Experiments in the Field

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WRITING WITH LIGHT
PHOTOESSAYS FROM THE ARCHIVES
FIXED FORMAT RE-ISSUE

Writing with Light

Writing with Light was created to bolster the place of the photo-essay within international anthropological scholarship. This project originated as a collaboration between two journals: *Cultural Anthropology* and *Visual Anthropology Review* and grew out of an initiative led by Michelle Stewart and Vivian Choi for the Cultural Anthropology website. The five-person curatorial collective at the helm of Writing with Light is commited to formal experimentation and it aims to animate an ongoing discussion around the significance of multimodal scholarship with an emphasis on the still image.

Multimodal scholarship changes what anthropologists can and should see as productive knowledge. Such projects compel anthropologists to begin rethinking our intellectual endeavors through an engagement with various media, addressing the particular affordances and insights that each form of scholarship offers. How, for example, does photography produce different types of knowledge than text or film? What criteria might we need to interrogate and evaluate each of these forms of multimodal scholarship? As part of a broader set of questions about the relationship between forms of scholarly work and knowledge production, we support the ongoing relevance of the photo-essay.

We would like to acknowledge the support of the journals *Cultural Anthropology* and *Visual Anthropology Review* in this publishing endeavor. Cultural Anthropology has hosted the Photo-Essay project since its inception.

Writing with Light is in reverse alphabetical order: Mark Westmoreland, Arjun Shankar, Lee Douglas, Vivian Choi, Craig Campbell

Photoessays From the Archives

When the Society for Cultural Anthropology relaunched its website in 2019, it was no longer able to continue support for the custom viewer that hosted the Writing with Light photo-essays on its previous site. At this point we learned a material lesson in the difficulty of sustaining multimedia digital publications over time.

In response to the challenge of preserving digital photo-essays we created the "Photoessays from the Archives: Fixed Format Re-issue" series to give a fixed visual layout for each of the photo-essays in a more stable format (PDF). With permission from the authors and from the publishers we re-present these photo-essays in this new format.

Photoessays from the Archives is an initiative led by the Writing with Light collective. Mark Westmoreland, Arjun Shankar, Lee Douglas, Vivian Choi, Craig Campbell

Layout and design by Craig Campbell with the Writing with Light Collective

Experiments in the Field

Farmers are either disappearing or rock stars (Weiler, Otero, and Wittman 2016; Phillipov and Goodman 2017). If a farm is not reaching economies of scale then it is alternative or nostalgic and therefore "impractical and unscientific in comparison to industrial agriculture" (Larmer 2016, 95).[1] Elsewhere, we celebrate farms as community change agents. Romantic portraits of farmers risk bearing little resemblance to the everyday reality on the farm. We can compare this marginalization to Ann Douglas's (1977, 12) description of sentimentalization whereby the values we say we cherish are those that, structurally, we seek to undermine. This disconnect then manufactures a kind of nostalgia where we celebrate farmers, for instance, while making it very difficult for them to secure a livelihood.[2] Related to farming, especially in the United States, sentimentalization means we say we want there to be small farmers, but our politics works against that desire. Our laws and economic structures enshrine a policy system that enables capitalist accumulation at the expense of marginalized workers and the hollowing out of rural areas.[3]

In combining insights from feminist ethnography focused on reading for difference and documenting examples of the diverse economy (Gibson-Graham 2014) and food utopias (Stock, Carolan, and Rosin 2015, 9–10), today's new farmers illustrate future-oriented experiments in contemporary agriculture that draw on successful models from the past thus illustrating what Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2009) describes as a process of repeasantization of the food system. Ploeg (2009, xiv) argues that our ways of representing farmers serves to make peasants invisible, while at the same time more farmers than ever experience "the peasant condition" as opposed to the idea of farmers solely as entrepreneurs.[4] If one makes the distinction that peasants aim to increase value in their life (e.g., concern over living a moral life, more affective considerations) and entrepreneurs focus solely on becoming profitable, we can put these new farmers' multiple jobs, projects, cooperative arrangements around land (see Image 5), market development, and political engagement into better context of repeasantization. For McMichael (2012, 114), the idea of repeasantization "places the modern peasant in time, and simultaneously explodes the pejorative meaning of 'peasant.'"

Repeasantization, like the projects of the new farmers pictured here, highlights farmers' emphasis on autonomy, self-control, and independence, the survival of their livelihoods, coproduction strategies with nature, and utilization of various forms of cooperation (Nelson and Stock 2016).[5] For example, some new farmers aim to open new markets for edible insect-based protein (see Image 6) and small-scale vegetable production or by growing locally produced eggs and meat. Ploeg (2009) expands both the geographic range of where we might expect to see "peasants" and that this is also a very good thing keeping in mind the role peasant and peasant-like agriculture plays in creating both social diversity and biodiversity. This includes peasants (see Image 10) in places like Kansas where repeasantization contains the geographically influenced and "modern expression of the fight for autonomy and survival in the context of deprivation and dependency" (Ploeg 2009, 7; Nelson and Stock 2016).

This essay and the wider project called New Farmers (see newfarmersproject.com that includes a newspaper edition, presentations, and exhibitions) is a collaboration between a photographer, a rural sociologist, and a graphic designer. Our collaboration started out from "an experimental orientation" that can "approach the world with the question: 'What can we learn from things that are happening on the ground?'" (Gibson-Graham 2011, 4). By agreeing to collaborate without a strict method in place we placed trust in one another and the process of working together. In this photo essay, we share some of these stories through an interdisciplinary and experimental ethnography (Harper 2012, 55) that combines photography and design elements. In many ways, this parallels the farmers in this project who trusted in their experimental methods and one another that markets might form and evolve with them.

The addition of a graphic designer helped the photographer and sociologist push past their disciplinary-specific limitations (prints or journal articles, for example) toward "aesthetically pleasing artifacts" (Boradkar 2011, 150) with an intent to challenge typical understandings of farmers in the contemporary world. We—and our farmers (see, especially, Images 1 and 10)—are working in conventional territory (agriculture, photography, exhibitions), but in more unconventional ways (small-scale, first-generation farming; view-camera photography in the 2010s; interdisciplinary ethnography). A designer brings a consistent visual language that mediates and rearranges the words of the farmers to enhance their story that unfolds in the photographs (see Images 2, 4, and 10). Design in the New Farmers project highlights the harmony between the interviews and the images of these farmers in their places. For example, a designer often gives art direction when working with a photographer—"Make it look this way." Alternatively, this project is an equal collaboration with one another. Working together in the field (through conversations and travel

including shared meals) undoubtedly affects the look and content of the photographs (see Image 2). Where the Farm Security Administration (FSA) projects during the 1930s and 40s documented despair and exodus (often to nowhere fulfilling), New Farmers documents farmers, families, and those working in cooperation building their lives in hope in Kansas. That place, Kansas, then, features prominently in the photography in the landscape, the fields, the prairie, and their homes.

As an example of "at home" ethnography (Messerschmidt 1981), this project allowed both the research team and the participants to see emerging trends and some glaring absences. Because sentimentalization can often put farmers in a category of "non-existence by describing [them] as backward," they can be erased or made invisible or what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007, 239) describes through a "sociology of absences." By highlighting what is often ignored or made trivial when celebrated as rock stars (and thus ephemeral) in this sociology of absences we can "enlarge the field of credible experiences" (Santos 2007, 239) and celebrate examples of "emergences" of farming. For new farmers, then, we then face a reality trying to declare who is and who is not allowed to farm. Those not pictured openly challenge what we see and do not see in farming policy including historical inequity related to gender, ethnicity, and race in U.S. farming, a process of silencing (Burawoy 1998, 23). The New Farmers Project, then, helps to make visible the farmers that are often written out of our global understandings of who and what constitutes farming particularly in the U.S. Midwest. Some estimates claim around 90 percent of the farms in the world are family farms—roughly 500 million farms globally (Graeub et al. 2015). In the United States, about 1 percent of the population lives on farms. Small (again a relative term) family farms represent even less than that. Bankers, politicians, and neighbors sentimentalize many of the farmers in this essay as gardeners or hobby farmers. One farmer summarized the mindset toward them: "If your farm doesn't meet a certain minimum size, you're not a farmer."

The photographs and graphically designed images and text show these new farmers/new peasants challenge both "known" ideas of what it is to farm in the United States while also hinting at the romanticism of farming in the twenty-first century.[6] As one farmer (pictured in Image 7) put it, "I am a romantic, and I don't want to live in a past era that's already gone. I want to live in this era because there is a lot of cool stuff here." Thus, this farmer is recapturing a powerful angle of nostalgia: "to recognize aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future" (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 921).[7] As John Berger (1979, 201) wrote of the peasant, their "ideals are located in the past; his obligations are to the future, which he himself will not live to see." Instead of sentimentalizing farmers through nostalgic depictions, we can begin to imagine a realistic future that recognizes the difficulty of creating the conditions that enable those who want to farm to farm while documenting those that see their work as a farmer as a vital form of resistance (Larmer 2016).

Much of this sentimentalization—to devalue by calling one nostalgic—is directed toward women despite their significant role in challenging the norms of farming.[8] Historically, women's contributions to the farm in the United States have been systematically devalued. However, on a global scale, women carry out approximately 43 percent of agricultural labor (FAO 2016, 49). In the United States, the sexual politics of farming translates into multiple tensions especially around issues of identity and questions regarding who is considered to be a farmer (Bell 2004, 102–10). And this patriarchal presumption in U.S. agriculture has material outcomes. As one new female farmer described applying for a female farmer loan:

> He was like, "You don't qualify for that." I was like, "But, I'm a woman farmer." He was like, "Yeah, but you don't own 51 percent. You have to have [your husband's] income." "Really? Wow! I have some choice words for you, but that's okay."

Repeasantisation and the new peasantries expands the dialogue around small farmers (Ploeg 2009). Much of this research comes on the heels of the growing power and size of food production movements that are motivated by autonomy and hope. The hope is that small farmers and sustainable forms of agriculture can repair social and ecological questions of community by reclaiming and retaining their relationship with land (Rosset and Altieri 2017). Thus, far from sentimental, these farmers embody ways forward that exhibit solidarity with food growers everywhere.

With difficulty, and in defiance of sentimentalizaton, then, new farmers continuously work to construct moral lives. Nostalgia can certainly retain some "powerful affective . . . charge" (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 935), but so can the actual experience of doing this work (see Image 4). At its heart, nostalgia is a "desire for reenchantment" (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 936) that is illustrated in farmers here talking about living a moral life. As one put it,

> If there is any place on the earth that offers me a chance to live a moral life on a daily basis, it's going to be on a farm. And it's not going to be a farm that's run by tractors. (New Farmer #3)

For the most part these farmers express their identities as farmers in comparison to their other selves, their past-selves. Here, the temporal designation of "new" is the "after" in a before and after

classificatory scheme of their lives. It's not just about local (Born and Purcell 2006) that presumes a moral certitude, but about ways of farming and living in a specific place that helps these farmers/new peasants find themselves and their place (see Image 9) in the widest of communities—the biosphere.

The experiments in the growing fields, with a significant female presence, inspires an ethnographic experiment in telling stories in unique and interdisciplinary ways. By experimenting in our work, we document and practice, like these farmers, as people pushing stubbornly against "progress" and conventions with little promise of reward.

Image 1. In Image 1, we have one member of a family that may be the most progressive and creative farmers in Kansas who raises pasture-based chickens and ducks, sheep, beef, and non-GMO row crops; runs the state's first GMO-free chicken feed company, a butchery; and created a new line of pet foods while leveraging new financial systems like Slow Money (see Field 2014). But we are also confronted with contradictions. The style of dress indicates certain strictures of religious adherence, yet she is holding onto state-of-the-art, on-farm chicken processing equipment while working via mobile phone. The processing plant itself indicates a challenge to the sentimentalization of smaller-scale agricultural practices in the United States. The family did not start farming until the father and mother were in their forties. Now three generations and a handful of full-time employees contribute to the growth and emergence of a diverse farm and food operation without marketing via the internet.

While there is a visual nod to historical precedents in An American Exodus (Lange and Taylor 1939), the Farm Security Administration photos, and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (Agee and Evans 1941), it is important to note these farmers, photographs, and images serve to tell an emerging story rather than lamenting an eroding past.

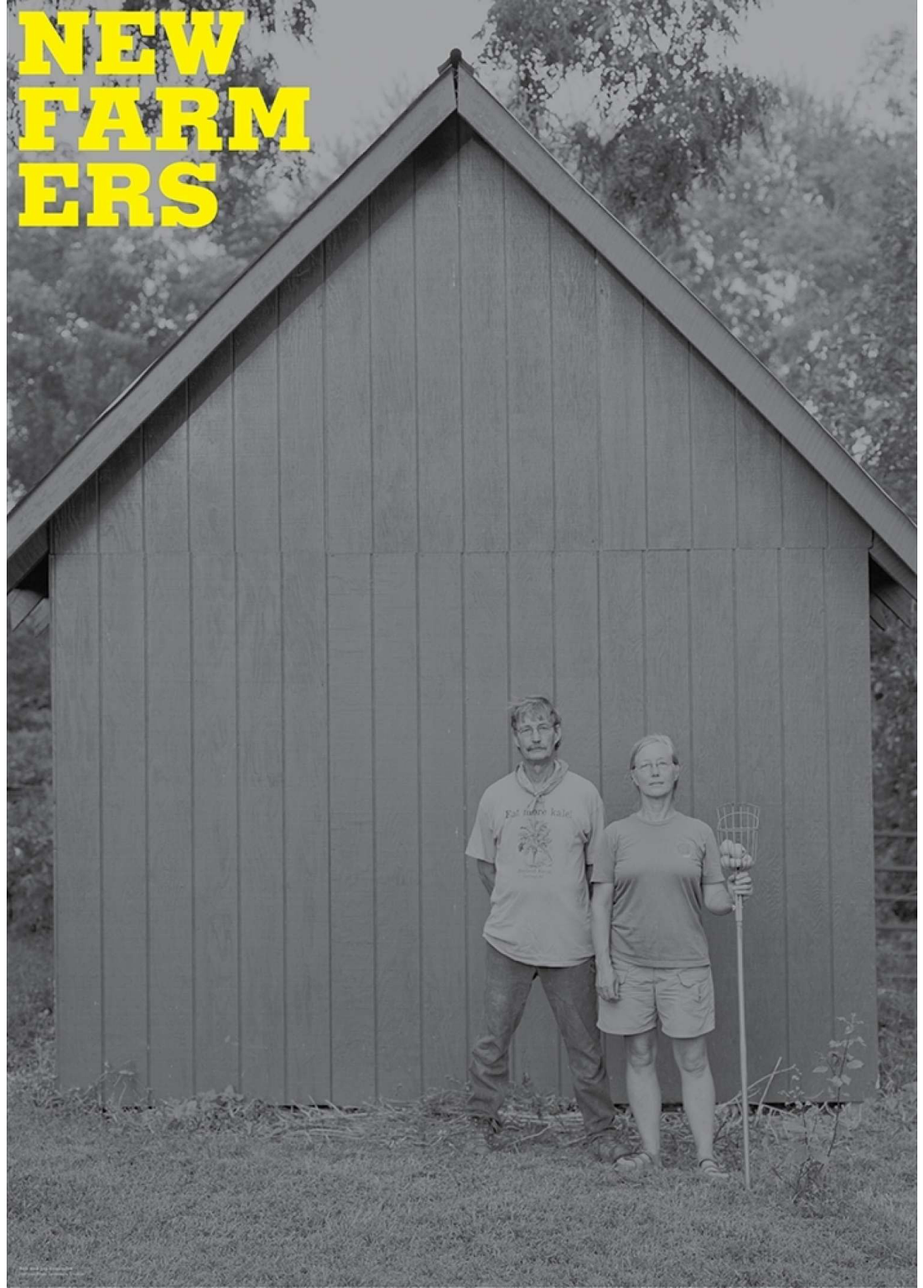
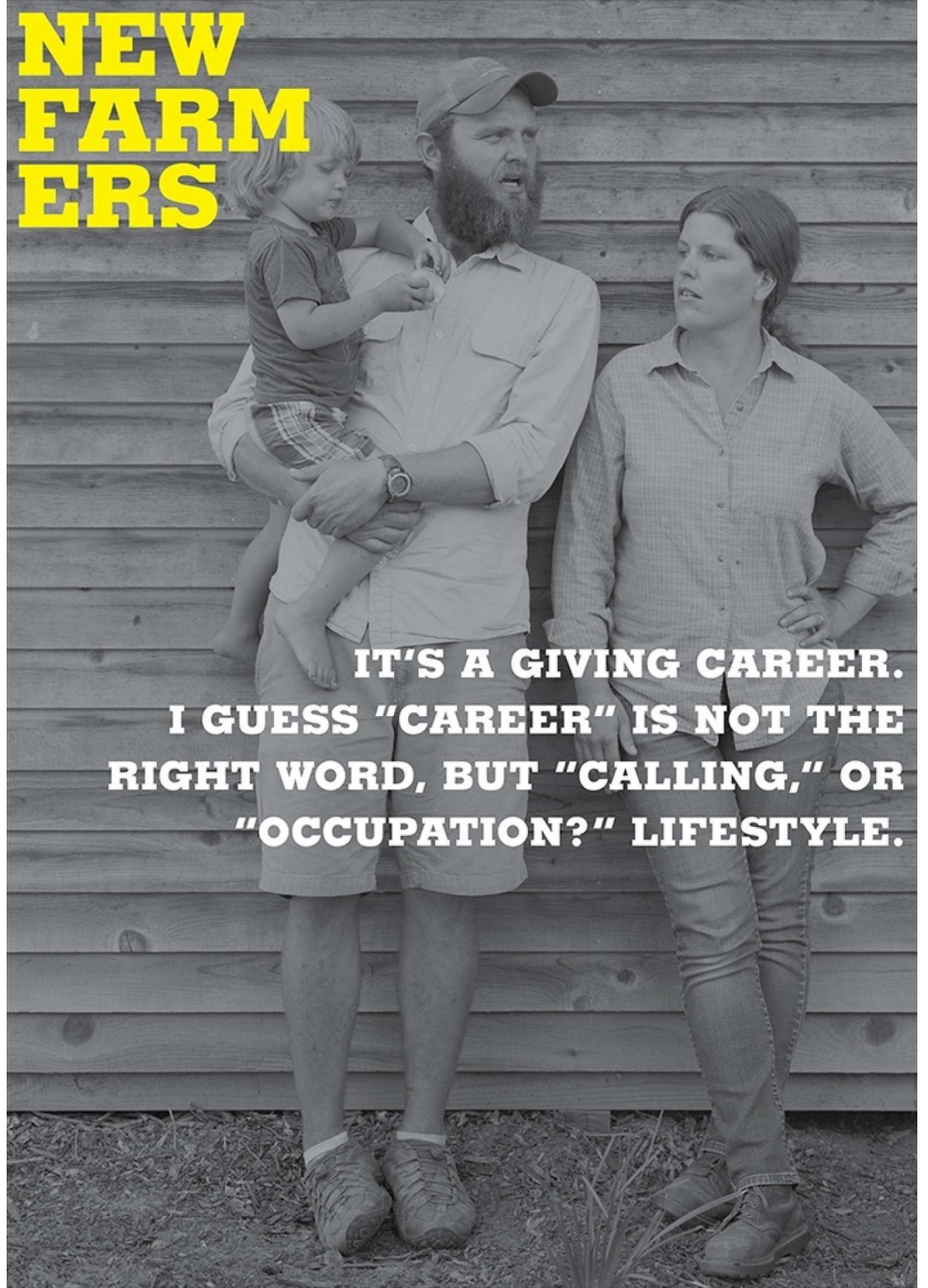


Image 2. The process of interviewing and photographing simultaneously benefitted from the 4x5 inch view camera with a hood as a "can opener" to dialogue (Collier 1967, 12): "May I see?" they would ask. The process was slower. But that same slowness yielded unintended outcomes such as what might be described as "merciless directness" (Hurley 1972, 44) in this nod to Grant Wood's American Gothic (1930), indicating a playful sense of the rural vernacular in the United States.[9] This slowness in the making of each image also mirrors the "slowness" of working across disciplines, languages, and formats. By approaching the research from the standpoint of "'with' rather than [solely] 'about'" (Mannay 2015, 21) these aesthetic choices (black and white especially), like the farmers' choices, aim for a respect of the past and tradition. The portraiture also represented a departure for the photographer used to landscapes and places; while for the sociologist trying to imagine the work in the form of a newspaper or posters rather than a narrative story took trust and openness. For branding the project the designer specifically chose typefaces that were connected with that time period but wanted to use them in a modern way. Here the New Farmers "logo" offers a consistent element throughout the various and unconventional iterations of the project. The design is contemporary, but rooted in the things that have been done before (see Suchman 2018).

NEW FARMERS



IT'S A GIVING CAREER. I GUESS "CAREER" IS NOT THE RIGHT WORD, BUT "CALLING," OR "OCCUPATION?" LIFESTYLE.

Images 3 and 4. In Image 3, we see a transplant from Texas in a field leased by the city to those contemplating a profession as a farmer. The farm incubator program provides access to cheap land and successfully propelled them (as a family) into a diverse operation that includes a collaborative enterprise including a community-supported agriculture (CSA), a seedling business coordinated with another farm, a partnership with a new food justice–oriented community nongovernmental organization (NGO), and farmers market engagement.

While the tepee offers some geographic indicators both of historical residents as well as culturally insensitive landmarks (it still goes by the name Teepee Junction). On the edges of this field in view are a local cemetery and a large conventionally farmed field (neither of which endangered this field's organic certification). The unsentimental pursuit of a small farm business takes root in the shadow of the expected.

In Image 4, the quotation overlying the image of the family leaning against the cold-storage shed they built emphasizes both their feelings about the work. Here the text with the image enhances the story of the photograph and the farmers' story while also resisting the sentimentalization of a certain kind of farming. Growing food allows them to enact their values of caring for people and the planet.

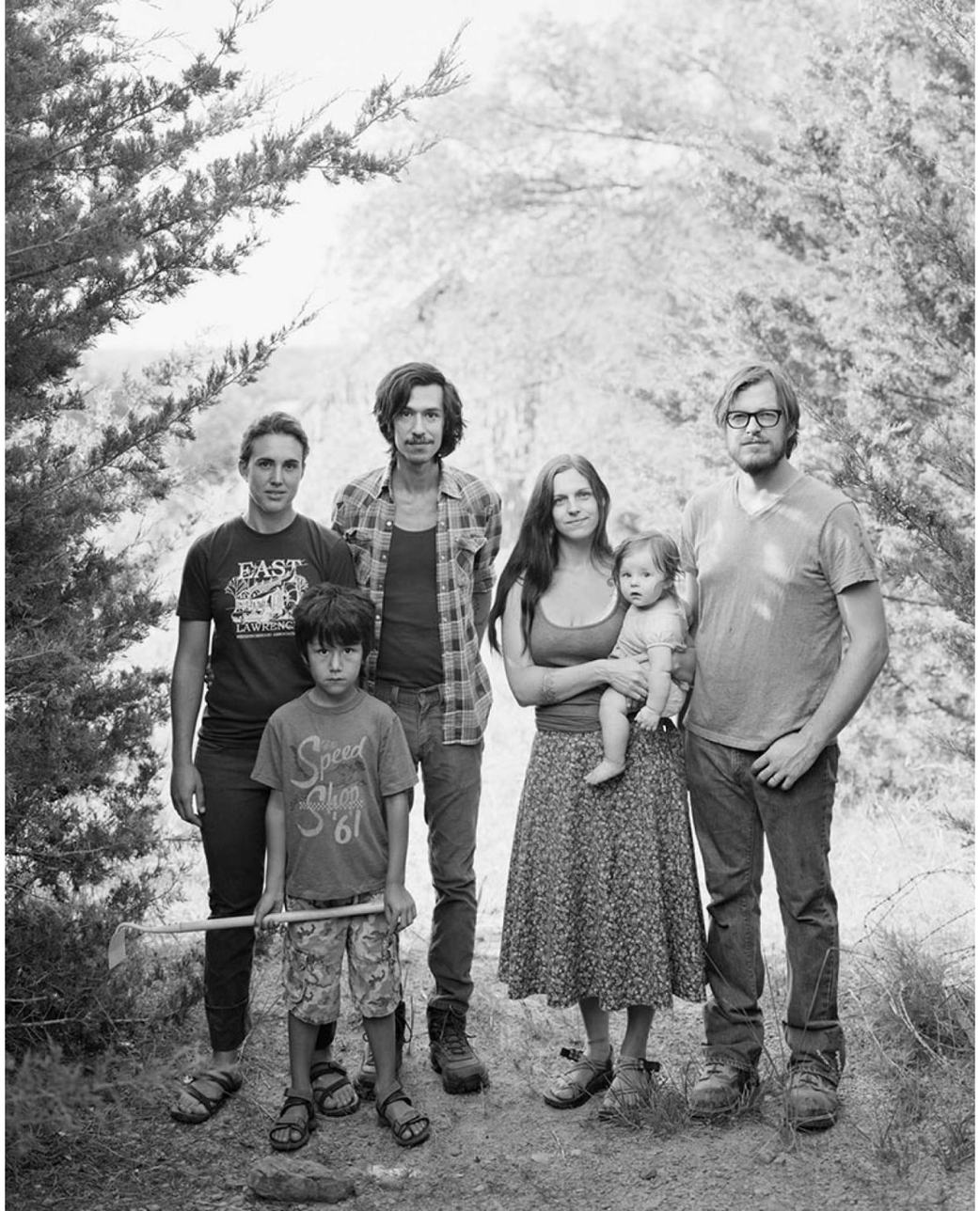


Image 5. In Image 5 we see two families early in their attempts to farm cooperatively. Only one of the four adults grew up on a farm, but it was a large-scale wheat farm that the son (on the far right) has helped turn into an organic dry bean farm. While surrounded by cedar trees, often deemed a nuisance, these couples differed in their description of the adventure of starting a farm together. The couple on the left described the energy they drew from the newness, while those on the right emphasized the practicalities of the minutiae of farm details. It is possible that those different orientations explain that, since this photo was taken, the couples are no longer farming together, as the couple on the left returned to town.

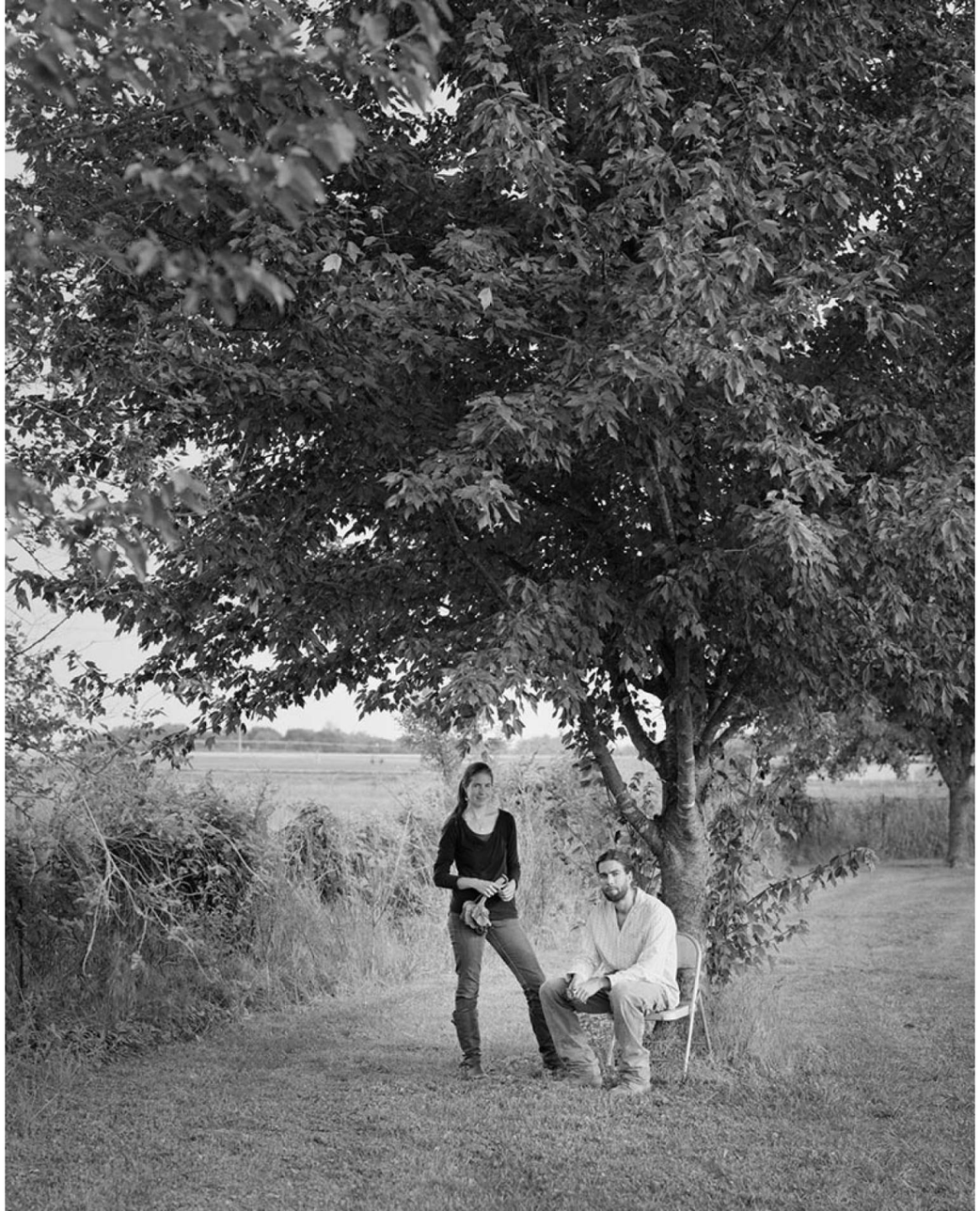


Image 6. The couple pictured here (Image 6) aspire to raise crickets as a food source. The large center-pivot irrigator in the background shows both the physical, but also metaphorical, proximity of working under the guise of a certain assumption of what farming looks like. Banks look skeptically on new and risky farming endeavors while conservatively supporting large-scale agriculture despite known financial and ecological risks. They are pictured on the same city-owned land as Image 3 that is leased for nearly free where they were growing vegetables for a season. This couple have yet to raise crickets commercially. In research motivated by reading for difference and the emergent, potentially transformative stories, persons, and policies, there exists risk that those a researcher captures in film, voice, or story “fail” to disrupt the status quo. In all kinds of experiments, success is not guaranteed.

Image 7. Farmers, especially in the United States, associate “good” farming with size and access to markets. Often, “good” in farming represents tidiness, absence of weeds, and straight rows (Burton 2004). Those who abandon these kinds of practices can be dismissed as not farming (Stock 2007). In response to this dynamic of “roadside farming” where farmers are constantly judged by peers and neighbors, the farmer pictured here shifted the direction of her crops because she claims, “I can’t plant in straight rows!” and was tired of hearing critical remarks from those same neighbors (Burton 2004, 204). What percentage of the criticism toward the tidiness of her fields was misogynistic? While difficult to assess, it is of a piece of the process of sentimentalization that dismisses both women and work in pursuit of community holism as less valuable, less important. As another new farmer adds to the description of how women agitating for local and new food systems are treated:

"When I go and I talk to people, and everybody says, 'That’s really great,' but, at the end of the day, I’m just getting this little pat on the head, 'There you go girl. Go do whatever it is you do,' or like all of your spare time, you’re doing this in your spare time, like, 'go do all this in your spare time.' So I don’t know. . . . I’ve had to weigh that balance of educating versus throwing a fit."

Image 8. The process of becoming a farmer can emphasize specific places, but also specific times. That time can include the accumulated wisdom of generations as well as the embedded (genetic) knowledge of specific seeds. These two boys stand in a field of Turkey Red Wheat descended from the variety brought from Russia by their Mennonite ancestors to the same state over 140 years ago (Image 8).

"One rendition of the Mennonite story recapitulates the cherished myth of the American dream: a providential faith in the skill, hard work, and success of willing immigrants. The story of Turkey Red Wheat distills that heritage into a single artifact: the seed that made the United States a breadbasket to the world" (Fullilove 2017, 123–4).

But we know that seeds have complicated histories, such that the same seeds went by multiple names even in a compact geographic area. In many ways there is no such thing as one Turkey Red Wheat as it's been known as many things, including Krymka (the Russian folk name) wheat (Fullilove 2017, 17).

The field seen here represents a cooperative effort between this family, neighbors, and others part of a regional network trying to build markets that draw on history without succumbing to the negative associations of nostalgia or sentimentalization (Hale and Carolan 2018). For them, the Turkey Red Wheat offers both a nod to tradition, while actively challenging the reality of the gluten-free trend, locally and regionally produced grains, and single- (and male-) grower production processes. The potential seeds from this field and the boys represent a possibly different future of food. Further, their Mennonite tradition also helps explore the role of religion and faith in many of the new farmers depicted here in eastern Kansas that include Mennonite, German Baptist, Quaker, and Catholic traditions.

Image 9. In the foreground the farmer grows native prairie grass including big bluestem and other flora. The four mobile chicken houses house upwards of two dozen egg-laying hens to supply a farmers' market stand and two local grocers including one of the larger retailers in the regions. In the background is the straw bale house built by this farmer and friends. The location of this home and farm have been shaped by housing policies in the county where he sells the eggs because straw bale houses are not allowed. So this farm is in the neighboring county with less restrictive housing policies. Again these new farmers aim to bring values in line with their choices and practices of everyday life that offer examples of what could change.

These new farmers are working on living better, not just as family units, but as members of a community. As this new farmer (Image 9) put it:

"[I]f we're going to integrate ourselves into this community, we have to be community members. . . . You have to know your neighbors, and that means the five hundred different species of plants and the—and the eighty-seven different varieties of purple flowers and the, you know, sixteen different varieties of small fauna. If you don't know those, how can you—how can you be part of the community?"

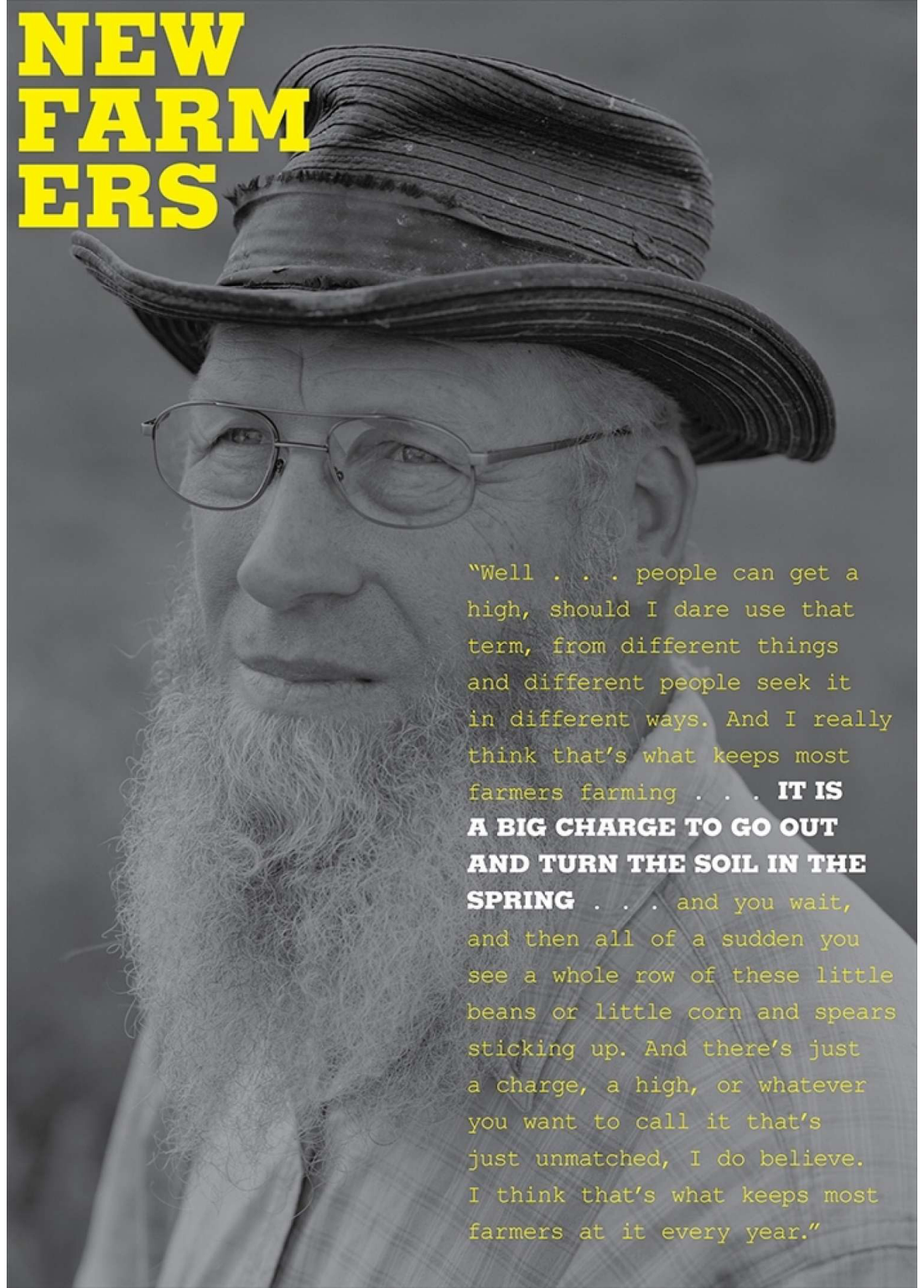


Image 10. A new farmer is chasing this high (Image 10), this phenomenological buzz "of frothy excitement" (Bell 2004, 121) that's also wrapped up in a swirl of livelihood and planetary concern.

Notes

1. There is extensive research on the divergent nature of U.S. agriculture toward a smaller number of larger and larger farms and a growing number of small farms. The hollowing out of the "farmers of the middle" has been well documented (Lyson, Stevenson, and Welsh 2008). That literature also very much supports Walter Goldschmidt's (1947) hypothesis that the larger and more industrial-like agriculture becomes the more community well-being suffers (Wilkinson 1991).

2. Max Weber (1946, 155) wrote that one of the defining features of modernity is our disenchantment with the world. On the opposite side, we have a strain that incudes, but is not limited to, the Romantic poets that nature is somehow better, more moral. This is what Michael Bell (2018) terms the "natural conscience," where our experiences in the world, when framed or lived in nature more, are more pure, better, more fully human than those that are not. The farmers portrayed here speak far less about being "better than," but more about doing what is best for themselves and their families. In this sense, the repeasantisation process emphasizes a re-enchantment process for these people and their families that is highly contextual based on place.

3. We know, for example, that smaller farms encourage gender equity in pay and decision making (Harper 2001, 262). We also have significant evidence that small farms are the fastest-growing economic sector in American agriculture (USDA 2017, 14).

4. Ploeg (2013) lays out his intellectual debt to Chayanov and the foundations or repeasantisation in Peasants and the Art of Farming: A Chayanovian Manifesto.

5. While it is true that many extremely large and mechanized farms adopt similar language about independence (Emery 2014) and autonomy there are important distinctions when looked at in a wider context. In a narrow, ideological sense where "feeding the world" (Rosin 2013, 51) dominates a farm's thinking, yes, there might remain some animating force to the family farm (for more on competing kinds of autonomy related to this, see Paul V. Stock, Jérémie Forney, Steven B. Emery, and Hannah Wittman [2014] and Paul V. Stock and Jérémie Forney [2014]). However, when the ecosystem and community impacts are included, small, more peasant-like farms tend to have more regenerative power for personal and ecosystem relationships (Ploeg 2009).

6. As David B. Danbom (1991, 1), talking specifically about romantic agrarianism (that "emphasize the moral, emotional, and spiritual benefits agriculture and rural life convey to the individual"), describes, we can romanticize farmers and rural society: "And it has a nostalgic quality, like the mythic 'family farm' to which it is related, always pulling at the heart-strings and appealing to our social memory" (Danbom 1991, 12). But "theirs remains a vital and important point of view. It is important in part because it has played a role in stimulating some new and promising developments in agriculture and agricultural research, such as organic farming and low-input sustainable agriculture [cf. repeasantization]" (Danbom 1991, 11).

7. They continue: "Nostalgia can then be seen as not only a search for ontological security in the past, but also as a means of taking one's bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present. This opens up a positive dimension in nostalgia, one associated with desire for engagement with difference, with aspiration and critique, and with the identification of ways of living lacking in modernity. Nostalgia can be both melancholic and utopian" (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 921).

8. Justin Farrell (2015) describes a process of moral devaluation when people's moral orders, their frameworks for making sense of what is right and good in the world, conflict.

9. Jack F. Hurley (1972, 44) on Walker Evans's photography: "His [Walker Evans's] style developed the sort of merciless directness that one associates with Grant Wood's 'American Gothic.'"

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