Good Stewards:
Cosmovisions and 'Good Farmer' Moralities

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Abstract

Because of the impacts of agriculture for people and ecosystems in the Anthropocene, many have sought to understand farmer motivations and behaviors. In Western cultures, "stewardship" has been shown to be a foundational principle of farmers' moral identities as "good farmers." Because stewardship assumes a divine responsibility to care for the earth, exploring farmer "cosmovisions"–their interconnected spiritual, natural, and social worlds–can better illuminate the heterogeneity within and between groups that may not conform to normative scripts of religiosity, spirituality, or life philosophy. The authors take a process-relational approach to ethnographic interviewing to explore stewardship as a foundational value among farmers across a diversity of farms and cosmovisions in the Midwest United States. They identify varied meanings of "stewardship" among relatively distinct assemblages of farming principles and practices.

Keywords: cosmovision; good farmer; morality; regenerative agriculture; stewardship

Introduction and Background

Industrial agriculture has had deleterious effects on farmers, rural communities, consumers, and ecosystems (James 2021; Stock, Carolan, and Rosin 2015; Stock 2021). A growing segment of farmers are turning (or *re*turning) to less harmful forms of farming, including regenerative agriculture (RA), which many see as a solution to the harms of industrial agriculture (Rhodes 2017; O'Donoghue et al. 2022; Sher et al. 2024). While research on the environmental effects of regenerative agriculture accrues (LaCanne and Lundgren 2018; Basche and DeLonge 2019; Giller 2021; Rehberger et al. 2023), much less is known about the human, socio-cultural dimensions of RA. As a result, important questions remain regarding the barriers and accelerators for transitioning to more regenerative forms of agriculture (Seymour and Connelly 2022; Miller-Klugesherz and Author2 2023; Snorek 2024).

Research has long been concerned with farmers' motivations and behaviors in an effort to understand transitions to more sustainable forms of farming (Salamon 1992; Bell 2004;

Carolan 2006). Because farming is a cultural practice, it necessarily shapes the identities of farmers, and these identities in turn influence the practices that comprise farming, as has been demonstrated by an extensive and still-growing literature on 'good farming' and the 'good farmer' (Burton 2004; Stock 2007; Sutherland and Burton 2011; Stock and Forney 2014; Burton et al. 2021).

The moral construct of the 'good farmer' entails fundamental beliefs and judgments about good and bad, right and wrong, or desirable and undesirable ways of farming (Burton et al. 2021:87-105). In this sense, farmers enact moral values through farming practices, and they are judged by others within the farming community (both in local communities of place and in diasporadic communities of practice) based on shared understandings of what it means to be a 'good farmer' (Burton et al. 2021:130-152; Sutherland 2013). These moral judgements by farmers are often rooted in deeper ontological and even spiritual beliefs and assumptions about reality (Campbell 2020; Stock 2020; Farrell 2015:34-65; Carolan 2006).

We use the moral concept of 'stewardship' to investigate how farmers' identities as 'good farmers' shape their farming practices. In Western cultures, stewardship is a significant principle of farmers' moral identities as good farmers (Burton 2004:209-210; Stock 2007:92-95; Ellis 2013:435-436). However, research exploring stewardship tends to employ more of an etic rather than emic perspective, limiting our understanding of key questions about how and why farmers adopt or change perspectives and farming practices (Enqvist et al. 2018; West et al. 2018). Etic views reflect the perspectives of outsiders looking in (such as researchers or policymakers), while emic views reflect the perceptions of insiders themselves (in this case, farmers). By defining themselves as 'stewards,' many farmers often attribute their moral actions to a divine mandate or responsibility to care for the resources they feel they have been given to manage (Vanwinkle and Friedman 2017:615; Farrell 2015:181-182; Reimer et al. 2012:34).

These cosmological cultural constructs hold potential for expanding our understanding of agriculture even though they tend to be disregarded by social scientists as theological rather than sociological in nature (Graddy 2013; Toledo 2022; Wright 2021). Thus, there is a need to further explore farmers' "cosmovisions"– their interconnected spiritual, natural, and social worlds made up of their worldviews, ethics, beliefs, and practices (Swiderska et al. 2022; Parks and Brekken 2018; Mashingaidze 2016). Parks and Brekken define cosmovision as "perceptions of the world which organize [farmer] behavior" (2018:36-37) and suggest that the term can better illuminate the heterogeneity within and between groups that may not conform to normative scripts of religiosity, spirituality, or life philosophy. Including cosmovisions in the frame of study encourages researchers to "consider the role of the natural, supernatural, and social within…farmers' worldviews, ethics, beliefs, and praxis" (Parks and Brekken 2018:36). Thus, we understand a cosmovision as an emergent assemblage of farmers' worldviews, ethics, beliefs and practices.

Although the term cosmovision is not used by Seymour and Conelly (2022), their identification of a 'regenerative mindset' reflects worldviews, ethics, and beliefs paired with RA practices, that together form a regenerative farmer cosmovision. This assemblage of attributes observed among RA farmers include attentiveness/observation, conceding control to regain balance, valuing of species, a holistic approach, embodied/experiential learning, inter-generational thinking, and a greater sense of personal responsibility (Seymour and Connelly 2022:235-237). Although the conceptualization of the regenerative mindset is unique to Seymour and Conelly, several other RA researchers have identified similar attributes among their participants (Miller-Klugesherz and Author2 2023; Gosnell 2021; Gordon et al. 2021; Strauser and Stewart 2024). The presence of an RA farmer cosmovision requires further examination, especially in comparison with other farmer cosmovisions. In this study, we focus on the concept of stewardship as a means of furthering our understanding of how cosmovisions shape farming practices in the Western context of the Great Plains of the Midwest United States.

Methodology

We used ethnographic interviewing to collect data for this study. Our methodology was informed by process-relational philosophy developed by Alfred North Whitehead (1929). Process-relational philosophy is a critical response to Cartesian essentialism which assumes that "things" are generally unchanging and reducible to independent parts or atoms. By contrast, process-relational philosophy offers an ontology which assumes that 'things' are not static, independent entities, but are instead, ever-unfolding processes emergent from relationships with other 'things' (Sherburne 1966; Mesle 2008). Although the body of process-relational theory continues to grow (Emirbayer 1997; Abbott 2016; Vandenburghe 2018), methodological development has lagged (Depelteau 2018:510). This has been the case in agri-food research, with a few notable exceptions (Darnhofer et al. 2016; Darnhofer et al. 2019; Darnhofer 2020; Aguiari 2024). Vandenberghe articulates that process-relational methodologies replace "linear techniques of variable analysis for complex, purpose-built techniques that are able to catch and represent the multiple interrelations between people, groups, and institutions… emphasiz[ing] the mutual interdependence of the variables and dissolve entities into processes" (2018:39-40).

Because ethnographic research has a "distinctive concern with *process,* with sequences of interaction and interpretation that render meanings and outcomes both *unpredictable* and *emergent*" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011:2), it is particularly well suited for process-relational approaches (Abbott 2016:106). The framing belief in ethnomethodology that "society consists of the ceaseless, ever-unfolding transactions through which members engage one another, and the objects, topics, and concerns they find relevant" reflects the process-relational ontology (Pollner and Emmerson 2001:5). The process-relational ontology is even more explicit in our use of a relational ethnographic approach, which focuses on "processes involving configurations of

relations among different actors or institutions" rather than limiting itself to one group or space (Desmond 2014:547). Following this approach, we use abductive analysis, which from a process-relational perspective, is better suited than grounded theory because of its emphasis on emerging and adjusting knowledge throughout the research process. Abduction fosters the formation of a continuum for understanding data by expecting data to emerge through the process of data collection, from the process of data analysis, and by comparing cases to one another (Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

Before entering the field, the project was screened by the researchers' Institutional Review Board (IRB) and deemed no more than minimal risk and in accordance with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report. From March to September 2024, we collected data from ethnographic interviewing, primarily on site on farm operations, although a few interviews occurred in places relevant to the person being interviewed, and included family, friends, or others who entered the social field. We conducted follow-up interviews through additional visits to the field and/or video calls to discuss emerging themes. We recorded data with near-verbatim field notes which we transcribed after leaving the field each day. We used Zoom for follow up video calls which had recording and auto-transcribing features. We then reviewed the Zoom transcripts and cleaned them. We would upload transcribed field notes and Zoom transcriptions to AtlasTi software for coding and theming which was an iterative process performed throughout the data collection process and after its completion. Single quotes ('') indicate near-verbatim quotations from field notes while double quotes ("") indicate verbatim quotes from Zoom recordings. Throughout the data collection period, we kept a reflective journal to outline key themes, connections, and surprises that emerged.

In total, we worked with 12 participants (including three couples) from nine farms, all of whom earned income from farming. Focusing our work on farmers earning income from farming allowed for greater comparability among cases due to the necessity of economic productivity, which would have been lost with the inclusion of donation-funded non-profit farms or hobby farms which are not under the same pressure to produce an income from the land. We tried to maximize variation in proximity to market centers, farm size, and farm products to allow exploration of the significance of these features in shaping possibilities for different farming practices and their relationship to farmer cosmovisions. Farm sizes ranged from 40 to 4,500 acres. Market outlets ranged from global commodities to direct market sales and personal subsistence. Six farms were located in rural areas and the other three were in periurban locations. We identified participants from three states across the Great Plains region of the United States. The Great Plains region was selected because agriculture remains more central to its economy and culture than in other regions of the U.S. Participants had higher than average education with most of them possessing bachelor's degrees (though not necessarily in agriculture) and five participants possessing advanced degrees. Ethno-racially, most participants

identified as white and non-Hispanic. Other racial and ethnic groups were not intentionally excluded but did not emerge from our snowball sampling. For religious/spiritual identity, nine identified with some form of Christianity (including Evangelical, Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, Mennonite, and German Baptist Brethren). The other three participants had previously identified with Christianity and/or had at one time attended Christian churches, but departed from that as their cultural identity evolved, now claiming no categorical religious identities while maintaining that their spiritual lives were significant to them. Participants were not selected because of their relationship with Christianity, but because of their indication of a supernatural component of their worldview.

Results

Common Definition of Stewardship

Among farmers across scales, markets, products, religious identities, and even the distinct cosmovisions which emerged, there was remarkable consistency in abstract definitions of stewardship. An industrial row crop farmer summarized that 'a good farmer takes care of the land.' Similarly, a regenerative row crop and cow-calf farmer indicated that "If you go back to the more original [translations of the Bible], they say that you're to steward the land, that you're to care for it, that you're a caretaker." Furthermore, a holistic, direct-market rancher indicated that "We were given the responsibility, you know, at the unfolding of creation of the Bible story, to take care of. That's the original stewardship in the truest sense of the word." This reveals the salience of the stewardship myth among Midwestern farmers for structuring their moral identities as farmers previously identified in prior research (Reimer et al. 2012; Farrell 2015; Vanwinkle and Friedman 2017). However, it also reveals the limitations of stewardship which it would seem farmers tend to use to morally justify their current farming practices rather than motivating a higher standard of ecological care. Gray and Gibson describe this gap between stewardship values and productivist actions as a *moral hazard* (2013:89), which is also consistent with other more recent findings that farmers' stewardship morality can be subsumed by their productivist ideologies (Raymond et al. 2016; Lavoie and Wardropper 2021; Hall 2024).

Distinct Cosmovisions of Stewardship

With stewardship as our entry point for farmer morality, a continuum emerged with consistent assemblages of worldviews, ethics, beliefs, and farming practices (i.e., cosmovisions). This continuum was similar to that of Parks and Brekken which depicts ethics as positions on a continuum from egocentric to ecocentric, and worldviews ranging from mechanistic to organic (2017:37). However, we use the "anthropocentric" rather than "egocentric" because it is more accurate for our findings, in which farmers on that end of the spectrum were not necessarily self-centered as the term 'egocentric' implies, but were committed to the belief of prioritizing people over the land which we will discuss further in the analysis below. We refer to two

distinct cosmovisions clustered at the opposite ends of the spectrum as the Anthropocentric-Mechanistic Cosmovision (AMC) and the Ecocentric-Organic Cosmovision (EOC). RA farmers possessed a cosmovision which reflected a moderate synthesis of both the AMC and the EOC, which we refer to as the Regenerative Agriculture Cosmovision (RAC).

Anthropocentric-Mechanistic Cosmovision (AMC) Stewardship: Maximizing Return, Maximizing Glory

AMC farmers tended to have a narrow scope of stewardship which centered on maximizing production, which they believed brought glory to God. Thus, "pests" that reduced yield were more commonly perceived as enemies of God's glory and threats to humanity. A quote from Jerry exemplified this while he was harvesting wheat in his combine:

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

As such, moral 'goodness' of 'good stewardship' depends on increasing the land's productivity for crops. However, divine responsibility to steward God's gifts tended to be reserved for privately-owned land, which reveals the "fence line" as a powerful ontological boundary for establishing the limits to stewardship morality among AMC farmer (Campbell 2024). These farmers were less likely to take such responsibility for rented and neighboring land. For example, Brian said:

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

These farmers refrain from making moral judgements about treating unowned, rented land with less care than they treat the land that they do own, even while claiming that all land is ultimately owned by God whether they own it or rent it within the current economy.

Although a (limited) imperative to care is found within this stewardship ethic, it also contains the imperative to kill, which ties it to many of the ills of industrial agriculture such as loss of species, water contamination, and consequences for personal health. These farmers often voiced a perceived conflict between ecology and humanity in which they felt only one side could win, and it should be humans. For example, while driving in his combine during corn harvest, Brian said "Land is something God made for his glory to grow food, but it's not a person…People are more important than the land. It's something to be used.' The phrase 'people are more important than the land' was a common refrain among AMC farmers, especially when morally justifying harm caused by their farming practices. However this perceived priority for human wellbeing also seemed to fall short when Brian acknowledged that 'Most Midwest farmers don't raise food–that's why these food fads don't affect us–it's feed and fuel. We grow anything that's bad to eat. [He joked] Maybe I should get a sign on my combine that says *Drink Pop.*' Similarly, when we asked John, a direct-market orchardist about a religious ethic for spraying chemicals, he replied:

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

The perceptions of prioritizing people over the land and the authority granted by God to humans to kill reflect findings from Ellis (2013) and Farrell (2015), which found the concept of 'dominion' dovetailed with a stewardship myth in the book of Genesis: stewardship morally justified care while dominion morally justified killing. This duality allows AMC farmers to avoid perceiving a moral dilemma between their stewardship morality and their moral imperative for glorifying God through higher yields dependent on the chemical-elimination of 'pests' (Gibson and Gray 2013).

Ecocentric-Organic Cosmovision (EOC) Stewardship: Caring for the Whole

EOC farmers practiced their understanding of stewardship in a significantly different way than AMC farmers by tending to prioritize caring for the whole farm ecosystem rather than prioritizing maximum production. Rather than perceiving a conflict between people and the environment in which there could only be one winner, these farmers usually believed that there could be a win-win situation where people and the ecosystem both benefit from the balance of reciprocal care. Andrew, a rancher who rents 100% of his rangeland, described the cumulative and interconnected benefits of his stewardship in this way:

> "The health of the animal is absolutely important. We rotate cows every two weeks through eight different pastures. Is that more work? Yeah, is it easier to turn them out and leave them out? Yeah, which is what people do. But then your grasses are affected by that, and so you try to do the best you can with what you can learn about it. So we try to rotate them through, we try to keep an eye on the plants. We want everything to be healthy. Because again, health is like we were describing love, it's a proximity. How close am I to feeling healthy? How close am I to health that I'm willing to provide for others, right? What am I putting in my mouth? What's going through my blood? Those are all things that we have to ask…It's all tied together. Those grasses in that soil have to be healthy in order for me as the end user to be healthy. And I don't really even see it as an end user."

Andrew's quote reflects the sentiments of 'reflexive producers' that Stock encountered among organic farmers in the Midwest U.S. These farmers chose practices based on what they themselves would want as consumers because they perceived a broader moral responsibility to care for people and the land (Stock 2007:94-97). Linda described her broader approach to stewardship like this:

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

The belief in the interconnected health of soil, grass, livestock, consumers/farmers, and the surrounding ecosystems was consistent with the EOC farmers studied by Parks and Brekken (2018). The emphasis on achieving a balance by 'working with nature' reflected prior research among RA farmers (Gosnell et al. 2019:8-9; Gosnell 2022:610-611; Miller-Klugescherz and Author2 2023:7-8). This pursuit of balance as a moral good involves embodied learning through attentive observation and listening, as well as through deliberately giving up power and control (Gosnell et al. 2019:8; Seymour and Connelly 2022:235-236). EOC farmers often granted greater agency to the farm ecosystem, believing that they could farm better by listening to the land and participating in what they perceived the land wanted. Gabe expressed this sentiment this way:

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

Unlike AMC farmers, care in this cosmovision of stewardship was neither limited to private ownership nor to the farmers themselves. Instead, stewardship extended beyond the modernist ontology of "thinking like a fence line" to include landlords, neighbors, consumers, and even rented land within the scope of moral care (Campbell 2024). Jim described his experience of grazing his livestock on the rubble heaps of a neighbor's property like this: 'The sheep and goats get the joy of being on it. My neighbors get the joy of watching them from their porch. I get the joy of watching them rebuild the ecosystem. There's a lot of neat levels there.'

Regenerative Agriculture Cosmovision (RAC) Stewardship as Moderate Synthesis: Investing in Ecology

RAC farmers reflected both a synthesis and a tension between AMC and EOC approaches to stewardship. While still carrying a more capitalist mindset of investment and return, RAC farmers also tended to emphasize a broader variety of values, notably with economic values often more marginal. These farmers usually focus more on maximizing values rather than maximizing yield. Other prioritized values included relationships, ecological diversity, and unpaid research participation and knowledge exchange. Specifically, regarding yield, these farmers often took pride in how they were able to leverage ecology to increase yield which reflected both the ecological emphasis of the EOC farmers and the productive emphasis of the AMC farmers. Hannah, the principal operator of a diversified 180-acre regenerative farm said:

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

Although AMC farmers tended to use similar language to the RAC farmers with a capitalist framework for stewardship, the scope of care seemed wider for RAC farmers, who were often motivated to improve relationships, ecological diversity, service, *and* productivity. They were also more willing to walk away from leases, markets, customers, and yields if they came at a significant cost to their other values. This reflects the regenerative attitude that "goes beyond production" (Strauser and Stewart 2024:5).While taking care of the land for AMC farmers meant erosion prevention and weed elimination, for RAC farmers, it usually also meant increasing soil organic matter, sequestering carbon, creating habitat for insects and songbirds, and increasing species diversity of both agricultural crops, and non-agricultural species in the farm ecosystem. They tended to identify more interconnections between the health of the soil, the crops, and the ecosystem than the AMC farmers, yet also tended to be less driven by how

the end product contributes to the health of the consumer compared with the EOC farmers. Like EOC farmers, RAC farmers were also motivated to work with nature, and patterned their farming practices in accord with ecological systems, which they tended to believe enhanced production and profitability. However, they perceived ecology as something to be used for their own ends, and therefore tended to be less concerned with what the 'farm wanted' compared with the EOC farmers. Nancy described her cow-calf operation as follows:

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

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

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

This group tended to view agrichemicals as an exception to ecological patterns rather than the standard operating procedure like AMC farmers, or as morally bad like the EOC farmers tended to believe. RAC farmers oriented themselves toward the ecological balance that the EOC farmers perceived, yet still acknowledged a degree of the human-ecological conflict on which the AMC farmers focused. Speaking of "spraying down," Jeremy said:

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

RAC farmers tended to resist the concept of dominion which AMC farmers understood to be a divine authority to kill (like Miller-Klugesherz and Author2 2023:7), yet still would resort to using chemicals when they felt it necessary to achieve sufficient yields. However, even in these cases, RAC farmers would often deliberately choose more expensive chemicals that were more selective to allow for fewer casualties compared with AMC farmers. Among the RAC farmers, some were morally opposed to chemical use while others saw nothing morally wrong with it, yet they all tended to use it similarly as a fall back. While some expressed their long-term goal of a chemical-free ideal, others felt good about continuing with restrained, selective use of chemicals. Drawing on Miller-Klugesherz and Author2's addiction metaphor (2023:9-10),

some RAC farmers aspired for total sobriety, while others, though no longer the addicts they once were, also had no intention of quitting altogether.

Discussion

This project set out to explore morality as a facet of the 'good farmer' identity through the concept of stewardship by tapping into farmer cosmovisions and how they shape farming practices. Because stewardship has tended to be defined from an etic rather than emic perspective, this helped to inform how farmers define and enact stewardship. A key finding that emerged was a common surface-level definition of stewardship as 'care for the land' which then diverged into multiple distinct cosmovisions for farming practice falling along a continuum reflected in the work of Raymond et al. (2016) and Parks and Brekken (2018). The AMC farmers tended to prioritize caring for a productive return on investment to glorify God while the EOC farmers tended to prioritize holistic health for the land, crops, livestock, neighbors, consumers, and themselves. Another key finding was that RAC farmers fell in the middle of this continuum, reflecting the tensions between more industrial and more ecological approaches to farming.

Implications

The stewardship moralities which guide farmers identify and enact being a 'good farmer' are significant. Exploring stewardship offered a greater understanding of the concept held among farmers. Stewardship functioned as the anchor point on which their *moral orders* hinged (Farrell 2015). Farmers' ontologies for what the land is and what good farming should be emerged, in part, from their understanding of this structuring narrative of stewards given land to care for by God. More importantly, however, is the reality that farmers can draw on the same myths and still come to contradictory if not antithetical conclusions about how to practice good farming. By myth, we mean powerful stories that shape the way people view the world regardless of whether they are "true," making no attempt to either verify or falsify them. While Farrell's (2015) work on environmental morality revealed that two divergent moralities emerged from two distinct myths, the stewardship myth can produce both chemical-intensive monocultures and holistic agroecological systems. This indicates that while myths and narrative structures play a role in shaping farmer morality, they are by no means the root cause or single source. Stewardship appeals as an inspirational structuring narrative drawn from a Judeo-Christian background that remains malleable enough for a wide range of farmers to assimilate into their pre-existing understanding about what it means to be a good farmer.

A second implication of this study is the potential of the regenerative trajectory. In an era of unprecedented environmental harm, especially from chemical-intensive approaches to agriculture, many have suggested that RA is a radical solution. Our own data suggest that RAC is the more moderate compromise of productivism and holism, yet the regenerative farmers and ecocentric-organic farmers reflect many common attributes of the regenerative mindset. The

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

Together, these findings point to the significance of the trajectory of the regenerative mindset which propels farmers in a new direction for agriculture. That is not to say that all farmers will keep moving on this spectrum, nor that farming practices at the far end of this spectrum will be homogenous. Mapping this trajectory of the regenerative mindset complements the work of Miller-Klugesherz and Author2 (2023), which depicts the front half of a timeline of farmers transitioning from conventional to regenerative agriculture, where some farmers are further along in their 'addiction recovery' than others. While it is unreasonable to assume that the trajectory of the regenerative mindset would be linear or chronologically consistent, it seems that once farmers transition through cosmovisions, they will likely continue to move further from chemically-dominated productivism, especially when they can afford the financial burdens (Miller-Klugescherz and Author2 2023).

We also found degrees of difference in appreciation of environmental agency among the different groups of farmers. Within the regenerative mindset, there is greater openness, especially to the ecosystem as well as a desire to work with it and trust it to restore balance resulting in enhanced agency for the non-human members of the system (Gosnell et al. 2019; Gosnell 2021; Gordon et al. 2021; Miller-Klugesherz and Author2 2023). This transition to a more regenerative mindset resembles the conversions observed by Bell (2004), which he

attributes to his concept of *natural conscience*, where people attribute their morality to the apolitical forces of nature, but are really enacting a morality from a social construct of nature that masks its influences. Ecocentric-organic farmers' cosmovisions in particular tended to express that ecosystems had the agency to re-pattern human beliefs and practices, especially when people are more open and attentive to the ecosystems they occupy. Process-relational, new materialist, and more-than-human approaches to environmental social research offer tools and assumptions to recognize the environment as its own social and material force in society, rather than just a cultural construct.

The transformation of farmers growing deeper into the regenerative mindset could be understood as a process of *vernacularization.* Vernacular is often used to describe the local language or dialect, which is rooted in and sprouts out of a particular region or local context, in contrast to the imposed language of the empire or the colonizer. Vernacular is of Latin origin—the language of the Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church. The root—*verna*—was a term used by the Romans that meant a "home-born slave." That is to say, if you were not born in Rome as a Roman citizen, you were instead a conquered, colonized, and/or enslaved "barbarian" or "pagan." Vernacular was the language of slaves and people patterned by life outside of the empire. Vernacularization then is the process of learning the language—the patterns—of one's own local geographic and ecological context, in place of the language of Empire (Scott 2020:296-299; Loring 2023). Language shapes perceptions of reality (Whorf 1956), and powerful actors in the food system use the language of empire—production, yield, feeding the world, conquest, control, and even stewardship—to affect reality. Decolonizing this language however does not come easily. As Gabe describes,

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

We found that those who are better able to appreciate environmental agency are in this sense able to hear new languages that can teach them new patterns and customs for thinking and enacting farming according to local context. And in this sense, there is the promise of new agri-*cultures.*

Limitations

This project had a few notable limitations. While purposive case selection ensured a diversity of farm types, with variations of products, practices, scale, genders, and cosmovisions, this method of case selection intentionally limited participants to farmers that indicated a spiritual component of their perceived reality. Because a cosmovision assumes relationships between the spiritual, natural, and social worlds, the very definition excludes secular-

materialists from participation, leaving their notions of stewardship untouched in this study. Another limitation of purposive case selection as well as the fewer number of cases eliminates empirically generalizing beyond our study, but the findings here do allow for theoretical generalizability (Small 2009). Similarly, most of the participants self-identified as non-Hispanic, white farmers influenced by American Judeo-Christian culture, which was a limitation of snowballing case selection. Racial and ethnic-minority farmers likely have different structuring moral narratives for farming, and investigating these went beyond the scope of this study, but would be very worthy of future research.

Future Research

Our results suggest the need for more research on regenerative agriculture trajectories. Especially fruitful could be gathering oral histories from older farmers who have been implementing RA principles for longer time spans, which could potentially reveal new dimensions of the regenerative mindset. However, given that present memory of the past can alter details of the actual past, studies that follow farmers' practices and cosmovisions (or mindsets) over longer time periods could also be insightful for our understanding of the movement on the regenerative trajectory over time, and overcome some of the limitations of oral history methodology. Additionally, given stewardship's potency in shaping the environmental morality of farmers, engaging other structuring narratives may offer new avenues for research. Examining farmers' perceptions of the Malthusian 'Feed the World' myth or Hardin's 'Tragedy of the Commons' myth could offer new insights into farmer-environmental relations. Exploring the cultural constructs of farmer cosmology not only yields social understanding, but plants seeds of hope for the ongoing individual and systemic transformations within American agriculture.

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