiring, and maintaining a lease arrangement for farmland is an informal and socially mediated process. Undergirding this process are existing cultural, social, and economic relationships that make up the "rules of the game" for access to land. The legacy of private property regimes that historically preference white male landownership creates a racialized access dynamic. In this setting, the cultural and social capital required to negotiate a lease informally excludes socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. More affluent, white beginning farmers can more easily negotiate these social-cultural access mechanisms, leading to the elite entrenchment of the good food movement.

The dominance of tenant farming as a mode in US agriculture immediately forces a reconsideration of the yeoman ideal. The lack of attention to the root causes of the land access dilemma among beginning farmer interventions provides a way forward for research, innovation, and action. What forms of policies would chip away at the structural injustices embedded in land access challenges? Could a reinvented Williamson Act leverage property tax relief to rein in speculation on undeveloped lands?<sup>3</sup> What mechanisms can housing boards implement to protect tenant farmers? Can planning departments implement progressive zoning laws to support beginning farmers? If new entrant farmers are viewed as vulnerable tenants first and farmers second, what novel interventions become possible?

Urban sociologists have long been concerned about the forces that produce uneven distributions of individuals into neighborhoods with chronic poverty. Recently, a key figure has emerged as a powerful yet overlooked sorting mechanism: the landlord (Rosen 2015). Landlords, with their power to make autonomous decisions over their private property, use considerable discretion when selecting tenants. If the concern is understanding how individuals arrive in certain spatial living arrangements, these scholars suggest that interrogating the landlord-tenant relationship will help us understand the origins of poverty in cities (Rosen 2015; Desmond 2016). Applied to the farmland access context, one might say that landlords most determine what type of agriculture is happening on the land—not farmers, land suitability, or farmer decision making. While there is much concern (and scholarly output) about the forces that influence farmer decision making, this attention could be combined with research about the forces that influence the landlord.

In *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, sociologist Matthew Desmond (2016) depicts the lives of chronically evicted tenants in Milwaukee as they struggle to establish a semblance of permanent homes. After clearly laying out the structural origins of widespread, chronic evictions, Desmond's strategies for reform are similarly broad and bold. The policy reforms offered include universal housing vouchers, New Deal-esque affordable housing commitments, and a strengthening of tenants' rights (Desmond 2012, 2016). What is notably absent in those urban housing reform strategies is a call for increased technical capacity aimed at enabling individual tenants to obtain housing. On the contrary, it would be amoral and illogical to suggest that the way to solve the housing crisis would be through providing piecemeal skills-improvement strategies. Imagine a program that taught vulnerable tenants how to perform self-repair on their dilapidated lodging, or a capacity-building workshop on "how to speak to landlords." Here, it

seems, the knowledge deficit approach is appropriately absurd. But because of the pervasive yeoman myth, this type of logic persists across beginning farmer programs.

#### ESCAPING THE KNOWLEDGE DEFICIT MODEL IN BEGINNING FARMER INTERVENTIONS

Future work needs to be done to imagine how to escape the trappings of the knowledge deficit model that places the burden of success wholly on the beginning farmer. What would a beginning farmer grant program look like if it were attuned to the weaknesses of the model? What would a “knowledge surplus” model be? The first place to look is through alternative pedagogy. Horizontal and bottom-up knowledge transfer mechanisms are well established as transformational in the food system, especially when associated with peasant movements (Méndez et al. 2017; Rosset et al. 2011; Holt-Giménez 2006; Altieri 2004). Built on the foundations of the Freirean ideal, bottom-up learning approaches are transformational precisely because they provide power to “laypeople,” experts of their own experience, to determine the themes of inquiry (Freire 1970). What would new farmers want to investigate and learn about if given the autonomy to do so?

Perhaps changing the BFRDP programs from technical assistance to political education could be enough to escape the trappings of the deficit model. This would be a transition from teaching new farmers what they do not know to working together to understand leverage points within municipal and regional governments. This work would change the primary duties of beginning farmer organizations from technical assistance and training toward the traditional work of political and movement organizing. In some ways, I see this transition already underway in a variety of beginning farmer organizations, perhaps internally aware of the limits of a purely technical assistance and training operation.

For example, the University of California Cooperative Extension, a storied knowledge deficit program (Henke 2008), recently created a few positions for “public policy specialists.” These positions, novel to the program’s history, reflect an awareness that the upstream challenges of the agricultural constituencies that Cooperative Extension is meant to serve are predicated on structural policy change. I find this reflexive shift encouraging. However, I am forced to ask, is political education not a knowledge deficit approach with a slight shift in content? It is unclear how the weaknesses of the knowledge deficit model are avoided in a political education or rights awareness program.

The limitations of the knowledge deficit model in resolving structural barriers for beginning farmers underline the perpetual tensions between technical and political economic

agricultural change strategies. Putzel (1992), after engaging in a detailed study of approaches to land use change in the Philippines, presciently notes this tension:

While every national debate over ‘agrarian’ or ‘land’ reform policy must be understood in its own historical context, there has been a common thread running through most debates. Debates everywhere have seen a confrontation between those who believe that agrarian reform must be centered on the redistribution of property rights and effective control over productive agricultural land and those opposed to extensive redistribution who wish to focus on measures to raise agricultural productivity. (xxiii)

Attending to how power influences land tenure arrangements forces us to consider the deep questions of historical dispossession of land, the sanctity of private property rights, ongoing racial discrimination, and tenant rights. These themes are made largely invisible when farming is represented as a purely technical endeavor. Engaging with these questions, however, is crucial to addressing the social determinants of a dignified agrarian life.

### Conclusion: Unravel the Yeoman Myth

This article presents an argument for challenging the prevalence of the yeoman myth across beginning farmer narratives. To return to the outset of the paper—Is asking “who will do the work of farming in the future?” the right question? —I argue that it is not, but it could be. A decidedly political and process-oriented reframing of the question is required. As long as the yeoman myth pervades the federal, university, and nonprofit approaches to beginning farming interventions, it will continue to make power in the agricultural system invisible across many spatial and social scales. When this power is elided, socially disadvantaged farmers will be left behind by their more privileged, often white peers, ultimately weakening the chance for building a truly broad coalition of new agrarians. The good food movement has long been challenged by activists of color, critical sociologists, and geographers for its articulation with the ideals of elite consumers. By contrast, I argue that writing a new narrative around land rights is a compelling way to draw together the many disparate beginning farmers (and aging farmers) towards a political agenda for changing the agricultural system. A farming mythology focused on secure land tenure and land rights builds the structures for the long-term survival and endurance of beginning farmers who may deliver needs of food system transformation for climate, health, and rural economy.

This call is not particularly novel. *The People’s Land*, published in 1975, is a collection of essays on the impending disappearance of smallholder agriculture in the United States that

reaches a similar conclusion, calling for a broad suite of land reform legislation (Barnes 1975). The collection's authors make it clear that the site of action is through the use of *public policy* to change the structural forces that were seen as pushing agriculture to a profound breaking point. The authors freely write about new taxation of absentee landholders, land seizure for smallholders, and the nationalization of industry that profits from large-scale land use—all seemingly taboo today. Clearly, the beginning farmer movement demonstrates a lack of enthusiasm for deep social reform and instead favors market-based strategies, or what Borras et al. (2018) calls “petty reform incrementalisms.”

Identifying the trademarks of the yeoman myth provides a backdrop to propose novel farming mythologies that may revitalize conversations about the land use arrangements that optimize agricultural renewal. I see the articulation of this vision as a crucial priority for the beginning farmer movement, as do others who observe struggles for food sovereignty (Trauger 2014; Rotz, Fraser, and Martin 2019). In fact, the differing distinctions of approach toward property and land use may be the largest barrier between food sovereignty and beginning farmer movements. Breaking down these barriers by unraveling the yeoman myth could create new political allyships that are needed for meaningful food justice reforms (Kepkiewicz and Dale 2018). Groups like the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition have rightly called for an increased monitoring of the outcomes of the interventions funded by the BFRDP (NSAC 2017). However, while NSAC urges monitoring to understand how many new farmers have been successfully established, monitoring of beginning farmer programs must be extended to understand who succeeds, under what circumstances, why they fail (as farm businesses) (Rissing 2019), and under what types of land use and tenure relations.

Who will be central in articulating this alternative land use vision depends on much future work. Of course, current visionaries of the beginning farmer movement could leverage their privileged position in society to argue for innovative land redistribution policies and programs. It would be encouraging for celebrity chefs, for example, to work toward supporting the creation of a land base in which their suppliers could maintain the secure tenure to innovate, establish and grow wealth. Supporting the secure tenure of producers would indeed be a new mechanism through which food buyers, distributors, and grocery conglomerates could take more responsibility in the good food movement.

Yet an elite call for land reform still fails to address central questions of democratized decision making. As I have argued, the proposed “solutions” to beginning farmer challenges, rooted in a yeoman mythology adapted for a neoliberal age,


appear to maintain the status quo. The challenges of elite problem-solving reproducing elite spaces demand an urgent search for new modes of allyship, representative scholarship, and equity-based movement building. A case in point is the example of Penniman's (2018) *Farming While Black*, which invokes the concept of reparations as means of land access for beginning farmers through the experience of Soul Fire Farm. The reception of Penniman's work and arguments suggests that there are alternative farming mythologies ready to be amplified and mobilized. Leaning on an intersectional approach, researchers have shown how a myriad of social locations influences how farmers make land use decisions (Ravera et al. 2016) and what they see as useful training material (Trauger et al. 2008). A research agenda that applies intersectionality to beginning farmer experiences would likely reveal how a diversity of farming (sub)identities generates alternatives to the yeoman myth. What are nondominant visions of farmland property, training, individualism and market relations? Minkoff-Zern's *The New American Farmer: Immigration, Race, and the Struggle for Sustainability* (2019), a deep exploration of Latinx farmer transitions from laborer to proprietor across America and the implications for agricultural land use, provides a model for exploring alternative beginning farmer mythologies and what implications this may have on land use decision making.

When searching for other sources of alternative mythologies, it is also useful to explore cases of alternative visions of land use that have won concessions from local and national governments to legitimize their access claims. In parts of Brazil, a movement of land redistribution is driven by landless workers who use occupation to demonstrate lands that fail to deliver public good (Wolford 2010). In Scotland, a logic of land transfer from absentee landlords—who acquired land from mid-eighteenth-century forced evictions—to common use has motivated a national land reform and community empowerment act and the formation of a Scottish Land Commission (Shields 2018). The protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline are bolstered by Standing Rock Sioux appeals to indigenous rights to land use (Whyte 2017). La Via Campesina, a global movement of agriculturalists, demands that the global political structure support peasant livelihoods (Patel 2009; Wittman 2011).

In each of these political land-based or agrarian movements, historically underrepresented voices, whether a landless worker, a Scottish crofter, or an indigenous activist, are fundamental in production of alternative land use narratives. The mythology they produce tends to reject the dominant logics of what land is for and how it should be used. Yes, they represent a voice that cries out against a threat of marginalization, extermination, or neglect, but instead of simply demanding



that there be *more* of their constituency, they call for an end to the policies, norms, and rules that threaten their vision of land use. They form a critical mass in movement membership and are present at tables of power.

As long as the narratives of beginning farmers silence alternative agrarian visions, the chance for unraveling the yeoman myth will remain out of reach. The myth's unraveling may require engagement with forms of movement politics, where aspiring farmers identify themselves as landless peoples who collectively demand new entitlements and land redistribution in exchange for their potential contribution to agricultural production. In this way, the beginning farmer movement has the potential not simply to call for a renewal of a farming workforce in the United States but to reimagine what it means to be a farmer. 

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## NOTES

1. The then-USDA secretary Tom Vilsack famously urged the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry to use the Farm Bill to create 100,000 additional farmers. He added, "Why not create a venue where new farmers can get help with business planning, with marketing and the other ingredients of successful entrepreneurship?" (US Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry 2010: 6)
2. Throughout this article, I use a variety of terms to describe "beginning farmers," such as new entrants, young farmers, new farmers, and aspiring farmers. The USDA defines beginning farmers as farm operators with 10 years or less experience. But definitional problems exist. Should a long-term conventional farmer who switches to a new mode of agriculture be considered a "beginning farmer"? What about established farmers who immigrate from a different state or country looking to start anew? The term "new entrants" is broadly inclusive and accepted by many academics, but it may not be specific enough to match the visions placed on such individuals. Thus, my choice of terms, aware of their problematic nature, is mainly an outcome of editorial choice and flow of prose.
3. The California Land Conservation Act of 1965 provided statewide property tax relief for owners who guaranteed their productive lands would not be converted to other uses. Much of the funding has been depleted.

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