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Cultivating Legitimacy as a Farmer

Abby M. Dubisar

Abstract

Beyond growing and selling food, women farmers perform literacy work to establish and maintain legitimacy. As part of a larger interview-based dataset, this article analyzes the literacy practices that one woman farmer, Lauren, undertakes in relation to her legitimacy as a farmer. Informed by literacy studies research and feminist rhetoric scholarship, as well as interdisciplinary studies on women in agriculture, the analysis here illustrates how Lauren performs specific literacy practices. Audiences' gendered expectations necessitate such practices, which Lauren performs in order to be understood as a farmer in a masculine, patriarchal landscape shaped by her family, customers, and broader farming community. These literacy practices include crafting an image visually, interacting intentionally through verbal conversations, adapting to audience assumptions, and taking on community leadership roles.

Keywords

farmer, woman farmer, agriculture, food, food literacy, legitimacy

"My grandparents [on both sides] were farmers, but I didn't know women could farm. There's a whole story there, that I can tell you," Lauren says with a brief laugh during the first three minutes of our research interview. Her laugh signals the irony of how even though her ancestors farmed she could not imagine that women could farm, either on their own or otherwise, due to the ways sexism shapes agriculture. Lauren's life is populated with sexism, as I have come to learn through multiple interactions with her, and she navigates agriculture with particular attention to its gendered landscape. A midwestern farmer in her early thirties, Lauren is committed to making sure people know that women can farm. Our interview took place during the winter between her eighth and ninth farming seasons. Her farm is thriving. She uses organic practices to farm eight acres of rented land, growing over thirty different vegetable and herb crops in over 150 total varieties during the June-September growing season and about a dozen other vegetables in October and November. She runs the largest woman-owned CSA (community supported agriculture) in her state. Lauren defines a CSA as "basically a subscription service that people sign up [for] for the year and then get vegetables each week." Her CSA—the second largest overall in her state—feeds over two hundred families and is evidence of the fact that women can farm.

Making sure that people know that women can farm requires a range of literacy work, labor performed to address constraints that women farmers encounter. These farmers experience unique challenges not only in running their farms but in being interpreted as legitimate farmers. At times they face hostility and must justify their existence to audiences who are unfamiliar with or threatened by a woman farming. At other times they are welcomed, especially by those who are alarmed by the thousands of farms that close each year in the United States. Although fewer than 1.5% of the United States population engages in agriculture (Bureau of Labor Statistics)—and women make up only 14% of that 1.5% (USDA, "Women Farmers")—women are increasingly entering farming. The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition describes women farmers as "one of the fastest growing sectors of American agriculture." Due to this recent increase, and how this change in population sheds light on gender in agriculture, literacy scholars who participate in interdisciplinary food studies have an opportunity to research how this farmer population harnesses past literacy experiences and develops new ones as they start and sustain their farms.

In this case study with Lauren, I join scholars who have examined the perspectives of women farmers to position them as literacy workers (Gollihue; Greer; Wolford). Based on the data I gathered by listening to and interacting with Lauren on multiple occasions, I argue that Lauren, as an independent woman farmer, performs specific literacy practices in order to contend with audiences' gendered expectations and be understood as a farmer in a sexist landscape shaped by her family, customers, and broader farming community. These literacy practices include crafting an image visually, interacting intentionally through verbal conversations, adapting to audience assumptions, and taking on community leadership roles. My analysis of Lauren's literacy work provides scholars with a model of the strategies that a woman farmer can use to meet various audience expectations and be recognized as an expert in agriculture.

First I review the literature on constraints faced by the current generation of women farmers, including the ways that literacy researchers have recently highlighted women farmers' work amidst such constraints. Then I describe my methods for conducting this research before explicating my argument that gender shapes Lauren's literacy performances in multiple ways as Lauren acquires and maintains her legitimacy as a farmer. To support my argument about Lauren's literacy practices and the impact of gender, I analyze examples of her efforts to access legitimacy, including visual and verbal strategies. Finally, I discuss some conclusions and limitations of my study as well as its implications for future studies.

Constraints Facing Women Farmers: Literature Review

In both multiparticipant and single case studies, scholars have exposed the sexist infrastructures of agriculture and American agrarianism[1] as well as the resulting constraints that women farmers face. I rely on the work of scholars from a variety of fields invested in women's contributions to agriculture, including sociology, history, and literacy studies. As scholars have shown, some of these constraints faced by this farmer population arise from the fact that, despite the recent growth in women running their own farms as new farmers, they still make up a small percentage of farmers in the United States overall, just 14% (USDA).[2] They also lack access to land (Pilgeram and Amos). The USDA indicates that women farm only 6.9% of U.S. farmland ("Women Farmers"). The invisibility of women's labor on farms is another constraint, shown in Andrea Rissing's ethnographic study of eleven women farmers in Iowa. Even though women have been farming for generations, they report that they are not considered "farmers" (128). Infrastructural discrimination is another constraint faced by these farmers, including racist and sexist treatment by the USDA and other gatekeepers that prevent women and other historically marginalized farmers from accessing loan applications and other resources (Penniman; Schell). Julie Keller's results from ethnographic field research with twelve Wisconsin farmers show how USDA representatives did not "read" women and racial minorities as farmers (76), enabling them to withhold resources from these farmers. Interviews with sixteen women farmers in Colorado reveal additional challenges they faced, including tokenism, harassment, and resistance from their own families (Shisler and Sbicca 881). Lauren, too, faces these challenges in her work as a farmer, and they shape her interactions with various audiences.

Compounding the material challenges women face as farmers, the literacy landscape is also fraught with constraints that prevent them from being understood as legitimate farmers. Jane Greer analyzes Myrtle Tenney Booth's 1985 autobiography, showing how women like Booth, who lived from 1906-1999, performed undervalued farm labor in the early twentieth century. Greer's analysis reveals how Booth's farming required technical expertise, advanced reasoning skills, intellectual flexibility, and rhetorical sophistication. Booth's writing enabled her to "fix the meaning ascribed to her lifetime of labor" (95). Her writing to secure meaning to her labor and gain recognizability as a farmer aligns with Lauren's literacy work to attain legitimacy in the present.

Highlighting a woman a generation younger than Booth, Rachel Wolford studies Annette, born in the 1920s and in her mid-eighties when Wolford interviews her in 2011. Annette inherited 160 acres of farmland after her husband died in 1994, suddenly finding herself in charge of all farm decisions. The main constraint Annette faced arose from attitudes long held by her husband's family. Before becoming widowed, she was not allowed access to any farm knowledge, a position held by her in-laws that her husband maintained. Annette's experiences show how resilience is a crucial characteristic of women who attempted "to build meaningful lives despite difficult circumstances" (np). As I examine below, while Lauren works in a different farming context, her experience still retains some of the constraints Annette faced over a generation earlier.

Featuring a participant another generation younger than Annette, Krystin Gollihue uses first-person videoethnographic methods to capture the farming work of her mother, Wendy, who became the sole caretaker of their family's twenty-two-acre farm and apiary when her husband died unexpectedly in 2017. Gathering data using GoPro video cameras attached to her and Wendy's bodies as they farm, Gollihue analyzes how Wendy enacts literacy through her farming body as she expertly attends to bees on her land and talks through her intimate knowledge of the landscape. Gollihue addresses the constraint of the invisibility of women's integral farm labor, showing how farm work is "constructed through technological and institutional systems to be a masculine activity" (25). By positioning agricultural labor and knowledge as relational practices that take place within built infrastructures designed for men's bodies (31), Gollihue helps us understand how Lauren's literacy work and farmwork include negotiating interactions and spaces not designed with her in mind.

To be read as a farmer and avoid some of these constraints, some women farmers choose to engage in "alternative" agriculture and sustainable practices, which are more likely, in Rissing's terms, to "empower" these women's identities as farmers. That is, they participate in sustainable or regenerative farming practices to address the constraint of working in a masculinized occupation by undertaking a completely different type of farming that does not directly reject the masculine norms of conventional, industrial agriculture (Sachs et al.). By growing diversified crops such as vegetables and flowers and selling them directly to local consumers at farmers' markets and through CSA memberships, often called "direct marketing," they are read as farmers in those contexts and are not competing with established men farmers in their communities who sell to commodity markets (DeLind and Ferguson; Trauger). As a direct marketing farmer, Lauren works to be recognized and known by her community, establishing relationships that sustain her business and preserve her reputation. By investigating how farmers navigate those relationships and the role that gender plays in doing so, this study contributes to other work that increases the readability of women as farmers and highlights the legitimizing literacy work these women perform along with that of farming.

Methods

My case study, approved by my institutional review board, features the literacy practices that Lauren uses to be read as a farmer. I selected Lauren for this case study because she is a member of the rising generation of women farmers, and her gender brings attention to her farm, a fact she both resents and invites. Lauren was chosen from a larger pool of interview participants that includes thirty-three other members of this population because her strategies for contending with gender show a range of proactive and nuanced approaches that made her stand out among the participant group. Further, Lauren is committed to bridging two points on the wide spectrum of farming practices. She brings together farmers like her who grow vegetables using organic practices on smaller parcels of land in order to sell this food to their local community and larger-scale commodity growers who use chemical inputs and rely on expensive machinery to grow crops on several thousand acres of land. These commodity crops will be manufactured into ethanol and other food and non-food products in order to be sold on the multinational market. While often represented as a binary, contexts for agriculture in the United States are far more complex than overly-simplified constructions of big vs. small, local vs. international, etc. That said, the boundaries Lauren crosses are also gendered borders for many in her community, with *big* commodity farming led by white men while farmers who are women lead *small* vegetable farms. Among my participants, Lauren is the only farmer who detailed the ways she deliberately seeks out interactions with commodity growers. She is not meant to be representative of all farmers.

The design of my larger study follows in the tradition of scholars who insist that women's literacy experiences have worth (Al-Salmi and Smith; Bean; Leonard; Moss; Royster; Simon; Solberg; Vaughn, Harrell, and Dayton; Vieira; White-Farnham). My intention is to listen to women farmers who create and adapt strategies that address a range of audiences who meet them with a broad spectrum of responses to their work and status as farmers. In the interviews, farmers draw upon their experiences and generate knowledge that I then analyze and amplify in order to offer farmers' perspectives in farmers' own terms. Farmers' own views can be unfamiliar to those outside agricultural communities since food systems are increasingly obscured and hidden from those not directly engaged in farming. Additionally, like other scholarship engaged in studying women's roles in agriculture, my study is oriented from the perspective that gender is socially constructed and shapes individual and community experiences. I agree with Rissing that a "social constructivist understanding of gender [frames]…the ways women farmers conceptualize their gendered identities alongside their professional identities [and that] agriculture is not a gender-neutral field" (129). To that end, listening to Lauren's opinions and experiences regarding why and how gender matters to farming prompt me to place the farm as a literacy context with gendered implications.

To gather data, my study draws on several experiences listening to Lauren, initially during a field trip to her farm in 2017 and months later at a 2018 farmer conference where she spoke as part of a panel on land access. While listening to Lauren, my eagerness to speak with her one-on-one for a research interview grew. In 2018 I traveled back to Lauren's farm for the interview. On a sunny, icy January morning, we sat together at her kitchen table, in a building she lives in on the land she rents to farm. In our seventy-minute conversation, Lauren spoke about her literacy practices. I took handwritten notes while listening to Lauren speak to the audience on her farm and at the conference, as well as at her farm when we spoke one-on-one. Rev.com transcriptionists transcribed the interview audio recording into text for me to read and analyze. Lauren is a pseudonym, and all identifying information has been removed. Lauren was given an opportunity to member check this write-up. Appendix A lists my interview questions.

To analyze Lauren's speeches and interview transcript, I use a grounded theory approach (Charmaz) to explore how being a woman affects Lauren's life as a farmer and how she uses literacy practices and strategies to address audiences' gendered expectations for farmers. As Melanie Birks and Jane Mills note, "grounded theory is the preferred choice when the intent is to generate theory that explains a phenomenon of interest to the researcher" (17). By asking Lauren open-ended questions I encouraged her to describe how and why gender and farming intersect and how she communicates in her work. That is, these questions were intended to gather knowledge about how Lauren makes meaning of the intersections of farming and gender that occur in the communicative contexts she experiences in her work life. In my analysis, I initially looked for recurring themes in my notes and the interview transcript, paying particular attention to Lauren's descriptions of written and spoken interactions, and how her identity as a woman mattered during these interactions. One recurring theme was access, and a major subtheme of that was legitimacy. My analysis illustrates how Lauren must both acquire legitimacy because she needs to prove herself as a farmer, a burden that she says farmers who are white men do not have, and maintain legitimacy because it is always at risk.

My findings show how Lauren's literacy practices are essential to her acquiring and maintaining legitimacy. It joins other literacy studies scholars' findings that increase knowledge of agriculture as a unique literacy context, including Gollihue's evidence that shows how farming involves a network of making practices that are co-animated relationally with others (22), such as Lauren's visibly gendered identity that matters to those with whom she interacts. My findings also contribute to the growing group of scholarship that reveals how an evolving understanding of literacy must view literate practices as enacted and lived (Ehret and Hollett; Pink; Schmidt and Beucher; Shivers-McNair; Swacha; Walker; Woodcock; Work-Slivka). As this case study shows, Lauren is both put into situations by others in which she must work for legitimacy and puts herself in situations with the intention of enhancing her legitimacy. She offers examples that show how her experiences as a farmer are rich with opportunities to effect change through her lived literacy work, especially in the minds of those who do not see her as a legitimate farmer.

Acquiring Legitimacy

Lauren's efforts to be understood as a legitimate farmer occur through visual and verbal strategies that occur in two ways: by crafting a legitimate farmer image and by interacting intentionally through verbal conversations in order to gain status as an insider. I provide examples of how Lauren obtains and attempts to obtain legitimacy with audiences to argue that the literacy strategies under consideration here demonstrate how her farmer work involves much more than growing and selling vegetable crops. She must make herself readable as a farmer to the audiences she interacts with as a farmer.

Crafting an Image

Appearance matters for acquiring legitimacy. Lauren describes that within farming and other physically-demanding work contexts, her appearance as a woman is delegitimizing. Normative expectations of white femininity, which Lauren visibly presents, do not align with her appearance after a day of farming when she has visible dirt and sweat on her work attire, as is typical of those who do manual labor. In other words, Lauren's look as a woman in dirty jeans and a sweaty t-shirt does not signify to audiences that she is a farmer or even a respected worker in a phyiscally-demanding job. She said, "I have a burden [of] explaining myself. A man who's a farmer has [no] need to explain himself. You walk into a room with a plaid shirt and overalls on [as a man and] people think you're a hard worker." This notion that the visual cue of a man wearing overalls signifies that he is "a hard worker" represents the unearned legitimacy Lauren has noticed others receive. To not be misread, she must create strategies so that people know who she is and recognize her work.

Lauren also describes how the type of labor-intensive vegetable farming she does delegitimizes her. Even when her labor is recognized as agricultural work, she is still not granted the legitimacy that her men peers seem to be granted automatically, especially if they do commodity farming on large acreages. As Lauren describes, "I constantly get told that I'm a gardener and not a farmer, and sometimes I don't know if that's because I'm a woman or because it's vegetables." Lauren explains that men farmers are granted legitimacy because of both their masculine appearance and their status as commodity growers using expensive, specialized equipment on large parcels of land. These farmers, both in their appearance and their crops, fit normative expectations for the definition of farmer.

Lauren further describes the gendered expectations related to physical labor and how even her own farming grandmother tells her "you can't physically do that" in regard to the farm work Lauren is actively accomplishing. She proves her grandma wrong over and over again. Lauren said, "I constantly get told that the amount of physical labor I'm doing is not sustainable whereas a guy wouldn't be told that. They're expected to work that hard on a farm, if you're a guy. If you're a woman, it's considered, you know, not sustainable." Such denials of her ability to do farm labor serve to repeatedly delegitimize her farmer status merely because of her gender, not her physical capability.

One strategy Lauren uses to respond to these delegitimizing constraints and acquire legitimacy is to craft an image by agreeing to be featured in publications of nonprofit organizations and government agencies that work with farmers. She expressed mixed feelings about her participation with these organizations: Although she welcomes these opportunities for the way they both publicize her farm and legitimize her as a farmer, she dislikes the added labor and time they require of her. She also expressed concern that she is participating in the tokenization of women farmers. She asks herself what it means to be featured as a *woman farmer* when she is working for legitimacy as a farmer without the gendered qualifier. But Lauren thinks the benefits of these opportunities outweigh the drawbacks. For example, she tells about two separate occasions when she was photographed for two different organizations, noting how the respective photographers each had a different way of photographing her, which she did not fully realize until the photographs were published:

> [Organization A] sexualized me in the photographs. [Organization B] made me look like a working woman, in a positive way. And just talking to [Organization B's] photographer about her concept behind [securing my identity as a woman doing farm labor] and how important that is…I didn't even see it until she pointed it out and I was like, wow. [Organization A] showed my butt and not my head, you know—and then [Organization B] has these pho-

> tos of my muscles that are just huge, you know, and the way she took the photo was just trying to show strength.

When Lauren agrees to features of her and her farm in food and farming publications, she thinks that doing so will be good publicity for her business and the wider community, helping to legitimize her individually as a farmer and normalizing the broader notion that women farm. In these photos she is always wearing her normal work attire for the growing season: jeans and a t-shirt or plaid button-down flannel shirt. But she has to rely on choices made by the photographer, editors, and others who work at the sponsoring organization, so not being able to control how the images will be used or where they will travel is a risk that comes with those rewards.

As a result of these experiences, Lauren directs the photographers regarding how they feature her body. Lauren describes how one photographer traveled to her farm from Washington, D.C., to take her photo for a government organization's profile of her. The photographer downplayed the importance of women's contributions to agriculture, and Lauren details her response as it aims to secure legitimacy: "I had a conversation with the photographer about why it's a big deal for women to be in farming, and I had to convince him that this project [he was hired for] is legit, and I had to talk him down from his 'women are just whining' kind of mentality." Lauren details how tiring and time-consuming it can be to repeatedly do this work to acquire legitimacy, but then she explained again how she benefits from the resulting projects: "And granted, I get benefits from it, like, when my name appears in the paper, there's a benefit to that, but… It gets kind of exhausting being the token woman farmer, even though I simultaneously love it. Like, I do love it, right?" Lauren, then, continues to question her participation in these campaigns and what impact such profiles yield, both for her farm operation and women's noticeable prominence on farms.

Relating to these concerns about photographers' choices, cutesiness is a recurring term that Lauren used when talking about these opportunities to craft an image. By *cutesiness*, Lauren is referring to the trend in profiles of women farmers to dwell on the farmer's conventionally attractive looks, such as by positioning her with a bouquet of flowers or other displays of beauty. Although Lauren knows that such representations do not increase women's legitimacy in agriculture, she understands why they continue to be perpetuated. She says that one factor motivating these images is the attempt to elevate the plummeting legitimacy of farming writ large at a time when farms are closing: "Conventional agriculture doesn't know what [to] do with the fact that farmers are going away. They don't know what to do with this new trend of alternative agriculture coming in, and so their antidote is this really poor attempt at cutesiness." But when agriculture organizations feature Lauren or any woman farmer in an objectifying, cutesy way or by only showcasing her image and not her farm, these portrayals limit viewers' understandings of women who farm. That is, such representations position farmers like Lauren not as decision makers and hard workers, but instead as physically attractive feminine objects.

To better secure legitimacy, then, Lauren makes sure publications feature her story along with her photograph. Commenting on Organization A, which objectifies Lauren as it does others in its visual campaign, she says, "That was the thing (being cutesy) that [Organization A's leader] did, and she never connected it to people's stories." Lauren details that she notices that some other women Organization A features in their campaigns are no longer even farmers, yet their images are on display to lead viewers to believe they still farm: "A lot of those women [Organization A features] aren't still farmers, and their pictures are still being used whereas [Organization B] connected [the farmer photos] to a story, [the farmers'] work, which I think is really important, that you can't just separate the image from the farmer." So to acquire legitimacy for herself and others, Lauren wants the image she crafts via these organizations to include detail and description in order to communicate who she is as a farmer, not just display a feminine image of her as one.

Interacting Intentionally through Verbal Conversations

Another practice that Lauren uses to acquire legitimacy is to interact intentionally through verbal conversations, especially by introducing herself to specific audiences. To participate in organizations that farmers in her community traditionally engage in, Lauren attends her county and state meetings for an agriculture organization that is not necessarily known to include vegetable farmers. She describes how those attending the meetings introduce themselves: "[You] go around the circle and explain yourself, and most of the women pass and let their husbands explain them, which is annoying as hell." But Lauren, breaking the tradition that women do not speak in these introductions, introduces herself and talks about her farm. As a single woman, she is also an exception in the room of married pairs of men and women or men attending alone. She explains how she carefully chooses her words in these contexts in which independent women farmers who grow vegetables are not likely attendees, much less speakers during meetings:

> I think very hard about how to craft my words so that the men in the room will hear me. And I do that ... I'm successful at it. I'm highly successful at it, which is fascinating. But I think about the way I dress, I think about the way I speak, I think about the way I talk about my operation. I try to put it in their terms, and I constantly am doing that, because ... And I'm aware that I'm doing it, but I'm also not going to stop doing it, even though I hate that I have to do it, because it's, I feel, like the only way to move across those barriers of change.

As Lauren put it, effectively moving across barriers means that the men in the room who farm large commodity operations, including growing soybeans and corn or keeping animals in confinement facilities, have an opportunity to understand and respect farmers like her who grow food for the local community. The words she chooses show that she understands their operations, such as connecting their farm to the types of farming her grandparents did, bringing up antique tractors with fellow farmers who like them, finding common ground through challenges all farmers face with weather, among other verbal strategies. She sees herself as highly successful because these other farmers remember her and her name at subsequent events, they attend events that she hosts, and they ask about her farm. They also ask her for advice as some of them consider adding vegetables to the crops they grow. Regarding her appearance, she dresses for off-farm meetings and activities in clean work boots, jeans, t-shirts or flannel shirts, and baseball caps that bear the logos of non-profit organizations that support farmers. When she describes her appearance in these interactions she mentions another woman vegetable farmer in her community who has a *hippie* style of dress. While Lauren deeply respects this farmer and praises her farm, Lauren describes how she herself would never dress in styles that evoke a hippie identity since doing so would not yield respect from the famers with whom she is trying to connect. While working to acquire her own legitimacy as a farmer, she tries to bridge boundaries between those practicing industrial agriculture and those using sustainable, regenerative, *alternative* practices. So in legitimizing herself through her appearance, words she uses, and topics she speaks about with these farmers, she is also legitimizing the type of farming that she and other women in her surrounding community do, including those who would never go to the meetings that Lauren attends with commodity farmers.

Maintaining Legitimacy

Maintaining the legitimacy Lauren acquires is an ongoing aspect of her life as a farmer and her continuing literacy labor. She maintains her legitimacy by adapting to known audiences' assumptions and by both creating and taking on leadership roles through hosting community events and mentoring other farmers. It took years for Lauren to reach acceptance by audiences she encounters, and gaining insider status is an ongoing process that recurs each time she meets and explains herself to new audiences. Having farmed for eight years, however, she can rely on her established legitimacy.

Adapting to Audience Assumptions

Lauren explains a range of strategies she uses to maintain her legitimacy with audiences she has built rapport with in the early years of her farming. While she is now beyond being the unfamiliar face at farm organization meetings, she still does the communicative work to maintain her insider status with those groups—partly because even after years of being involved with these organizations, she remains the only woman who is vocal at these meetings and runs her own farm. To maintain her status within these contexts, she learns as much as she can about her fellow farmers' operations and demonstrates that knowledge to show that she values their farms and understands the conventional farming on large acreages in her area. She avoids the label of a person who is critical of industrial agriculture despite being personally and politically invested in changing certain aspects of conventional practices. She has been successful with her efforts, shown by the fact that she wins leadership awards from an organization not known for its inclusion of vegetable farmers or women and also now serves on the organization's county-level board.

One example she provides in our interview is how she navigates in-person conversations, specifically in how she adapts her words to meet known audiences' assumptions: "[I try to] always find the fine balance of where to put [my] words and in what context…when I'm talking to a large [acreage] farmer.…I'm always thinking about [how to be taken seriously] especially if I'm going into an environment with other farmers. I also have a way of speaking to male farmers, making sure that I know some of the lingo of the equipment that they're using." By showing her familiarity with other farmers' operations, she shows that she respects them and—even though her farm is quite different from theirs—that she understands and values what they do. Although she now has an established farm, she still does not want to alienate herself. She explains how she would adapt her vocabulary and conversation topics when talking to a customer and others at the farmers' market. She illustrates all the different ways she meets audiences' assumptions and expectations:

> So, I'm going to talk about the beautiful vegetables [with a customer at the farmers' market] and how I cook them and how healthy they are and things like that. If I'm talking to a farmer, I'm going to talk about the soil, I'm going to talk about the cultivation, I'm going to talk about my antique tractors, I'm going to talk about the horse power of my tractor. I'm going to make a self-deprecating joke about how my tractor is small, but I can still produce a lot per acre.

Lauren's use of self-deprecating jokes about her equipment and yield demonstrates her evolving status as both an insider and an outsider farmer in these contexts. She shows that she values yield, like other farmers, and understands soil science and engine size, all ways that farmers compare their operations and demonstrate expertise. And with the confidence of an insider she can make self-deprecating jokes, connecting with her conversation partners through humor. Instead of feeling threatened by not being taken seriously, Lauren feels she can now balance her performance of farmer literacies, such as about soil content and antique tractors, with levity. She can participate in a normative farming discourse that maintains her legitimacy in that particular interaction and builds friendships with other farmers. Whether this respect is fully reciprocated on an individual level is difficult to assess, but could be partially shown, from her view, by the friendly relationships Lauren now has with these farmers and the fact that she feels more welcome around them now than when she first started attending meetings and introducing herself and her farm to them.

Additionally and more specifically, to maintain her legitimacy during in-person interactions with conventional farmers who are men, Lauren takes great strides to connect with these audiences and intentionally find common ground, which she further details as being an effort on the conversational level: "I'm going to make sure that I ask good questions about their operation, make sure I praise their operation, make sure I don't say anything that's dissenting to who they are, even if I don't personally believe in hog confinements, I'm never going to say that to them because I'm going to try to make sure that they like me. I'm going to spend a lot of time making sure that they like me." She must perform this conversational work in order to be read as an insider even though her farm and the choices she makes for it are quite different from these other farmers who grant legitimacy in her community. Lauren deliberately works to not only depoliticize her interactions but also connect with these other farmers. She understands that these intentional habits of hers are unique among others who practice sustainable agriculture. She notices that other vegetable farmers who choose to be publicly political about the food system as it exists in her surrounding community can alienate themselves from the established farming community led by men who practice conventional farming.

But beyond communicating with other farmers about farming, Lauren takes on a new kind of personal embodiment when she pays particular attention to how she communicates significant news to her audience of CSA members in order to maintain legitimacy as their farmer. In this particular occasion, she makes public an evolution of her embodiment by describing her heterosexual relationship and future marriage. She wants to be the person who breaks the news to her customers because she knows her personal life matters to them, and she wants to be specific about how they receive the news. Concerns that her customers would assume she would quit farming or that her future husband would take over the farm motivate her worries that the news would put at risk the legitimacy she works so hard to secure.

Marriage includes embodying new roles, so when planning to deliver this message and maintain her legitimacy, Lauren knows to use and define the new term *farm husband* to delineate that her future spouse would not be a farmer on her farm. But her first step in articulating this new role to CSA members was to explain it to her fiancé. Because she anticipates that his role will require articulation to those outside the relationship and that many would assume that he will become the lead farmer, she wants to first make sure he understands his role: "I've had a lot of conversations with my fiancé…in a not unkind way, [making sure he knows] he will be my farm husband, because he is not going to be doing primary labor on the farm. And I want to ... I believe that term, that farm wife, was used well for a long time, and then was misused for a while, depending on what era you're in and how much work women were doing on the farm." The use of terms is important to her, and she trusts that "farm husband" will designate that her fiancé is not the primary farmer—she is. Lauren wants her new status as a woman marrying a man to not compromise her legitimacy as the primary operator on her farm, and she anticipates that her fiancé will get immediate, unearned, unwarranted credit as a contributor to her farm. She intends to make sure that he knows his role. She specifically describes this role, framing it in a historical context:

> But I feel that that concept [of farm spouse] is important to reclaim and the beautiful part of it [is that] farm wives, even if they weren't doing physical labor on the farm, there was this huge support role that they were in. There are women, like my grandmother, who should've been called farmer, because she was farrowing the hog, she was milking the cows. But in my situation, my fiancé isn't going to be doing those things. He might be helping me with equipment and things like that. He will be in a support role, so, we joke a lot about it [and] we actually had a long conversation last weekend about what does that mean, and what does that mean to both of us, that I'm the farmer and he's the farm husband.

Securing her fiancé's understanding of her autonomy over the farm is essential before she can articulate the news to her CSA members.

Lauren's specific vocation as a farmer necessitates her articulation of her new role as a woman planning to marry. Other jobs would not require her to write such an explanation. She names being a hairdresser in town as an example and points out, "no one would think twice of me getting married" if she held other occupations. Continuing, Lauren illustrates, "one of the reasons I feel like it's really important to talk about [my fiancé's role as a support person] is because if we're going to talk about women farmers and women ... all aspects of that need to be talked about." Lauren estimates that once she is read as a wife and no longer as a single woman farming independently, her legitimacy as a farmer is at risk. Thus, Lauren articulates her transition from being a single, independent farmer to being a married, independent farmer as important to the broad, inclusive understanding of women's lives and their efforts toward legitimacy. Farmers should be able to choose marriage without sacrificing their farmer status and Lauren explicitly rejects the assumption that women are only truly independent as farmers if they are single.

After talking about her discussions with her fiancé about his role on her farm, Lauren details her strategies for communicating the news to her CSA customers. She wants to strike an informative yet joyous tone so that her customers would take seriously the boundaries she is describing for her future husband's minimal, supportive role in the operation, and simultaneously celebrate her happy news. She reads the email to me after describing her process in composing it. Before sending the email, she recruits her sister, a marketing professional, and other friends as readers to assess its effectiveness. In the message, she refers to how her readers have heard of farm wives, but they might not have heard of a farm husband. She introduces him in the email message and briefly describes their courtship. After reading the introductory part of the message to me, she stops and says, "This is the important part." Then, she starts reading the details about how her farm would continue to operate the way it always had in the past. When she finishes reading the email to me, she explains her customers' viewpoint to further justify why such a message is necessary to maintain her legitimacy: "It was really important [to write to my customers with this information, in this manner] because a lot of people had said, 'Oh, are you moving?' Every time I said I was getting married, people asked me if I was moving." I ask whether people respond to her engagement news by assuming that she was going to quit farming. Nodding, she answers, "I got asked that a lot. So I was like, We're going to nip this in the bud with my customers and just say, 'This is how it is.'" Customers also express assumptions that she would not do a fall CSA since she would be busy wedding planning, which Lauren gently rejects when it comes up. In multiple ways, Lauren anticipates and responds to reactions from customers who assume her entire life and business would change in the context of her future marriage, an experience, she emphasizes, that would not happen to men farmer colleagues when they announce an engagement. Lauren feels that men's multiple identities as farmers and husbands do not put their legitimacy at risk, whereas this new role of wife risks delegitimizing her as a farmer.

Taking on Community Leadership Roles

Another strategy Lauren uses to maintain her legitimacy is to create and accept leadership roles, such as hosting events that all farmers in her community will enjoy and feel welcome to attend and mentoring aspiring vegetable farmers. For example, she tells about co-hosting a farmer documentary screening with a woman farmer friend. She intends that hosting such events makes her a recognizable member of the community, someone who brings people together. Lauren expresses why she would much rather create these open, farmer-focused events than events aimed at women: "I happen to be a woman farmer, and I believe in female farmer issues and all that kind of stuff, but really who I want to reach are the people that control the strings, and I don't want to get bogged down in this cutesy kind of like thing." Lauren assumes that if her public persona seems relevant to women only, she will not maintain her legitimacy among all farmers. For the film event, she reaches out to farmers with operations different from hers in order to be intentional about the event's inclusivity: "I personally invited a friend of mine who's the largest farmer in the county. He and his family farm ten thousand acres, and I've worked really hard to be respected by him because I think it's important." This importance to Lauren stems from the fact that she believes all farmers need one another, and they should thus actively transgress boundaries across their different farming practices. She sees herself as an ambassador for vegetable farmers who successfully gains the friendship of a farmer who is quite different from her when it comes to farm choices and the types of farms they lead. This man validates her and her farm by coming to her event, in her view.

Lauren also takes on community leadership roles by agreeing to mentor women pursuing vegetable farming and who are also married to men who farm large, conventional operations. By answering the call to perform as an expert who is trusted by men farmers who do not know how to grow vegetables or run a CSA operation like Lauren's, she further secures her legitimacy as a successful, independent woman vegetable farmer. She agrees to volunteer in this capacity when men farmers ask her to mentor their wives. In this role she feels pressure not only to show that she knows every detail of her farm operation, but also to speak on behalf of all vegetable farmers working small parcels of land. This role is high stakes for Lauren because her success in it can both maintain the legitimacy of vegetable farming and support the ambitions of the women she is mentoring. Although the men are often skeptical of vegetable farming, they know and respect Lauren, so she is aware that she has a lot to prove in these mentoring roles. She explains two of these opportunities: "Both [women] are part of large family operations. One's five thousand acres; one's ten thousand acres. Both have hog confinements in the family and large row crop operations, and both have either started or are considering starting vegetable operations." Thus, both of these women are familiar with one type of farming and want to start a much different type, looking to Lauren as the expert. "[For] the first one, who's already started her vegetable operation," she continues, "I drive down [a few hours to their farm] and I have this very uncomfortable lunch where her husband comes in and basically grills me about my business. And you know, I feel like I'm having to talk for all of vegetable farming, and be this legit vegetable farmer. So, I better know my numbers, I better know my business. So, I'm always feeling like I'm having to be this perfect person because if I show a crack, then it's going to bring down the whole thing." Performing such mentorship means putting her legitimacy on the line, and those that ask her to take on this work rely on her expertise as a farmer as well as her identity as a woman, assuming their wives will be able to learn from her.

Lauren's description of the multiple roles she has to fulfill while doing such mentoring work—an arrangement she agrees to, uses her own time and money to drive to, yet dislikes in many ways—shows her commitment to her broader community and the ongoing legitimacy of women leading vegetable farms. Here Lauren has to not only demonstrate her own farmer legitimacy and the value of her farming choices but she also bears the burden of this other woman's persuading her husband that her ambitions are legitimate too, which is a lot of pressure. Thus, to maintain her legitimacy, in this case, Lauren must rely on enacting her knowledge about farming, which she does to meet the expectations of mentoring and communicate effectively as an expert. Doing so means continuing to foster trust with established, conventional farmers while validating new farmers' pursuits to farm differently.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Studies

In their 2010 article on "civic" agriculture in Pennsylvania, Amy Trauger and her coauthors ask, "Do women express a connection between their practice of agriculture and particular articulations of gender identity?" (44). Their findings show that the majority of respondents affirmed that their gender affected their decisions and choices, particularly concerning "barriers and problems they had faced" (51). My case study on Lauren pushes the conversation on the significant role gender plays in women farmers' lives by analyzing one farmer's literacy work, including the strategies she uses to navigate constraints and cross boundaries.

While my findings from this analysis are not meant to be generalizable, the details of Lauren's literacy life described here, especially the literacy work she does to acquire and maintain legitimacy, provide one dynamic case study on the complex literacy work of a woman farmer and how gender is a critical factor in her literacy life. These findings support my argument that Lauren, as an independent woman farmer, faces a range of audiences' gendered expectations, which elicit the necessary legitimizing literacy work she performs to maintain and grow her farm business and influence in her community.

But this study has several limitations. To follow IRB protocol and maintain the farmer's anonymity, I could not interview any of Lauren's customers or members of her community to get their perspectives on the status of Lauren's legitimacy as a farmer. Lauren's farm, however, remains a thriving business, a strong indicator that her communication with customers is meeting its goals. Since I am also unable to interview men farmers who grow commodity crops in Lauren's community, I cannot claim that her strategies are successful with them. However, as she describes, they attend events she hosts. Further, the agriculture organizations Lauren joins, organizations not known for being inclusive of vegetable farmers or women farmers, ask Lauren to speak at their events and feature her farm on their website and other venues, showing they at least trust her to represent the organization, which she also does on the county-level board. In one photo on their website, with an accompanying story about her farm, Lauren is pictured standing in a field and holding a CSA box of vegetables. She is wearing a shirt with a slogan the organization uses as well as a hat that bears the logo of a well-known clothing brand also worn by commodity farmers, visibly demonstrating her affinity with conventional farmers who are members of the organization.

Case studies like this one with Lauren can be expanded in the future by collecting other types of data. For example, understandings of Lauren's legitimacy-building work could be enhanced by combining interviews with other ethnographic approaches, such as working an entire farmers-market season with a farmer to observe interactions with passersby. That said, farmers may be hesitant to consent to a research study that includes allowing the researcher to interact with customers. Doing so would also present challenges for anonymity, an aspect of the study that empowers farmers to be transparent and honest about information they do not necessarily disclose to customers and fellow farmers.

More research is needed in order to better understand the literacy practices of women farmers, both in their local communities and in food systems writ large. Future literacy-based studies could investigate what strategies are necessary for women to obtain land access, such as negotiating leases with landowners, obtaining grants and loans to buy land, or even challenging local norms and laws that prevent smaller parcels of land from being defined as farms. Lauren, for example, said she actually hated vegetables when she first started her farm, but growing vegetables made the most sense because she rented a smaller plot of land. Now she appreciates vegetables in a new way, but growing what is accessible for a few acres of rented land was key to her farm's success, especially initially. Thus, instead of assuming women make certain farm decisions because of their gender, such as connecting sustainable practices to nurturing stereotypes, we can ask them how constraints and access shape their choices.

Ultimately, literacy scholars could more actively apply a gendered lens to studying agriculture and participate in this multidisciplinary field of inquiry, contributing our findings to the growing efforts of interdisciplinary food studies. While many in food studies commit their work to demystifying agricultural labor and promoting eaters' knowledge about the conditions under which food producers work, more can be done to better understand the literacy labor that goes into such oft-obscured and intentionally hidden roles within food production. Listening to practitioners describe the strategies they use to negotiate the sexist and racist infrastructures that undergird our food systems and analyzing these findings contributes to building the knowledge that can change these systems and the intersecting oppressions they perpetuate. One effort toward doing so includes taking a both/and approach that invites practitioners to speak about both farming and gender. We cannot expect women farmers to only be experts on gender. They are eager to talk about their farms and their expertise on farm-related literacies, all efforts that normalize women as agriculture experts.

The findings I feature here illustrate a range of examples regarding how one farmer applies her literacy skills to acquire and maintain her legitimacy. The observations and experiences Lauren provides portray complex terrain for why and how gender and farming interlink in rich literacy contexts. Further, they show how her interactions with others create opportunities for her to articulate her own narratives beyond those based on statistics and gendered stereotypes. While sitting in Lauren's home on the cold and sunny January day of our interview, I became struck by how much she thought about how gender matters to her interactions with others. It permeates her farm life. She expresses gratitude to me for my attention to her experiences and the validation she feels from our interaction, demonstrating that farmers are eager to tell their stories to those invested in learning more about the hidden and obscured aspects of women's work in food systems. Interviews with women farmers showcase the literacy work they do in order to be read as legitimate farmers who shape the cultural context of agriculture and offer opportunities to expand our access to their literacy lives and the ways that gender is critical to their literacy work.

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Appendix A

Food, Farming, and Feminism Interview Questions

General

1. What has been your past experience with being a farmer or food worker?
2. In what ways do you see gender making a difference to farming and food?
3. What do you see as the status of women farmers and food workers in your community?
4. What do you see as the status of women farmers and food workers within the food system, both as it currently exists, and in future iterations?
5. In the academic field of feminist rhetoric, researchers study how gender matters to persuasion and communication. Please describe some occasions in your working life when gender mattered as you communicated and persuaded others.
6. What communication strategies do you use in your job?

7. How did you learn to communicate effectively in your work? For example, are there any mentors you have as models? Or ways you've learned about how to communicate differently in different aspects of your work?
8. Organizations like the Women, Food, and Ag Network claim that networks are important to women in food and farming. Please respond to this idea.
9. Some people claim that food is a feminist issue. Please respond to this idea.

Questions for farmers only

1. Some academic researchers connect sustainable agriculture to women. For example, the book *The Rise of Women Farmers and Sustainable Agriculture* shows the work that women are doing in this area. In your experience as a farmer, in what ways do you see women making contributions to sustainable agriculture as well as conventional agriculture and agriculture policymaking?
2. How do you define the word farmer?
3. Have you noticed organizations and individuals claiming that women are the future of agriculture and farming? What do you make of these claims?
4. What do you wish nonfarmers knew about what it's like to be a farmer? And what do you wish nonfarmers knew about what it's like to be a woman farmer?

Notes

1. According to American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia, agrarianism is a "complex set of ideas that celebrates the moral, spiritual, and political superiority of men who cultivate the soil, was a central cultural theme of early American society, and it has heavily influenced American understandings of manhood" (Hartman 20). Lynn Harter defines American agrarianism as rooted in Thomas Jefferson's writings, which positioned farming as important since it prompted democratic citizenship as a revolutionary virtue. As they evolved, Jefferson's ideas about farmers have taken on mythic qualities and been coupled with "frontier images and hegemonic constructions of masculinity (i.e., the privileging of a patriarchal, managerial masculinity guided by technical rationalities)" (91). Janet Galligani Casey shows how the agrarian ideal is predominantly masculinist and its lead reformers linked farming to "authentic" American pasts that aspired to a "eugenics-inspired, racially sanitized future" (25). As Wolford summarizes, "Much of the research concerning women in agriculture over the past thirty years from social sciences and feminist and women's studies scholarship in Europe and North America concludes that conventional industrial agriculture in Western countries is a hegemonic, male-gendered institution that has obscured women as ancillary helpers with little or no decision-making power regarding the farm" (np). The masculinist agrarian tradition can also be located in other texts

and practices from American history and current popular culture, such as children's books that primarily depict farmers as men.

2. More recent statistics exist, but deserve qualification. Between 2012 and 2017, the USDA Census of Agriculture indicates that the percentage of farm operators who are women increased from 13.66% to 29.13%, a statistic used to argue that women farmers have doubled when, in fact, such a significant increase may be partially due to a change in how farmers are counted, obscuring the actual growth in numbers of women running farms. In the new census, respondents could indicate that multiple people make decisions on individual farms, so women who may have been farming for generations with a partner or other individuals now show up in the data. (https://www.agdaily.com/insights/usda-releases-2017-census-of-agriculture-data/)

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