A Landscape of Abstraction:
Agriculture in the American Imagination, 1970-Present

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THESIS
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This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Anna Schnurr, whose support made it possible.
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SUMMARY

Over the course of the 20th century, American agriculture became a landscape of abstraction, one in which the human relationship to nature through food production was mediated as much by ideals and images as by machines. This project considers how agriculture is constituted in the American imagination, specifically focusing on the period from 1970 to the present, and some of the cultural and political implications of this constitution, especially for the practice of farming itself—essentially, the relationship between cultural ideals and agricultural reality. I argue that during the late 1970s and 1980s abstract representations of the ‘yeoman farmer’ and the ‘family farm’ came to dominate agricultural discourse. This elevation of the farmer had two significant effects on social, economic, and political realities: first, it centered individual actions and responsibilities even as agriculture was increasingly characterized by global interdependence and reliance on abstract systems, and second, it obscured the role of the machine as tool and agent in cultural and political change. The relative invisibility of the industrial reality—the machine—in agricultural discourse obscured the social and economic realities of modern agriculture. These in turn helped to facilitate a strengthening of the global neoliberal economic and ideological program, and therefore the continued dominance and expansion of industrial agriculture.
I. INTRODUCTION

In 1978, six years after Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz told farmers to “get big or get out,” at a time when only 4 percent of Americans worked on farms, and in which those farms were increasingly industrialized and heavily mechanized, Paul Harvey, a conservative radio host and commentator, gave a speech called “So God Made a Farmer” at the Future Farmers of America (FFA) convention. It began: “And on the 8th day, God looked down on his planned paradise and said, ‘I need a caretaker.’ So God made a farmer.” Harvey’s speech to the FFA illustrates a peculiar contradiction that has characterized American agriculture in the latter half of the 20th century: the overwhelming industrialization and mechanization of agriculture, and the simultaneous trend toward elevating the ‘yeoman farmer’ and the ‘family farm’ to a hallowed, mythic national status. The tension between these two serves as the core of this thesis.

This project considers how agriculture is constituted in the American imagination, specifically focusing on the period from 1970 to the present, and some of the cultural and political implications of this constitution, especially for the practice of farming itself—essentially, the relationship between cultural ideals and agricultural reality. As a result, it takes the form of what Foucault (1981) calls a ‘genealogy’ of ideas: I trace the development of ideas about agriculture—especially industrial agriculture—in public discourse over the latter half of the 20th and early part of the 21st centuries, paying particular attention to the presence and role of the machine, the garden, and the yeoman farmer. I will situate this analysis within the context of changes in American culture over the latter half of the 20th century.

In this project, I argue that over the course of the 20th century, American agriculture became a landscape of abstraction in which an outmoded mythic vision of the yeoman farmer was the dominant feature. The farmer in turn obscured and naturalized the industrial reality—the
machine—and its logics and implications, paradoxically helping to maintain its dominance. This pattern would continue to reverberate throughout the early 20th century. Crucially, I argue, the industrialization and globalization of agriculture—the machine’s takeover of, and pervasive presence in, the garden—provided the infrastructure necessary for the dominance of neoliberal capitalist ideologies in the 1980s and beyond. By neoliberalism, I am referring to a set of ideas for facilitating capital accumulation, usually characterized by deregulation and an emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility in a way that gives disproportionate political power to economic elites (Harvey, 2005). This is often accompanied (not incidentally, I argue) by “championing abstract constructions of yeoman entrepreneurial capitalists and small businesses (as opposed to powerful, footloose multi-nationals)” (Heynen, McCarthy, Prudham & Robbins, 2007, p. 5). The industrial logic of efficiency, rationalization, and mechanization, rooted in a value system that is primarily economic, was embedded in the technologies proliferating across the American landscape. This logic allowed for agriculture—which, because of its role in structuring social and political life, is an intensely cultural act—to be standardized and centralized in a way that made it amenable to, and useful for, the neoliberal project, which promised “political emancipation through economic growth, increasing prosperity, and market mediated social relations,” or the commodification of American life and culture—including agriculture (Heynen et al., p. 6). The cultural and political focus on the mythological yeoman farmer and the ‘family farm,’ paradoxically, served to help this cause by obscuring the infrastructural movement toward concentration of power with economic elites behind the image of the hardworking American farmer.

The concentration of land and capital, coupled with the mechanization of farm work, had disastrous effects on both the environment and culture in America, from increased rural poverty
to topsoil loss to carbon emissions from fossil fuel use (Horrigan, Lawrence, & Walker, 2002). The conversation here is important because the ways in which a given culture imagines nature—and perhaps more importantly, their relationship to it—has a significant effect on how they treat the earth. In the era of climate change and rapid biodiversity loss, study of this connection has taken on a new urgency. According to Buell (1995), addressing current problems requires “better ways of imagining nature and humanity’s relation to it” (p. 2). I agree with his assessment.

Agriculture, as one of the most concrete and unavoidable connections between humans and nature, offers an opportunity for reimagining. It is my hope that this project can contribute to discourse on the development of a new imagination by tracing the genealogy of the current one.

The abstraction of American agriculture represents a massive and important shift, culturally speaking—one that in many ways reinforced the dominance of large-scale industrial agriculture and masked its shortcomings. The overwhelming dominance of abstract romanticized notions of the yeoman farmer both signified and perpetuated the abstract industrial reality that characterized the latter half of the 20th century in American agriculture, and the mechanisms of its realization, namely industrialization and capitalism, particularly neoliberal capitalism. Thus the primary work of the yeoman farmer during this period, in terms of the American environmental imagination, was to obscure the true state of the relationship between people and the natural world—the new, abstract, industrial-capitalist reality.

A. Culture and the Environmental Imagination

Nature, in American culture, is not so much a thing as an idea (Merchant, 1996). Beliefs about an appropriate relationship between nature and civilization (which necessarily implies humans), are embedded in what Buell (1995) calls an environmental imagination, or a particular
culture’s way of understanding, and beliefs about, the human relationship to nature. Extending this definition, a given culture’s ‘environmental imagination’ refers to a particular subset of a larger ‘cultural imagination.’ I find the notion of a ‘cultural imagination’ to be a useful concept, building on Carey’s (1989) definition of culture as a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed. For Carey, meanings and values of a society are embedded in artifacts, which then reflexively shape culture moving forward. Thus, what I mean by ‘the American imagination’ is very close to the definition of culture: that whole set of shared values, beliefs, and ways of understanding a given topic or phenomenon, such as agriculture. This imagination is, as Carey pointed out, embedded in artifacts and discourses, meaning that examination of these artifacts is the most appropriate means of understanding it. The process is similar to archaeology in this respect. Moreover, given that this project is interested in the development of ideas about agriculture, tracing conceptual threads through varying historical contexts—documenting changes in the cultural imagination—is a useful approach.

1. The Yeoman Farmer

Thomas Jefferson, one of the most influential figures—perhaps the most influential figure—in the formation of American political ideals (Peterson, 1970), “envisioned the United States as a nation of small farmer-landowners, each economically and politically independent, and he believed that agriculture would be the heart and soul of American democracy” (Malone, 1993). Such agrarian ideals are present throughout his writings, and are characterized by a focus on the virtues of the farmer. Two key symbols emerge in these passages: the yeoman farmer, and the land (Lester, 2007).
Jefferson wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that “Those who labor on the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue” (Jefferson, 1797, p. 99). He then went on a few sentences later to claim that “Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phaenomenon [sic] of which no age nor nation has furnished an example” (p. 99). Jefferson’s ideals revolve around the ‘character’ and perceived incorruptibility of the yeoman farmer. For him, the yeoman farmer embodied the values of independence, self-sufficiency, simplicity, honesty, wholesomeness, morality, and respect for nature, and was a model for action.

Jefferson’s writings were instrumental in the formation of American political and cultural values, and his elevation of the yeoman farmer had a significant effect on the character of the nation. Malone (1993) writes that the values of the yeoman farmer are “at the heart of the Jeffersonian vision, the heart of our democracy, and still within the hearts of many Americans today” (p. 49). Thus, in the United States, the yeoman farmer has historically represented the ideal relationship between humans and nature, in which humans interact with the land using these values. For Jefferson, he was both “the ideal person and the ideal citizen” (Retzinger, 2002, p. 47).

The notion of the yeoman farmer was paired closely with that of the land. The farmer’s virtuous behavior was made possible by, and gained significance from, his direct, virtuous relationship to the earth. This relationship between humans and the earth has long been an important one in Western culture and thought. The yeoman farmer was far from the only ideal to act on the land, and the ways in which the land has been imagined provide useful insight into the yeoman’s place.
2. The Garden and the Machine

Historically, nature and civilization have been separated in the American imagination. As a result, nature becomes a stage on which the culture plays out its ideals. Leo Marx famously argued that the image of ‘the machine in the garden’—the presence of technology and industrialization in the pastoral, Edenic countryside—exhibits the central tension of American culture: a need to balance “the opposing forces of nature and civilization” (1964, p. 23). Marx gave us the useful term ‘middle landscape,’ which represents “an idealized pastoralism where humans have carefully exerted their power and control over the land in order to craft an idyllic vision of country life” (Marx, 1964; as quoted in Hajdik, 2011, p. 5).

Merchant (1996) characterizes Western culture as a “heroic recovery narrative” in which settlers work to civilize the beastly Wilderness, reclaiming it from savages and creating a new Edenic paradise (p. 143). Knobloch (1996) makes a similar argument about the American West. She argues that Wilderness and The Frontier were conceptualized in a way that positioned nature as antithetical to civilization. In this case, she argues, the work of agriculture became a means of colonization. It is not simply cultivating land. By turning ‘wild’ nature into civilized culture, agriculture is “intensely social,” and “as much about structuring social and political life as it is about raising cattle or wheat” (pp. 2, 3). Told by agricultural scientists, the story is one of “advancing civilization, with them [and science] at the center” (p. 152). More recently, Cronon (1996) argues, Wilderness became a sacred space, defined by the absence of humans, which must be protected from the encroachment of humanity—and preserved as a place of escape. In each of these cases, the author found a connection between imagination and historical context, and that the way that a given culture understood their relationship to nature had implications for that same culture’s subsequent interaction with it.
In the middle landscape, the countryside and farm work can become a container for shared cultural values of hard work, simplicity, and independence, politicizing the yeoman farmer (Conlogue, 2001). Because the image of the country farm is “rich with meaning in our collective life and history” (Adams, 1985, p. 695), the elements that make up this image, like the self-sufficient yeoman farmer, maintain considerable social and political clout (Thompson, 2010; Adams, 1985). The social and political power of this image is embedded in American civic and political life—Lester (2007), for example, found that agrarian ideals and the image of the yeoman farmer had a significant influence on U.S. agricultural policymaking into the 21st century, and Dudley (2000) found them to be salient themes in responses to the Farm Crisis of the 1980s. These themes have their roots in the country’s early social and political life—namely, Jefferson’s yeoman farmer.

B. The Complications of Modernity

The 20th century in America saw scientific and technological developments that disrupted the middle landscape, and especially the role of the yeoman farmer. This was a period characterized by the expansion of, and relationships between, what Giddens (1990) calls the “institutional dimensions of modernity”: industrialism, capitalism, surveillance, and military power (p. 59). These four dimensions are interrelated, and manifested in the modern globalizing world as a world capitalist economy, an international division of labor, the nation-state system, and a world military order, respectively—we can understand the social dynamics of the 20th century using Giddens’ model, which illuminates a complex system of dynamic interaction that clearly and insightfully describes the period.
1. The Industrial Ideal

One aspect of the complications of modernity was the emergence of a new industrial ideal in the early 20th century. This ideal is an extension of the ‘ideology of progress’ that animated frontier narratives, and was developed and put in place by a new class of leaders and experts—agricultural economists, professors, business leaders, bankers, and government agents—and designed to mimic the logic of the factory and the modern business, focusing on mechanization, rationalization, and efficiency (Fitzgerald, 2003). But perhaps its most significant impact, culturally speaking, was that it replaced the virtues of the yeoman farmer with the logic of the machine.

The industrialization of agriculture is a direct result of the conditions of modernity. According to Giddens (1990), under these conditions “industrialism becomes the main axis of the interaction of human beings with nature” (p. 60) and “modern technology is often applied in such a way as to alter substantially preexisting relations between human social organization and the environment” (p. 76). As an explicit manifestation of human interaction with nature, agriculture certainly lies well within the scope of this argument. Industrial agriculture relies heavily on what Giddens calls “expert systems”: transportation systems, communication systems, inspectors, and other integrations of so-called “expert knowledge” (p. 27). These expert systems are foundational to the expansion of the institutions of modernity, including industrialism, and require a measure of trust from individuals. It was a “recipe for modernization,” and the logic spread, buoyed by the development of an “industrial web” that made it easier to get big and stay big (Fitzgerald, 2003). It is important to note that the industrial ideal took off in agriculture as an industry, but not necessarily in the broader American culture (Fitzgerald, 2003; Hajdik, 2011). But its influence on the industry was decisive. Earl Butz, secretary of agriculture under
Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, famously told farmers to “get big or get out” (Duscha, 1972, p. 34), and American agriculture in the early 21st century became overwhelmingly industrial (Dimitri et al, 2005).

One of the most compelling implications of Giddens’ model is the idea that each of the dimensions is complemented by and draws strength from the others. This is particularly true when it comes to capitalism and industrialism. Giddens builds on the work of Karl Marx in arguing that capitalism laid the groundwork for the development of industrialism, and that the two are intensely interconnected. Replacing human labor with mechanized labor kept production costs low by allowing producers to profit from cheaper and cheaper concentrations of energy, effectively taking the place of slave labor as a cost-cutting measure. At the same time, the “commodification of labour [sic] power” became an important link between capitalism and industrialism, as labor can then be standardized and incorporated as an element in engineered production designs (p. 61). Industrial production and constant technological advancement helped processes of production become cheaper and more efficient, and made possible the scaling and centralization of formerly smaller-scale, distributed agricultural activity. They did so through the development of abstract systems.

2. Abstract Systems

For Giddens (1990), “the nature of modern institutions is deeply bound up with the mechanisms of trust in abstract systems” (p. 83). These abstract systems, including the expert systems discussed above, are necessary for the continued functioning of social life at the global scale. And, I would add, they are also necessary for the efficacy of highly centralized, mechanized (depopulated) industrial agricultural work. Industrial machinery, including
agricultural industrial machinery, is a dissociative mechanism, dissociating those living in an industrial society—and farmers themselves—from the production of food. These are systems that people only regularly encounter at what Giddens calls ‘access points,’ which are responsible for mediating the relationship between people and the work of these systems. These “representatives of abstract systems” must display “trustworthiness,” Giddens writes, because they are a primary means through which people can achieve a sense of security with systems that they simultaneously cannot escape, and do not fully understand (p. 84). But individuals and locations are not the only means by which the relationship between people and the work of these systems is mediated: public debates, speeches, novels, documentaries, feature films, and industry advertisements all help people to piece together an understanding of systems that are fundamental to their daily lives, yet with which they have little to no explicit contact, and about which they have little to no usable knowledge—in this case, agriculture. These mediations are responsible for the maintenance of a sort of general trust in abstract systems, which they do by providing a constant source of ‘reassurance’ of the safety and efficacy of those systems (Giddens, p. 85).

The industrial ideal fostered the development of an ‘abstract industrial system’ that dramatically altered agriculture in America. Federal programs in the New Deal further institutionalized these trends, and the industrial logic became the foundation for agriculture in America as the machine began to dominate the garden (Fitzgerald, 2003). This system led to enormous growth and an increase in profitability, but largely at the expense of small farmers, who could no longer compete (Stapleton, 2014). With the rise of this system in the 20th century, modern American agriculture became separated—symbolically and literally—from the country’s agrarian roots, and, perhaps more importantly, the daily life of Americans. So one major result of
the concurrent industrialization and globalization of agriculture was the separation of the daily lives of people from the production of their food, which formed a key element of a profound and growing disconnect between humans and nature. Like oil pipelines, industrial agriculture became “politically invisible,” a term I borrow from cultural studies scholar Imre Szeman (unpublished communication). This separation is the foundation of the abstraction of American agriculture, as it replaced direction interaction between humans and the natural world (through farming) with a form of interaction heavily mediated by machines. Thus, the industrialization of agriculture radically altered food production in the country and laid the groundwork for the commodification of the human relationship to the natural world.

3. From Agriculture to Agribusiness

The American farm changed drastically over the course of the 20th century, from many small farms to fewer, larger farms. The industrialization of agriculture—a logic of efficiency, paired with the use of machinery, chemical fertilizers and pesticides—along with the availability of large amounts of usable land, meant that farmers could increase the size of their operations while decreasing the amount of human labor required. Between 1900 and 1970, the number of farms decreased from almost 6,500 to around 2,500, despite population growth rising steadily. At the same time, the average farm size increased from 100 acres to 400 acres. These farms also became increasingly less diversified, with a trend toward monocropping—they went from cultivating an average of five crops to cultivating just one over this time (Dimitri et al, 2005). The percentage of the U.S. population employed in farm work decreased from 41% in 1900 to 4% in 1970 (Dimitri et al.). In the late 1990s, that number sunk below 2%, and since 2000 the U.S. Census has ceased to classify “farmer” as its own occupational category (Hajdik, 2011).
the same time, food could be shipped across larger distances, making possible the centralization of food production.

Modern industrial capitalist agriculture is often referred to as ‘agribusiness.’ This language is helpful in understanding the neoliberal influence on American farming. The new primacy of ‘business’ as opposed to ‘culture’ neatly encapsulates the changes to American agriculture in the 20th century. These changes are primarily changes of scale and centralization, driven by capitalism and industrialism and impacted by globalization. They are also controversial. U.S. agricultural output increased substantially during the latter half of the 20th century (Dimitri et al., 2005), driven by industrial production methods combined with neoliberal economic policy. Many, including former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, point out that this development has helped to alleviate hunger worldwide (Glickman & Bertini, 2011). But the mechanisms that make possible this increased output come with significant cultural and ecological costs. Farm consolidation (especially the concentration of land and capital) has been linked to “the deterioration of rural communities,” including lower incomes and education levels, and higher levels of poverty and social inequality (Horrigan, Lawrence, & Walker, 2002, p. 446). On top of this, “the industrial agriculture system consumes fossil fuel, water, and topsoil at unsustainable rates” (p. 445). There are implications beyond the United States borders as well. American farmers compete on a global commodities market, which includes regions that are poorer and less developed. Modern industrial agriculture in America is able to compete in part because of the support of the U.S. government (Rivoli, 2005). Using cotton farmers as an example, Rivoli demonstrates that American farmers are “embedded in a set of institutions that insulate them from the full strength of a variety of market forces” by crop subsidies and other
policy supports (p. 7). The result is a market that is stacked in favor of powerful nations like the United States, to the detriment of less developed countries.

One of the most significant environmental concerns is industrial agriculture’s dependence on fossil fuels, which have played a pivotal role in the development of industrial-capitalist agriculture. Bartlett (1978), a professor of physics at the University of Colorado-Boulder, went so far as to say that modern industrial agriculture was simply “the use of land to convert petroleum into food” (p. 880). The relationship between the two is a long one, as access to cheap energy via fossil fuels catalyzed the Industrial Revolution (Campbell, 2002). And fossil fuels continue to power industrial farming, from massive factory operations to tractors on a family farm. There are political and economic consequences to this reliance: because American agriculture is dependent on fossil fuels—mainly oil—it follows that such commodities would take on a strategic importance for the nation-state interested in maintaining viability. From a broader perspective, industrialization generated surplus capital and laid the groundwork for market logic. Furthermore, the contemporary global market, within which modern industrial agriculture is embedded, is supported by oil-based energy—oil that is itself traded on the global commodities market (Campbell, 2002).

Globalization, too, has been a primary force working on U.S. agriculture. In fact, it was heavy reliance on a global commodities market that facilitated a farm crisis in the 1980s (Dudley, 2000). This global commodities market is part of the ‘world capitalist economy,’ in which the power of a nation-state plays an important role (Giddens, 1990, p. 74). The nation-state is a primary actor on the world stage, and when it comes to American agriculture, trade policy and global political standing have a significant effect on the industry. During the 1970s, American agriculture was booming as it became integrated into larger national and global
markets where demand for U.S.-produced food commodities was high (Barnett, 2000; Dudley, 2000). This boom fueled an increase in speculative activity in the agricultural sector during which time farmers, at the encouragement of financial institutions, financed larger and larger properties and saw greater and greater profits (Dudley, 2000). But this integration also made the sector more vulnerable to outside political and economic influences, and 1979 policy changes by the Federal Reserve, combined with a slumping global commodities market, led to the farm sector’s worst financial crisis since the Great Depression during the early- to mid-1980s (Barnett, 2000). All of these changes were undergirded by the introduction of the machine into the agricultural landscape. Yet this infrastructure is often overshadowed in public discussion.

C. The Invisible Machine

Material objects, including industrial machine technologies, are integral elements in evolving controversies, and thus important subjects of scholarly inquiry regarding social change (Barry, 2013). This translates into the study of agriculture, which, as an explicit expression of the interaction between humans and nature, is a useful lens through which to examine the controversy over changing notions of the human place in nature. Farming technologies are a means of engagement with the natural world, by which I mean non-human plant and animal life, as well as the other elements like soil, water, and air, with which all life interacts.

Scholars working on the cultural and political dimensions of oil pipelines have done extremely useful work in this realm of material relations between humans and the natural world (particularly Barry, 2013; and Szeman, unpublished communication). Szeman applies the language of ‘visibility’ to such material objects, claiming that their physical remoteness from daily life and resultant ‘political invisibility’ explains, in large part, the political power of the oil
industry, and oil’s continued dominance as an energy source in spite of widespread knowledge of
the disastrous ecological effects of its usage. Here, I argue that the same is true for industrial
agricultural machines and attendant technologies, obscured by powerful ideals that shape
perception of reality.

1. Manufactured Reality

When it comes to agriculture, there is some precedent for the obscuring of
uncomfortable realities. Jefferson himself, the grandfather of pastoral, agrarian ideals in the U.S.,
introduced these ideals while simultaneously obscuring the realities of agricultural work at the
time—his famous invocation of God’s favor to confer blessings onto workers of the land
managed to selectively erase a huge swath of “those who labor on the earth”: the slaves working
his and other land in the antebellum republic. Jefferson argued that hard-working, independent
farmers were “needed to preserve democracy” (Browne, 2001, p. 51), praising the
“independence” of slaveholders, who were in fact quite dependent on coerced labor (Ashworth,
1995).

The ideal can overshadow the reality in the contemporary world too, sometimes
intentionally. Hinrichs (1996) found that the idealized pastoral is employed in marketing
materials for Vermont. The state of Vermont is constructed as a distinctively rural place
embodying purity and simplicity. This reflects the pastoral ideal, and is especially true when it
comes to the work of food production. Hinrichs finds that marketing of Vermont is far more
likely to feature an image of dairy cows grazing in a field, say, than an image of the machines
and various technologies used in the modern milk production process. For maple syrup, a
product closely associated with Vermont in the public mind, labels nearly always depict a snow-
covered forest with metal buckets hanging from trees and collecting syrup, despite the fact that modern maple syrup harvesting uses a different set of “production technologies” (p. 270). In this way, manufacturers and marketers employ an image of the pastoral ideal to obscure the industrial technologies used in dairy farming and maple syrup production. Furthermore, and not surprisingly, despite the fact that Vermont was, at the time, the 2nd poorest state in America, Hinrichs found that the lived reality of poor country people was not reflected in these materials. In advanced industrial countries, she writes, “idealized images of rurality…usually feature land uses and rural production practices characterized by technological moderation, calm industriousness, and social harmony” and “showing little mark of the technological excesses or social problems more commonly ascribed to cities and towns” (p. 262). I argue here that the yeoman farmer performs a similar function when it came to the effects of industrial agriculture during the latter part of the 20th century, obscuring the machine’s role in the destruction of rural communities and natural landscapes.

2. Changing Landscapes

The industrialization of agriculture had a number of significant consequences for the pastoral ideal and the yeoman farmer: machines increased the capacity of the farmer, who could now farm greater and greater acreage with less manual labor. But at the same they served to separate the farmer from the land. The modern farmer sits high above his land in an air-conditioned cab on top of a large piece of machinery—a tractor, perhaps, or a combine—rarely coming into contact with the actual soil. He or she is only marginally more connected to the land than those who do not farm at all. She is still hardworking, but her labor is differently applied, and there is nothing simple about the work. Nor is he independent: the average farmer lacks the
knowledge or skills to fix every form of machinery necessary for running a modern farm, and relies on price supports and federal trade policy for a measure of security. The modern farmer is heavily dependent on expert systems and fully integrated into a complex and volatile global commodities market (Dudley, 2000).

The abstraction of American agriculture has its roots in the scientific, technological, social, and, to some extent, ideological changes that took place over the course of the 20th century, and has been played out on the farms and fields that dot the American landscape. The forces of modernity, especially globalization and industrialization, have facilitated the machine’s dominance of the garden when it comes to agriculture, disrupting the ‘middle landscape’, exacerbating Marx’s tension. At the same time the pastoral ideal, embedded in the image of the yeoman farmer working in the idyllic countryside, maintained considerable social and political clout (Thompson, 2010; Lester, 2007). And rather than competing with the pastoral ideal, the industrial reality seems to have strengthened it—the realities of industrial farming and the separation of daily life from farm life have created a renewed interest in selective, romanticized visions of rural America, especially those of the ‘family farm’ (Hajdik, 2011). Often, I argue, this serves the interests of agribusiness, whether intentional or not.

In the modern agricultural landscape, characterized by abstraction, Marx’s ‘middle landscape’ thrives as a symbolic site, one on which the pastoral narrative can be played out. In this project, I examine the middle landscape in the American cultural imagination during a period of drastic change to the reality of food production.
D. Methodology

This study takes place in the tradition of cultural analysis made popular by Raymond Williams (1961). Williams’ approach is interdisciplinary in nature and more popular in the humanities than the social sciences, especially in the fields of cultural studies and cultural history. According to Williams, historically informed cultural analysis is a sustained examination of the relationships between ideals, the documentation of those ideals, and the social matrices surrounding them—a textual analysis of contextualized artifacts. Denning (2008) textures this definition by explaining that such cultural analysis is especially good at capturing the “reverberations” of ideas, and their consequences. This is akin to Foucault’s (1981) notion of a ‘genealogy of ideas,’ in which given ideas (or ideals, in this case) are passed down and adapted to new circumstances and environments. In each case, analysis consists of pairing prominent cultural texts with sustained discussion of the historical milieu in which those texts were produced, in order to understand the cultural effects of social, technological, and ideological context.

In this tradition, this project is an interpretive analysis of culturally significant texts relating to major social, technological, and ideological changes. By texts, I am referring to what Williams calls, generally, “documentary culture” (1961, p. 53). Such texts, for my purposes, include any cultural production, produced within a given culture at a given time, that provides a record of ideas present in said culture. This can include speeches, novels, poems, films, essays, photos, art installations, public debates, festivals, and advertisements, though certainly not exclusively. “The significance of documentary culture,” Williams writes, “is that, more clearly than anything else, it expresses that life to us in direct terms” (p. 53).

The texts used here have been selected for their role in the genealogy of ideas. Some, like
Wendell Berry’s *The Unsettling of America* and the documentary *Food, Inc.* were selected because they became major cultural touchstones in public discussion. Others, like the concert series Farm Aid and Paul Harvey’s speech at the 1978 FFA convention, were selected because of their cultural resonance within particular contexts. All were chosen for their direct relationship to agricultural ideals during periods of dramatic and consequential change.

Marx’s tension between the machine and the garden serves as an analytical touchstone in this study, though I expand it to include a third dimension: the yeoman farmer. I looked for explicit representations of, or discussions pertaining to, the ‘middle landscape’ in American culture during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, tracing the presence and activity of the machine (industrial technologies), the garden (nature/the land), and the yeoman farmer, and their relationships with prominent ideas on how the work of agriculture should be approached and carried out. This allows me to understand changes in culture in “direct terms” (Williams, 1967, p. 54). Essentially, I will be looking for when, where, and how different agricultural ideal crop up, what is present or missing in terms of these three key components (yeoman farmer, garden, machine), and how these ideals relate to developments in agriculture.

The analysis of cultural artifacts in this methodological tradition relies on a formal “guide to the dynamics of the period” (Jameson, 1977, p. 554). Giddens’ (1990) work on globalization and the expansion of the institution of modernity, characterized by abstract systems and industrialization as the mediator between humans and nature, provides this guide for the dynamics of modern American society. It is in such a society that representations of the ‘middle landscape’ are formed and embedded in artifacts.

Lears provides a strong model of this form of analysis in his 1981 study of antimodernism in American culture. In this study, he examines a wide range of texts that engage with and
respond to major social transformations in the latter part of the 19th century, including novels, essays, poems, letters, and even sermons. Lears also makes a point to recognize the complexity of the situation, drawing insightful connections between ideas, events, and consequences—both intended and unintended. Lears uses an interpretive framework in which theory can “inform but not imprison” his understanding; he pays primary attention to findings, being open to emerging patterns, then uses theory to draw broader conclusions about social change (p. xiii). In doing so, he traces ideas about modernism in American culture during the period (especially dissenting ideas) and connects these ideas to changes in the social and technological milieu, highlighting how antimonist ideals failed to adequately address modern developments and ultimately arguing that the antimonist movement paradoxically helped to reinforce the modern project. I make a similar argument here, focusing on the inability of many in the anti-agribusiness movement to adequately address the realities of industrial farming.

E. Chapter Preview

In this introduction, I have ‘set the scene,’ so to speak, for the changes that would occur in the middle landscape as industrial agriculture came to dominate the garden. In the chapters that follow, I examine how discussion unfolded over the ensuing decades. In chapter 2, I examine the cultural tension brought on by the changes happening on the farm through in an-depth analysis of the conflict between two figureheads in their respective camps: Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, and farmer Wendell Berry. This conflict takes place in the latter part of the 1970s, which saw the realization of the industrial ideal in American agriculture. Berry’s book The Unsettling of America is a response to Butz’s agricultural ‘assumptions and policies’ and stands as a watershed moment in the sustainable agriculture movement. It is also the magnum opus of a
giant in both American environmentalism and the responsible agriculture movements. I will analyze this book, as well as Butz’s writings on agricultural philosophy and policy and the transcript from a public debate between the two men. I argue that Berry’s challenge to the new industrial reality was an attempt to make the machine in the garden politically and culturally visible—especially its associated logics of efficiency, rationalization, and ultimately commodification. Berry puts forth a vision of responsible caretaking that echoes Jefferson’s yeoman farmer, adapting it to the new environmental realities.

The 1980s saw unintended consequences of the globalization and industrialization of agriculture, as small farmers all over went out of business. In chapter 3, I examine the parallel rise to prominence of the yeoman farmer in the American imagination, and the relationship between the yeoman’s rise and the triumph of neoliberalism, primarily focusing on the political and cultural invisibility of the machine. This will include an analysis of Paul Harvey’s 1978 address to the Future Farmers of America National Convention, “So God Made a Farmer,” a high-profile speech at the epicenter of American farm culture—and made even more significant by its resurgence as a cultural touchstone in the 2010s, in an advertising campaign for Dodge trucks. I will also analyze Farm Aid, a popular concert series started by music stars Neil Young, Willie Nelson, and John Mellencamp in response to the misfortunes of the small farmer that drew more than 60,000 people to the University of Illinois stadium in Urbana, Illinois—with less than six weeks’ notice. At the same time, the concert served to reinforce the mythic yeoman farmer, who, during this period, became wrapped into the neoliberal project as an abstraction that serves to both obscure the work of the machine and reinforce the ‘goodness’ of growth and patriotism.
Chapter 4 follows the reverberations of these ideas in the early 20th century, including Farm Aid’s 30th anniversary concert, a 2013 Super Bowl commercial for Dodge RAM trucks, and the popular 2008 documentary *Food, Inc.*, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature (The 82nd Academy Awards, 2010). I find that the yeoman farmer continued to eclipse and naturalize the machine and its logics, and to support the industrial, neoliberal program in agriculture, paving the way for its continued dominance—and, importantly, the perpetuation of its negative cultural and ecological consequences.

In chapter 5, I conclude with a summary of the legacy of industrial agriculture and the yeoman farmer, and a discussion of the implications of these developments—namely the abstraction of American agriculture—for contemporary cultural and ecological challenges. I argue that this abstraction, with its roots in the industrial transformation over the course of the 20th century, is a hindrance to the development of a healthy environmental imagination.

The most interesting aspect of the recent history of agriculture in the American imagination continues to be the coexistence of the industrial reality and the pastoral, agrarian ideal. Tracing depictions of, and discussions regarding, the middle landscape during the latter half of the 20th and early part of the 21st centuries can provide a compelling explanation of how a mechanized, abstract industrial reality can persist despite apparent widespread inconsistencies between such practices and American ideals.
II. TROUBLE IN THE MIDDLE LANDSCAPE: 1970-1978

The 1970s were a period of great prosperity for American agriculture as a whole. Strong demand for U.S. exports, coupled with apparent increased production capacities, created a ‘boom’ in commodity production: between 1970 and 1973, feed grain exports more than doubled, from 20 to 42 million metric tons. But these were not the only factors. Barnett writes that “The world’s leading financial institutions, intent on recycling massive deposits of petroleum dollars, helped turn the potential demand for agricultural exports into effective demand” with “extensive incentives” that would “insure that the United States would be the bargain supplier in world export markets” (Barnett, 2000, p. 370). The nation was poised to ‘feed the world’—and to get rich doing it. During this time, net income from farming increased from $34 billion to $69 billion, reaching its highest point since the 1940s, and land values increased 73 percent (Barnett). But these changes were not without their critics. Among the most prominent criticisms was the apparent contradiction between industrial agriculture and the nation’s agrarian ideals.

A. Contradiction in Terms

In 1977, farmer and writer Wendell Berry published his landmark collection of essays, *The Unsettling of America*. In the preface, he makes it clear that the book “deals at length with the assumptions and policies of former Secretary of Agriculture Earl L. Butz” (1996, p. v). With this book, Berry, who taught English at the University of Kentucky, became a public face for those who opposed the machine’s takeover of the garden. During this period Berry and other proponents of small-scale, ecologically responsible agriculture mounted a challenge to the dominant trend toward the industrialization and mechanization of U.S. farming. Berry lived and
worked (and continues to live and work) on a small farm near the banks of the Kentucky River, not far from the farm on which he grew up, and this background served as the foundation of most of his writing. The book was at once an extensive treatment of the problems brought on by the industrialization of food production and an exhortation to seek a healthy relationship between humans and the earth through a return to that “old idea” of people working in direct relationship to the land, near where they live—what he called “settlement” (pp. 13, 14).

Butz, who served as secretary of agriculture from 1971 to 1976 under presidents Nixon and Ford (he resigned in 1976 after allegedly making lewd and racist comments to reporters; Goldstein, 2008), was an enthusiastic proponent of large-scale industrial-capitalist agriculture. He was an early participant in the ‘expert systems’ that shaped the new industrial reality, receiving Purdue’s first PhD in agricultural economics in 1937. He then taught in Purdue’s department of agricultural economics before serving as assistant secretary of agriculture from 1954 to 1957 (Hagenstein, Donahue & Gregg, 2011). In 1957 he returned to Purdue where he spent 10 years as dean of Purdue Agriculture before his stint as secretary of agriculture began in 1971 (Forbes, 2008).

Butz wrote explicitly in praise of the “emerging, market-oriented food and agricultural policy” (Butz, 1976, p. 137). Under his leadership, the Department of Agriculture encouraged, expansion, consolidation, and efficiency (Hagenstein et al., 2011) and he was largely responsible for the dismantling, over the course of the 1970s, of many New Deal-era farm policies, including price supports designed to protect the small farmer from the instability of a global commodities market, and a related non-recourse loan program. The 1973 Farm Bill replaced these with “production-based subsidies” (Stapleton, 2014, p. 328). He was also a proponent of increased use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and monocropping, a technique in which crop diversity is
given up for single-crop fields, which are more conducive to the use of machinery. Moreover, as a former board member for several agribusiness firms, Secretary Butz unabashedly promoted corporate interests in agriculture. His tenure marked a shift from regulatory policies that discouraged overproduction to those that encouraged it, rewarding big centralized operations and weakening the resolve of the small farmer (Stapleton, 2014).

The public disagreement between Berry and Butz represented a paradigmatic contradiction underway in American agriculture (Beus & Dunlap, 1990). As social and technological developments drove the centralization and mechanization of farm work, the ideals represented in the yeoman farmer had become less and less related to the actual practice of farming in the country. Butz was in full support of these changes, while Berry sought to reassert the primacy of the individual and expose the negative consequences of modern industrial agricultural production. Butz, as Secretary of Agriculture, not only represented the institutional perspective toward farming and land use, but also exerted an enormous influence on agricultural policy in the U.S.

*The Unsettling of America*, meanwhile, became what *The New York Times* would later describe as a “seminal” text among those addressing the plight of the American farmer in the new industrial reality (Unger, 1984). Berry himself was and continues to be a giant of American letters, especially in the areas of agriculture and environmentalism. He was a contributor to many prominent publications in these fields, from *Orion* to *New Farm* (Conlogue, 2001), and his work has been enormously influential on sustainable agricultural thought in the U.S. Central to this influence was Berry’s status as not only a writer, but as a farmer himself (Goodrich, 2001). Berry won the 2010 National Humanities Award for “his achievements as a poet, novelist, farmer, and conservationist…exploring our relationship with the land and community” (“President Obama to

*The Unsettling of America* takes aim at this industrial agriculture, and the logic out of which it was born; a move that is made all the more interesting by its timing, coming at the high point of a high point in food production. His overall argument in this book was that the influence of experts and specialists into American agriculture had been overwhelmingly harmful to the land and to the people living on the land, and that the remedy for such issues was, instead, responsible management of land on a smaller scale. He argued against an all-encompassing, prescribed model for agriculture, but instead argued that humans ought to consider more fully the implications and consequences of their decisions regarding land use, farming in relationship *with* the land, not simply *on* the land (Berry, 1996, pp. 222-223). In this way, he re-asserted the primacy of the yeoman farmer working the garden, rejecting the machine’s intrusion as a negative force.

The machine’s role in the destruction of human culture and natural landscapes was a key component of his argument. In the essay “Living in the Future: The ‘Modern’ Agricultural Ideal,” Berry argued that America’s pursuit of efficiency and profit was on pace to transform the garden into “deserts of vast technology” (Berry, 1996, p. 76). In Berry’s view, the very purpose of the industrial ideal was to remove humans from the land, which would result in a barren landscape devoid of ‘human values.’ He wrote of industrial farms that
“To propose to blend such a farm with human values is simply to acknowledge that it has no human values, that human values have been removed from it...If human values are removed from production, how can they be preserved in consumption? How can we value our lives if we devalue them in making a living?” (p. 79, emphasis original)

These ‘human values’ included care for both humans and the earth, “the continuity of attention and devotion without which the human life of the earth is impossible” (p. 14). In a word, settlement. For Berry, the plight of humans and the plight of the earth are inextricably linked. He ended the titular essay of the book with this admonition: “The care of the earth is our most ancient and most worthy and, after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it, and to foster its renewal, is our only legitimate hope” (p. 14).

Butz believed, in contrast, that the industrialization of agriculture was the foundation of capital-P Progress. He wrote in a 1960 essay entitled “Agribusiness in the Machine Age” that “The very cornerstone of our high standard of life is our ever-increasing efficiency in the production and marketing of food and fiber, made possible by the specialized functions that characterize agribusiness” (p. 326). And importantly, for Butz this efficiency and production was connected to free-market economic policies. He wrote in 1976 that

I lean toward an economic decision-making process whereby people vote daily with their dollars. If you keep markets relatively free and competitive, and keep people informed, these markets transmit the signals from the public more quickly, cleanly, and impartially, and more for the good of all than the slower, more institutionalized bureaucracy...in short, the marketplace gets a lot more done in a lot less time at much less cost than the institutionalized bureaucratic process.” (p. 173)

In his view, scientific and technological innovations, driven by free-market capitalism (and increasing deregulation of that market) led to a better all-around state of affairs. His was a global, modern, neoliberal vision. The modern farm was a factory—and it should be. Butz argued that after what he called the “third agricultural revolution” (p. 323) the agricultural world and the industrial world are not to be seen as separate entities—the machine and the garden are now
fundamentally intertwined, and this was to be celebrated. Progress would continue despite its detractors.

During the 1970s, Marx’s tension can be seen most prominently in the public conflict between Berry and Butz. The two even debated each other in person, and a transcript of the debate appeared the following year in *The CoEvolution Quarterly*. The live debate was not productive—Butz said at one point that “I’ve got a feeling Dr. Berry and I have not met here tonight” (“Earl Butz versus Wendell Berry”, 1978, p. 56)—but it nevertheless embodied the tension in America between two competing notions of the role of the machine in the garden. The paradigmatic roots are these: large-scale, centralized, competitive, exploitive industrial food production versus independent, decentralized, community-based, harmonious and restrained agricultural practice (Beus & Dunlap, 1990).

B. “Earl Butz vs. Wendell Berry”

On November 13th, 1977, less than a year after the publication of *The Unsettling of America*, Berry and Butz met in a debate at Manchester College in North Manchester, Indiana. Butz declared in his opening remarks that “I have read the Unsettling of America. There are a few paragraphs in it with which I agree, not many” (“Earl Butz versus Wendell Berry”, 1978, p. 50). He also outlined his own, contrary argument, which was that “modern American agriculture is the very foundation of the strength in America” (p. 50).

Throughout the debate, Butz’s argument amounted to a sustained defense of industrial farming and the logic embedded in it, including the transition toward large-scale production and the corporatization of agricultural practice. In his view, the takeover of the machine was an
overwhelmingly positive development, largely because of increased profitability and its potential to build wealth:

Today we not only feed 216 million Americans much better than we did [in the ‘old days’], but we’ve got 24 billion dollars worth in the last year to send abroad—our number one source of foreign exchange. We’ve moved from 45 percent on the land to about 4 percent on the land now. I know that causes some sociological problems. Change always does. On the other hand, all of us live better because of it—including those remaining on the land. They’re in the commercial stream now… I’m talking about modern, scientific, technological agriculture. It’s big business, to be sure. (p. 52)

For Butz, success was best measured in terms of economic growth, leading to a narrative of progress driven by technological innovation and commercialization.

When I was born in 1909 we were an agrarian nation—45 percent of us were on farms instead of 4 percent as we have now. If we had known then how to make nice automobiles and radios and TVs and bathtubs and nice schoolhouses like this one here, we couldn’t have spared the manpower to do it…(p. 52)

He also argued for the value of abstract systems:

We talk about the crisis in culture, “because of no private property.” There’s a lot of private property in this country. You don’t even have to own a house to have private property. We’ve all got life insurance. We’ve got interest in America. We’ve got interest in the very profit process in America. (p. 57)

At first glance, this appears to be a collective argument, but its focus on individual ownership and “interest in the very profit process” betrays its neoliberal underpinnings. Abstract systems have value for Butz because they make possible a particular modern lifestyle—a lifestyle, and independence, that could be protected with individual ownership of a piece of the abstraction.

The focus is on independence from the constraints of the natural world, born out of scientific and technological innovation—“We’ve learned how to feed ourselves with a little manpower and a shirt-tail full of resources,” Butz claimed at one point. “Let’s never forget that” (p. 52). It was a liberation borne of growth, prosperity, and the market, and facilitated by the abstract systems of modernity.
Berry, on the other hand, told the story differently—his was a narrative not of progress, but of economic centralization and exploitation. It was a narrative of decline, which he explained as follows:

This is the pattern of modern agriculture where I live, and I think it’s repeated in many places. The land has fallen into the hands of first the farmers’ widows and then of the moneyed people who aren’t farmers. The land is then cash rented to young farmers who’ve made their investment not in land—which is appreciating—but in machinery—which is depreciating. And they’re renting the land with cash, breaking it whole farms at a time, planting them to corn and soybeans. (p. 54)

He bemoaned the removal of people from direct interaction with the land, and especially absentee landlords, which he perceived to be explicitly connected to the detriment of both: “in their patches the industrialization of farming is complete,” he claimed. “They’re treating the farm exactly as you would treat a factory or a mine” (p. 54).

The end results of this process are the ‘deserts of vast technology’ he wrote about in his book. He appears to mean deserts in two senses here: first, metaphorically, to refer to the lack of life; and second, as a prophetic image that describes a very real physical future wrought by the industrialization of agriculture. He linked these technological wastelands to the destruction of the environment, making the connection between agriculture and environmentalists. In the essay “The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Agriculture”, he wrote that as humans became further and further removed from the work of agriculture—that is, as industrial production replaced direct interaction with the land, as producers became focused solely on production, and consumers solely on consumption—this estrangement led to unavoidable misuse. “Our present agriculture wastes topsoil, water, fossil fuel, and human energy—to name only the most noticeable things. Consumers participate ‘innocently’ or ignorantly,” he wrote. “We are eating—drawing our lives out of our land—thoughtlessly” (1996, p. 38). And he saw this thoughtlessness as a cultural problem.
For Berry, the machine’s role in the garden had been disruptive of not only the health of the land, but of human and cultural values—which, for him, were linked fundamentally to, and preserved by, ongoing, responsible human interaction with the land. He highlighted this interdependence in the next essay, “The Agricultural Crisis as a Crisis of Culture”: “We can build one system only within another. We can have agriculture only within nature, and culture only within agriculture. At certain critical points these systems have to conform with one another or destroy one another” (p. 47).

Failure to recognize this interdependence, he argued, would lead to a “fragmentary” pattern of thought,

the kind of mind…that can introduce a production machine to increase “efficiency” without troubling about its effects on workers, on the product, and on consumers; that can accept an even applaud the ‘obsolescence’ of the small farm and not hesitate over the possible political and cultural effects; that can recommend continuous tillage of huge monoculture, with massive use of chemicals and no animal manure or humus, and worry not at all about the deterioration or loss of soil. For cultural patterns of responsible cooperation we have substituted this moral ignorance, which is the etiquette of agricultural “progress.” (p. 48)

He built on this cultural dimension in the debate with Butz, arguing for the farmer as a cultural character. “The farmer standing in his field is not simply a component of a production machine,” he said. “He stands where a lot of cultural lines cross” (p. 55). Furthermore, he argued,

The traditional farmer, that is the farmer who first fed himself off his farm and then fed other people, who farmed with his family, who passed the land on down to people who knew it and had the best reasons to take care of it—that farmer stood at the convergence of traditional values, our values: independence, thrift, stewardship, private property, political liberties, family, marriage, parenthood, neighborhood—values that decline as that farmer is replaced by a technologist whose only standard is efficiency. (“Earl Butz versus Wendell Berry”, p. 55)

Berry’s sense of the distinction between values- and profit-driven ideals was highlighted later in the debate with a pointed jab at Butz: “He’s arguing from quantities and I’m arguing from values” (“Earl Butz versus Wendell Berry”, 1978, p. 58).
Berry’s view, more than Butz’s, reflected the virtuous yeoman farmer. He did not go so far as to say that “those who labor on the earth are the chosen people of God,” but he did note, as mentioned above, in the titular essay of *The Unsettling of America* that “…the care of the earth is our most ancient and most worthy and, after all, our most pleasing responsibility.” (p. 14). In contrast to the factory logic, Berry argued for a more ‘traditional’ cultural logic, with cultural standards, emphasizing the distinction between rational production mechanisms and human culture. Berry also argued for the value of independence, but not from the constraints of the natural world. Berry, as Smith (2003) notes, has a negative view of individualism for individualism’s sake, arguing that it is “dangerous, both morally and ecologically” (p. 135). Instead, desire is an independence not from community or responsibility, but from the very abstractions Butz celebrates—from reliance on global, abstract systems, and, interestingly, commodities like oil. “Independence?” He asked at one point. “If you’ve got your own land, you’re sure as hell independent if you grow your own food from it. You won’t be starved by a shortage of oil” (“Earl Butz versus Wendell Berry”, 1978, p. 58).

Such discomfort with abstractions and large-scale dependencies was a common thread in Berry’s discourse. He articulated as much in the following quote from the debate:

“... a lot of private property, Mr. Butz says, in insurance policies in America. Those are abstract. I don’t love my insurance policy. But I sure love my farm. I haven’t laid awake at night thinking about my insurance policy. Lord god, I hope I never lie awake at night thinking about it. I hope I never depend on it. (p. 58)

In Berry’s view, human participation in the ‘middle landscape’ was the only way to cultivate affection for the earth and its creatures. And it is this affection that drives good, responsible use of the land. Here is an important distinction: while he frequently extolled the virtuous farmer, his vision was more holistic and communitarian in nature—the health of the land and community were his standards—and explicitly opposed to the creation of wealth through the economic or
political exploitation of people or land. For Berry, the farmer was but one aspect of this larger picture of the ‘middle landscape.’

**C. Expanding the Debate**

In the end, the argument between Berry and Butz boiled down to a conflict of divergent values: economic growth versus health and responsible stewardship. Berry’s environmental ethic was a hybrid of traditional agrarian notions of direct human interaction with the land, Jeffersonian political independence, and religious notions of care for the Creation. As a result, Berry quickly became one of the foremost voices in favor of sustainable agriculture. Much of his work during and since this period was and has been “an attack on the industrial ideal and a defense of the best of traditional agrarian culture” as part of a holistic environmental ethic of good use (Hagenstein, Donahue and Gregg, 2011, p. 358). Though he was far from the first to note the negative effects of industrial food production (Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring* was a watershed two decades earlier), he is sometimes credited with bridging the gap between agrarians and environmentalists in a holistic land ethic (Smith, 2003).

In 1981, the geneticist Wes Jackson, president of the Land Institute in Salinas, Kansas, wrote a book called *New Roots for Agriculture*, in which he described how heavily mechanized, chemically-drive agriculture, especially monocropping and the planting of annual grains, has disastrous effects for soil resources. He argued that a transition to ‘perennial polyculture’ was the only way to preserve and restore soil, and followed Berry’s lead in claiming that this transition had a cultural dimension, as an important element in preserving a new, better rural life.

In pursuit of this holistic ethic, Berry has consistently argued that small-scale, intensive, ecologically sensitive agriculture was not only a viable alternative to agribusiness, but also a
better one. In essence, he attempted to reverse the narrative of industrialization from that of progress to that of decline. The industrial economy was inherently exploitive, characterized by “unrelenting destructiveness” (p. 364) and “insane narrow-mindedness” (p. 366). Addressing the petroleum angle, Berry argued that agriculture dependent on machines—in which people “have substituted themselves, their families, and their communities for petroleum” (p. 365)—had only economic value, and therefore could be commodified quite easily. But the Amish community had “many kinds of value, and among them is economic value” (p. 366). Here is the central point of this ecological dissension: small-scale agriculture is healthier for the environment, and also more stable, as it does away with many of the costs associated with conventional agriculture and introduces a reliance on the community, while preserving the health of the earth: “Most significant, perhaps, is that while conventional agriculture, blindly following the tendency of any industry to exhaust its sources, has made soil erosion a national catastrophe, these [Amish] farms conserve the land and improve it in use” (p. 364).

For Butz, in contrast, as is the case for many techno-apologists, the narrative was always one of social and moral progress buoyed by innovation. In his view, any seemingly negative consequences were worth the cost. Such innovation is, they argue, the result of efficiency, mechanization, standardization, and specialization. As a result, it provides crucial infrastructure that can enable and support the expansion of the kind of neoliberal capitalism that Butz advocated. In fact, Beus & Dunlap (1990), write that “Conventional agriculturalists have long advocated decreasing the number of farms and farmers as a necessary step in the development of U.S. agriculture” (p. 602, emphasis added). The commodification of this portion of the human relationship to nature was well underway.
This latter quote comes from an article entitled “Conventional versus Alternative Agriculture: The Paradigmatic Roots of the Debate,” which appeared in the journal Rural Sociology in 1990. That the terminology of “conventional agriculture” is so readily used to describe modern industrial operations is worth noting, given that “conventional” implies, in one sense, a “traditional” way of doing things. “Alternative agriculture,” on the other hand, is used to describe small-scale, ecologically-responsible agriculture—which has, in fact, been practiced far longer, and in a much wider variety of contexts. This is perhaps an illustration of the pervasiveness of the industrial capitalist logic in the American imagination, a logic that is embedded in the machine itself, and perpetuated in its presence in the garden.

The machine in the garden represents more than just the encroachment of civilization on the natural world, as Marx argued (1964). Modern, large-scale agriculture was developed according to industrial capitalist logic, and thus had this particular worldview embedded within it. What Berry and a few others did during the 1970s and early 1980s was to attempt to make the machine—and the contradiction it represented between ideals and reality—culturally and politically visible. In doing so, they also mounted a challenge to the industrial, neoliberal worldview contained within it. Yet ultimately, this latter set of values came to define American agriculture in the decades to come, helped along significantly by the rise to prominence of the yeoman farmer.

Harvey (2005) traces the institutionalization of neoliberalism in the U.S. to the period since the early 1970s. Such institutionalization took place through interconnected governmental reforms across the world—including, but not limited to, liberalization of international trade regulations; the reinforcement and extension of private property rights; state austerity and defunding of social services; and the consequent privatization of formerly state-run services—essentially, the restructuring of regulatory measures in ways that decreased state authority and increased the authority of private and corporate interests in social, economic, and environmental spheres. These changes gained particular traction in the United States in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s (Heynen, McCarthy, Prudham and Robbins, 2007). This was certainly the case when it came to agriculture. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz laid the groundwork for the neoliberal shift in farm policy, but the 1980s saw its realization, due in part to the rise to prominence of the yeoman farmer, who served to obscure their negative consequences behind an abstract, romanticized mythic vision.

A. Heraldng the Yeoman

To understand the yeoman farmer’s role, we might return briefly to 1978: to Paul Harvey’s speech, “So God Made a Farmer,” at the national FFA convention (the text of which was reprinted in The Atlantic; see Franke-Ruta, 2013). Harvey was, by this time, already an “American institution” whose twice-daily radio show was “one of the most popular programs on the radio,” reaching “as many as 22 million people…on 1,300 stations” (McFadden, 2009, n.p.). As such, his conservative commentary had a major impact on public discourse of the day. This
speech, which featured Harvey’s characteristically folksy tone and spiritual imagery, was significant not only for its speaker, but for its audience and its timing.

At the FFA convention in 1978, Harvey was addressing members of a dying breed. As recently as 1900, 40% of the American population had been engaged in farm work, largely in rural areas. But by the 1970s, due in large part to the twin forces of industrialization and globalization, the number had dropped to just one tenth of that (Dimitri, Effland, and Conklin, 2005). 30 years later, American agriculture was concentrated on a few extremely large, highly productive mechanized farms in depopulated rural areas, with less than 2% of the national labor force working in agriculture. The farmers to whom Harvey was speaking were staring into a future marked by uncertainty, as machines had overtaken and radically transformed the agricultural landscape.

The speech began with God’s creation of ‘a farmer’ on the ‘8th day’. In this statement, framed as an extension of the Biblical Genesis narrative, he claims that farmers have been specifically chosen (from, the audience must assume, among the other kinds of people available) to take care of the earth. This introduction echoes Thomas Jefferson’s sentiment that “those who labor on the earth are the chosen people of God.” In fact, the entire speech is a riff on the Jeffersonian conception of the virtuous ‘yeoman farmer.’ The speech continued with a series of stories about virtues needed by God, and which the farmer possessed. The second paragraph read: “God said, ‘I need somebody willing to get up before dawn, milk cows, work all day in the fields, milk cows again, eat supper and then go to town and stay past midnight at a meeting of the school board.’ So God made a farmer.” The farmer was “strong enough to rustle a calf and yet gentle enough to deliver his own grandchild” (paragraph 3). In paragraph 4, the farmer sits up all night with a dying colt, but retains a measure of hope; in paragraph 5, he puts his neighbor
above himself, rushing to help put out a house fire rather than finish harvesting his crops ahead of the rain. Each successive paragraph gives an illustration of a hard-working and virtuous citizen, husband, father, and caretaker, chosen by God for that specific purpose. A yeoman farmer, ripped straight from Jefferson’s own pages.

Harvey’s reading of the book of Genesis is unmistakable: the human farmer is given dominion over the earth, embodying the mythic narrative of God’s ‘chosen’ people. Thus the yeoman farmer, elevated to hallowed status, is central to the stories in Harvey’s speech, much more so than the garden itself. For one thing, he skips the creation of the garden entirely, choosing to begin with the creation of the farmer on the ‘8th day’. The garden, as a ‘middle landscape,’ becomes a symbolic site on which the mythic narrative of the yeoman farmer is played out, where he can “clear trees,” “plow deep and straight and not cut corners,” and “bale a family together with the soft strong bonds of sharing.” The machine, too, shows up only occasionally, and always under the control of the yeoman farmer. The farmer is able to “tame cantankerous machinery,” and willing to “stop his mower for an hour to splint the broken leg of a meadowlark.” Clearly, the farmer is in control of the machine, and it has not disrupted his virtuous work. The machine, in turn, is guided by the virtuous farmer; how could it be a threat to the persistence and health of the garden? Harvey’s audience, farmers themselves, were presented with a vision of their work that reassured their mythic status in American life, despite the use of machinery to complete the work—in his account, there is no apparent contradiction between the expansion and mechanization of farms and the farmer’s hallowed role as the keeper of American land and virtue. In this speech, Harvey was shoring up an abstract but cherished mythic vision, not to mention an ideal rapidly losing its footing in reality. In a crucial and prophetic move, the machine is naturalized by the towering yeoman farmer.
Harvey’s was not the only instance of the yeoman’s prominent presence in public life. Two years later, Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency, having run on a platform that promised “A New Morning in America.” Reagan was often seen as a “cowboy hero” figure, a “renegade who was not afraid to do what he thought was right” (Dubose, 2007, pp. 916, 917). Frontier imagery featured heavily in his campaigns, and he was often seen wearing a cowboy hat, or photographed on his ranch. The cowboy symbol had much in common with the yeoman farmer—he was independent, virtuous—only with a frontier twist. He was a more rugged version of the farmer, heroic, able to tame the wilderness on top of his other virtues. One poster proclaimed “AMERICA: REAGAN COUNTRY,” with an image of the candidate in a Stetson (Appendix A). The virtuous yeoman had, to some extent, always been wrapped up in the idea of citizenship—after all, in Jefferson’s original conception he had represented the “ideal citizen” (Retzinger, 2002, p. 47). Now he was even running for president.

In his first inaugural address, Reagan promised what Heynen et al. (2007) deemed “political emancipation through economic growth, increasing prosperity, and market mediated social relations”—neoliberalism in a nutshell (p. 6). He praised the heroic yeoman, too—though not in those exact words. What he said was this:

Those who say we’re in a time when there are not heroes, they just don’t know where to look. You can see heroes every day going in and out of factory gates. Others, a handful in number, produce enough food to feed all of us and then the world beyond. You meet heroes across a counter, and they’re on both sides of the counter. There are entrepreneurs with faith in themselves and faith in an idea who create new jobs, new wealth, and new opportunity…whose voluntary gifts support church, charity, culture, art, and education. Their patriotism is quiet, but deep. Their values sustain our national life. (Reagan, 1981, n.p.)

What does an American hero look like? Reagan lists three examples here: factory workers, farmers, and entrepreneurs. These three are marked and united by familiar ‘values’—namely hard work and religion—but also for their patriotism, and importantly, their entrepreneurial
contributions to the wealth and prosperity of the nation and the world. By championing “abstract constructions of yeoman entrepreneurial capitalists and small businesses (as opposed to powerful, footloose multi-nationals)” (Heynen et al., p. 5) Reagan expertly integrated the yeoman ideal into his neoliberal vision.

Reagan’s policies, too, seemed to reflect at least the individualist aspect of the cowboy or the yeoman farmer, especially the neoliberal platform of deregulation, austerity, and privatization. His notion of “supply-side,” or neoliberal, economics was based on the idea that lowering tax rates would stimulate the economy enough to effectively increase tax revenue. These ideas came to be known as ‘Reaganomics’—a term that is, incidentally, often credited to Paul Harvey (McFadden, 2009). According to Barnett (2000), the idea failed insofar as the U.S. government began to accumulate significant amounts of debt to cover lost revenues—not unlike farmers, who, in a crucial difference, had borrowed against their land and other assets, often machinery. According to the neoliberal logic, however, this financialization of the agricultural sector—the use of large amounts of debt, leveraged to build greater wealth—was acceptable. But interest rates began to rise, and commodity exports slowed. At the same time the Federal Reserve began to reduce inflation, which led to falling land and asset values. All of this spelled trouble for an agricultural sector that was “highly leveraged” as a result of its expansion in the 1970s (Barnett, p. 375).

**B. Crisis on the Farm**

Out of this context came the Farm Crisis of the 1980s, a development that was explicitly connected to the globalization and industrialization of agriculture. Because American farmers were increasingly reliant on a global commodities market, any changes in international trade
policy would have significant consequences for the practice of agriculture in the country. This is exactly what happened in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when U.S. trade with Russia, a major consumer of commodity exports, was limited due to political disagreements, and overproduction began to outpace demand. Rising costs of land and the scaling up of agriculture were fueled by speculative activity, which required farmers to take on greater and greater amounts of debt as equity and inflation continued to rise (Barnett, 2000). Agricultural exports peaked in 1981, at $41 billion, and their value would fall 50 percent by 1986. Corn and soybean prices fell 64 percent and 52 percent, respectively. Wheat fell 51. To make matters worse, a drought hit in 1983, decimating yields (p. 375). Farmers were left with enormous amounts of debt, but without the demand or revenue to sustain it. Banks came around looking to collect interest on their loans, and huge numbers of farmers were forced to default. This turn of events disproportionately affected younger farmers who had borrow heavily to purchase land and machinery, and older farmers whose equity disappeared. Those who had mortgaged all of their property in an attempt to “get big”—property that had been drastically devalued—were forced to “get out” in dramatic fulfillment of Secretary Butz’s prophetic words (Barnett, 2000; Dudley, 2000).

The farm crisis was directly related to the globalization of industrial agriculture and the neoliberal project in American politics. The mechanization of farms and related increase in average farm size—in most cases, to keep up with global demand—meant that farmers had to take out huge amounts of debt to manage, at the encouragement of banks and the federal government. Yet Dudley (2000), found that on a local level discourse tended to link farmers’ failure to a failure of virtues—often laziness, greed, or a lack of thriftiness. This latter component, thriftiness, especially, became a key theme. Farmers who borrowed too much or tried to grow too quickly were seen as responsible for their own failure, despite the fact that they
were under immense pressure to do so from both the government and the market. These farmers
deserved their fate, the logic went, because they lacked the “independence of mind” to resist “the
social pressure to consume” (p. 108). Theirs was a failure of virtue. The pastoral ideal and its
image of the self-sufficient yeoman farmer motivated individuals (farmers and non-farmers
alike) to blame small farmers for their own misfortune, ignoring the larger context and focusing
instead on individual shortcomings of those who had apparently failed to live up to the standard
of the virtuous yeoman. The pastoral ideal and the mythic yeoman farmer played an important
role in shaping public response, obscuring the abstract systems that undergirded the entire event.
But the yeoman’s role in obscuring the machinations of global industrial-capitalist agriculture
went beyond individual farmers, extending even to the foremost symbols of organized resistance.

C. ‘**American Spirit**’

Perhaps more than anything else, the concert series Farm Aid cemented the yeoman farmer’s
place at the forefront of challenges to agriculture’s industrial reality. The story of Farm Aid’s
founding goes like this: Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Willie Nelson, and John Mellencamp were all
hanging out together backstage at a Live Aid benefit concert for Africa when Dylan turned to the
others and said, “wouldn’t it be great if we did something for our own farmers?” (Farm Aid:
Roots & Vision, n.d., n.p.). It was 1985, at the height of the Farm Crisis, and Dylan would have
been well aware of the dire circumstances facing American farmers. Ever the political instigator,
he then wondered aloud during his set, "I hope that some of the [Live Aid] money…maybe they
can just take a little bit of it, maybe…one or two million, maybe, and use it, say, to pay the
mortgages on some of the farms…the farmers here, owe to the banks" (Durcholz & Graff, 2012, p.
Farm Aid was born. Young, Nelson, and Mellencamp took Dylan’s comments to heart and put together the first Farm Aid in just six weeks.

The concert illustrated the powerful resonance of the yeoman farmer. The daylong concert, held on September 22, 1985, still drew 80,000 people to University of Illinois Memorial Stadium in Champaign, Illinois. The eclectic lineup included many superstar performers from a variety of genres, including Bob Dylan, Billy Joel, B.B. King, Loretta Lynn, and Roy Orbison (Appendix B). The concert raised more than $9 million (Farm Aid, 2016, n.p.). Perhaps not incidentally, the organizers of the festival, Young, Nelson, and Mellencamp, each to some extent embody aspects of the yeoman, and derive their authenticity from their farmer and cowboy imagery. In the Farm Aid telecast, Nelson, who is frequently seen wearing a cowboy hat, wears a trucker hat similar to the kind worn by many farmers; Channel 6, 2015). Young, a rancher himself, wore a wide-brim hat that resembled a slightly modified cowboy hat (Carr, 2012; Channel 6, 2015).

At Farm Aid, the yeoman farmer was front and center. According to Hilburn & MacDougal (1985), Neil Young and Willie Nelson opened the concert at 8 a.m. with a song, written by Young, entitled “Are There Any More Real Cowboys”. The song, which appeared on Young’s 1985 album *Old Ways*, was a song of lament for what Young viewed to be the loss of the American cowboy—and the way of life that he represented. It began:

Are there any more real cowboys / left out in these hills?  
Will the fire hit the iron / one more time?  
And will one more dusty pickup / come rolling down the road  
With a load of feed before the sun gets high?  
Well, I hope that working cowboy never dies. (Young, 1985)

The song describes the cowboy in a familiar manner:

Not the one that’s snortin’ cocaine / when the honky-tonk’s all closed  
but the one that prays for more rain / heaven knows
that the good feed brings the money / and the money buys the clothes
not the diamond sequins shining on TV
but the kind the working cowboy really needs. (Young, 1985)

The cowboy referenced here had much in common with the virtuous yeoman farmer of Jefferson
and Harvey. He was rugged, hard working, independent, not seduced by shiny advertising, and
respectful of religion. The third verse continued:

Are there any more country families / still working hand in hand
trying to stay together / and make a stand?
While the rows and rows of houses / come creepin’ up on the land
where the cattle graze and an old grey barn still stands
are there any more real cowboys in this land? (Young, 1985)

The farmer and his family stood together as virtuous protectors of the wild land and culture from
the “rows and rows of houses.” This appears to be a nod to encroaching civilization. Another
song, performed later in the day, sheds some light here. The song is called “This Old House,”
and was performed by Young alone. He sang:

This old house of ours is built on dreams
and a businessman don’t know what that means.
There’s a garden outside she works in every day
and tomorrow morning a man from the bank’s
gonna come and take it all away. (Channel 6, 2015)

Young then repeated this refrain, “take it all away” several times. The banker and the
businessman were coming to take the “old house” that was “built on dreams,” a line that draws a
connection between the farm and the so-called “American Dream” of freedom and prosperity. It
was civilization, perhaps—the “rows and rows of houses”—that was threatening the rugged life
of the wild yeoman cowboy. This is consistent with the pastoral ideal, and Marx’s tension. There
are also “a businessman” and “the man from the bank.” Each of these evokes a sort of villainous
archetype, suggesting that the yeoman is a victim of economics—not far off. But these are vague,
autonomous actors. What is it that is responsible for the death of the family farm? Corporations?
The government? Modern civilization? All of the above? It is not made explicitly clear who or what was responsible. But this much was clear: the new reality represented a threat to an ideal that emerged at the center of the event, an ideal that became tied inextricably to the yeoman farmer: ‘American Spirit’.

Young (and, by association, his co-founders, and the festival itself) was lamenting the corporatization of the American farm—or, more pointedly, the dream of independence, freedom, and prosperity that the family farm and the yeoman farmer represented. He put a finer point on this ideograph in a statement to President Reagan, which ran as a full-page ad in USA Today, and was also read during the Farm Aid telecast by the actor Timothy Hutton, immediately before Young’s performance of “This Old House”: “What will [the death of the family farm] do to the American spirit?” (as cited in Durcholz and Graff, 2010, p. 134; emphasis added).

This ‘American Spirit’ was reinforced by Farm Aid branding, which, in its treatment of the yeoman farmer and the cowboy, appears to have been primarily focused around an abstract idea of “America.” Many materials, including the telecast, were labeled with the tagline “Farm Aid: A Concert for America,” and the American flag was an omnipresent symbol. Even the Farm Aid logo (Appendix C), displayed prominently on t-shirts and marketing materials, as well as at the center of the handbill cover, featured a silhouetted farmer riding a tractor, with an enormous American flag—the size of the tractor itself—waving behind. Below the logo and title was the tagline: “Keep America Growing!” (emphasis original). This tagline appears to have a double meaning—it is a play on the word “growing” that serves to both evoke America’s agricultural heritage and underscore the growth-oriented, entrepreneurial component of contemporary agriculture, placing the yeoman farmer within the frame of this economic reality and implicitly acknowledging the dominant milieu.
Furthermore, the silhouetted farmer in the Farm Aid logo, riding the tractor and waving an American flag, has no land around him. The land is, perhaps, implied, but it is not present. Thus, in this logo, the farmer is not actually farming. He is a symbol abstracted from any concrete activity on the land. When the land, or the ‘garden’, does appear, it seems to exist primarily as set and backdrop for the family farm and the yeoman farmer’s activities. In “Are There Any More Real Cowboys?” “These hills” are where the cowboy lives, and “this land” is where “country families” work “hand in hand” and “make a stand” (Young, 1985). In “This Old House,” the house is built not in a particular place, or on a particular place of land, but “on dreams.” The house represents not a connection to a place or piece of land, but the “dreams” of the farmer and farm family. In this way, the historically intrinsic connection between farmer and land has been replaced by a new connection between the farmer and the farmer’s (American) dream(s) of virtue, independence, and, the hearer might imagine, prosperity.

The centering of the virtuous farmer with the indomitable ‘American Spirit’ also coincided with a relative lack of attention paid to the role of the machine—especially with regard to its function as infrastructure for the corporatization of farming. With the tractor in the Farm Aid logo, the machine was naturalized into this new conception of the abstract, romanticized, entrepreneurial, and extremely patriotic yeoman farmer—an image that happened to fit well with the neoliberal focus on business, individualism, and entrepreneurship (Heynen et al., 2007). Incidentally, while the benefit was ostensibly against the corporatization of the American farm, the telecast nonetheless began by naming its sponsors: Campbell Soup Company, Chevy Trucks, and Miller Beer. Two of the sponsors were introduced with loosely patriotic taglines—“making products good for America”; “made the American way since 1855.” Later, the program hosts
would thank the “generosity” of their “corporate sponsors,” and mention by name “sizable donations from Visa and Mastercard” (Channel 6, 2015).

For Young and Farm Aid, the family farmer had considerable cultural significance that was worth saving, and this was the impetus for change—in this respect, the concert’s message has echoes of Berry’s claim that the farmer stands “where a lot of cultural lines cross” (“Earl Butz vs. Wendell Berry”, 1978, p. 55). But the two messages diverged with regard to what it is, exactly, that the farmer represented. For the likes of Berry and Jackson, the farmer was the best hope for a healthy culture and relationship with nature. For Young, Nelson, and Mellencamp—and, ironically enough, for the Reagan administration—the farmer represented the ‘American Spirit,’ some ineffable quality that invokes ideas of exploration, of glory, of hard-working men taming the wilderness. In this way, the farmer converged with a national myth that goes back to the frontier (see Knobloch, 1996). As the face of this new iteration of the ‘American Spirit,’ the yeoman’s symbolism was redirected: he was now defined by his representation of an idea deeply connected to economic growth and individual prosperity, not for his virtuous relationship to the land.

D. Political Machinations

At its most basic level, Farm Aid was about raising awareness. Mellencamp told the New York Times that “The farm family is dwindling away…that’s unhealthy and we thought some attention should be paid to the problem” (Greenhouse, 1985, n.p.). Yet Farm Aid was also intended to help ‘America’s family farmers’ who were struggling as a result of Reagan’s farm policies, so there was an explicit political component to the concert—and the need to ‘save’ the
yeoman farmer and the ‘family farm’ on which he worked were central to explanations of the political agenda. In a television interview, Young explained:

We’re trying to raise a lot of money here, but that’s not the most important thing...there’s a bill in Congress that we at Farm Aid and the farmers—the family farmers of America—support, it’s really the only way we can save the family farm. And it’s called the Harkins Farm Policy Reform Bill of 1985...Your money’ll help but it won’t save ‘em. We gotta get the congressmen to vote for it. (Farm Aid, 2013)

The Harkins Farm Policy Reform Bill of 1985, which went by the shorthand title of “The Save the Family Farm Act,” was intended “To provided price and income protection to family farmers through the management of the supply of the 1987 through 1999 crops of certain agricultural commodities...” among other things (H.R. 5588, 1986). In doing so, it was expected to roll back farm policies of the Reagan administration by increasing government controls over production in return for pricing guarantees—a counterintuitive move, given the supposed independence of the yeoman farmer. Yet it was a move that many—Young included—saw as a chance to save the family farm, and the yeoman farmer, in the face of corporatization.

But the bill was controversial, with some opponents claiming that it would give the government too much control over farmers (Orr, 1987). So Young and the other organizers ultimately decided not to use the proceeds from Farm Aid to lobby support for the bill, instead focusing on advocacy work (Crapanzo, 2010). This included Young’s open to Ronald Reagan, published as an advertisement in USA Today. The statement read, at one point:

...As you read this, your advisors are telling you that America must be strong. America must compete on the world food markets. They advise you to keep prices way down, lower than ever. Do you know that this is killing the family farm? That only the large conglomerate farm units will survive?...Will the family farm in America die as a result of your administration? (Channel 6, 2015).

Periodic educational segments scattered throughout the telecast reinforced the political component. During one such segment, the actress Sissy Spacek described threats to the farm
economy, including foreign policy effects (37:30). Meanwhile, the industrial infrastructure that made the centralization and corporatization of American farming possible remained glaringly absent. And in the end, the alternative 1985 farm bill that ended up passing reinforced existing farm laws, ensuring continued centralization for at least another few years (Orr, 1987).

The farm crisis of the 1980s brought a fresh context to the discussion of Marx’s tension, as people began to see the effects of a relationship with the natural world heavily mediated by abstract—especially industrial—systems. At the same time, President Ronald Reagan was ushering in a new era of neoliberalism in American politics. The yeoman farmers and the family farms that populated the middle landscape—no matter how real their inspirations—became prominent symbols that mediated cultural and political discourse regarding the practice of agriculture in America—signifiers that were capable of carrying a particular idealized conception of agricultural work, and could be deployed in a variety of contexts and in the service of a variety of ideals. Indeed, they were so malleable as to be useful for both the Reagan Administration and its most vocal challengers at Farm Aid.

E. Symbolic Politics

The yeoman farmer’s usefulness came from his new status as a symbol of the ‘American Spirit,’ an idea that can be traced to the romanticized frontier attitudes. The colonization of the American west was made possible by the frontier ideology, which positioned humans as antithetical to nature, and valorized the extreme individualism of the frontiersman (Knobloch, 1996). This extreme individualism was particularly well suited to being resistant to limitations on individual liberty, autonomy, and profit, and therefore amenable to the exploitation of land and people, and social and economic policy that supports such exploitation. Moreover, the new
yeoman farmer, symbol of the American Spirit, was not only thrifty, independent, and moral—he was now an entrepreneur. And because entrepreneurialism is a partner term for innovation, the yeoman had become a poster child—more specifically, a poster boy—for the kind of profit-oriented individualism and economic centrality that, in partnership with modern industrial infrastructure, was required for the further commodification of the human relationship to nature through agriculture, and its decoupling from meaningful cultural endeavor (Vinsel & Russell, 2016). It is this kind of championing of the entrepreneurial individual that obscured the new large-scale, neoliberal economic realities.

Agriculture, in the American imagination, was, and in many ways continues to be, a landscape of abstraction, managed by abstract systems and populated by symbols that represent powerful abstract ideals. The dominance of the yeoman farmer and the family farm in the American imagination obscured the machine, and thus its implication in the very systems Farm Aid sought to dismantle, rendering it politically invisible. This, paradoxically, strengthened the neoliberal project by allowing its infrastructure to continue to unfold (largely) unchallenged. Mainstream resistance to industrial capitalist agriculture was chopping fervently at the tree of neoliberalism, but ignoring the roots of industrialization. Meanwhile, agriculture continued to become more and more centralized and mechanized as these symbols reverberated throughout the cultural imagination decades.
IV. REVERBERATIONS: 2003-2016

Nearly 30 years after its initial publication in 1977, *The Unsettling of America* remained in print. In a 2011 essay in *Orion* magazine, titled “The Agrarian Standard,” Berry lamented the continued relevance of his book 25 years after its original writing. “If I believe what I said in that book, and I still do,” he wrote, “then I should be anything but glad. The book would have had a far happier fate if it could have been disproved or made obsolete years ago” (n.p.). But this was not the case. In 2016, according to a report by *Pacific Standard*, “just four companies control 65% of cattle pork slaughter, 84% of cattle slaughter, and 53 percent of chicken slaughter” (Douglas, 2016, n.p.). Industrial agriculture has continued to become larger and more centralized, and even more embedded in the national and global web—despite the continued celebration of writers like Berry, who has been the recipient of, among numerous other awards, the National Humanities Award in 2010 (National Endowment for the Humanities, 2011).

A. Industrial Dominance

The globalization and industrialization of agriculture precipitated the use of biotechnology in the latter part of the 20th century, beginning in the early 1980s—technology’s further transformation of the garden. The first genetically modified crop, an antibiotic-resistant tobacco plant, was created in 1982. In 1995, the chemical and biotechnology company Monsanto introduced soybeans modified to be immune to herbicides (Cramer, 2001). From 1995 to 2005, use of Genetically Modified (GM) crops exploded in the United States (Seabrook, 2007). The amount of land cultivated with genetically modified seeds, usually from major multinational corporations using research developed in agricultural colleges (which is to say, by experts), increased 60-fold between 1996 and 2007 (Maghari & Ardekani, 2011). Huge, industrial farming
operations growing genetically modified crops came to dominate the agricultural landscape (Dimitri et al., 2005)—in the United States, as of 2010, 80% of corn and soybeans are grown using biotechnology, and the subject of significant debate over the trustworthiness of genetically modified meat, dairy, and plant products (Maghari & Ardekani, 2011).

In the meantime, this industrial agriculture has exacted a heavy toll on the American landscape and its occupants (Horrigan, Lawrence, & Walker, 2002). And in the decades following the Farm Crisis of the 1980s, environmental concerns have begun to garner a greater sense of urgency. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, in a 2005 report commissioned by the United Nations, claimed that “changes [to global biodiversity] are substantial and predominantly negative…we already have overwhelming evidence that humans have caused the loss of a great deal of biodiversity over the past 50,000 years and that rates of loss have accelerated sharply over the past century,” naming agriculture as the human activity that has constituted the largest threat to ecosystem functions and biodiversity during this time (Hassan, Scholes, & Ash, 2005, p. 114). And with the arrival of climate change in popular discourse, discussion of the effects of both agriculture and fossil fuels began to heat up. The United States Environmental Protection Agency pointed to the release of increased amounts of carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, noting that “the majority of greenhouse gases come from burning fossil fuels to produce energy, although deforestation, industrial processes, and some agricultural practices also emit gases into the atmosphere” (Climate Change: Basic Information, n.d., n.p.). The agricultural practices referred to here include soil degradation and nutrient depletion, but not exclusively. According to a 2002 report by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, “The industrial agriculture system [also] consumes fossil fuel, water, and topsoil at unsustainable rates” (Horrigan et al., p. 445). Yet, industrial agriculture remained the dominant
form of food production, even after most of these reports were made available for public access.

At the same time, the abstract, patriotic yeoman farmer continues to echo in the American cultural imagination.

B. Echoes of the Yeoman

To understand the continued dominance of industrial agriculture despite these effects, we might look at the reverberations of abstract representations of farmers and farming in the American imagination. Not surprisingly, the yeoman farmer features prominently, while machines—as well as the land itself—take a back seat. In 2013, Paul Harvey’s “So God Made a Farmer” speech was used in an advertisement for Dodge Ram trucks that ran during the Super Bowl—for the largest national audience gathered at any point in the year, only a miniscule fraction of which would have been engaged in any form of farm work. The commercial “became a major topic” of conversation in the country, having “stood out amid the stream of ads” that ran during the Super Bowl (Franke-Ruta, 2013, n.p.). National Public Radio, in an online article titled “‘God Made A Farmer’ And the Super Bowl Made Him A Star,” deemed it “a standout moment” in which “the values and future of American farming left the sidelines of the popular conversation to dominate a very, very large stage” (Godoy, 2009, n.p.).

Harvey’s audio was played under a series of stylized photographs depicting the yeoman farmer in the middle landscape (see Franke-Ruta, 2013). In the commercial, the farmer remains central to the story, and is present in nearly every shot. The land is a backdrop or site for his work. Trucks, combines, and silos have a limited presence, often serving as an accessory to the farmer—in one shot, the farmer is tossing bales of hay off of the back of the truck. The machine is present, but only sometimes, and usually with a supporting role to the farmer. Typically, the
machine is in the background of the shot, blending into the landscape. In one shot, cattle in a field congregate around a Dodge Ram truck. Strategically absent is any depiction of the enormous, impersonal machinery used to milk and slaughter those same cattle.

The use of this patriotic, entrepreneurial yeoman farmer to sell trucks—machines—represented the fulfillment of neoliberalism’s attempt to commodify the human relationship to nature. As an abstraction, the yeoman farmer himself became a commodity; the symbol for an ‘American Spirit’ that can be packaged, marketed, bought and sold—ideals that can be consumed—but he is by no means the extent of it. Contemporary global, industrial agriculture remains highly intertwined with the oil industry—not least by the trucks and other machinery that the yeoman farmer hawks at the Super Bowl. It is perhaps not incidental then that the Marathon Petroleum Corporation’s marketing tagline was “Fueling the American Spirit” (“Behind the Scenes: Fueling the American Spirit”, n.d.). The marketing executives at Marathon understood something about the elemental connection between culture and infrastructure, and the power of invoking deep-seated values in support of material realities. But there are two sides to this coin—on the other side, the ‘Good Food Movement,’ similar to the Farm Aid of the 1980s, also attempted to use these ideals to mobilize a different version of agricultural production.

C. The ‘Good Food Movement’

Farm Aid celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2015, on Chicago’s Northerly Island. Willie Nelson told Rolling Stone described the event like this: “…in Chicago, we’ll bring together so many of the people—farmers, eaters, advocates and activists—who have made the progress of the Good Food Movement possible” (Greene, 2015, n.p.). By The Good Food Movement he was referring to a movement of people interested in ‘reclaiming’ food from global agribusiness
corporations and saving the family farm—and more than this, saving the idyllic small town ‘Main Street.’ ‘Real’ America; American Spirit. John Mellencamp added: “In 1985, alternatives didn’t exist for most farmers and people didn’t understand that there was a role for them in changing the system…but after that first concert, people listened. They realized that if we lost family farmers, we lost Main Street and we lost our food” (n.p.). In a pre-concert interview, Neil Young, Nelson, and Mellencamp attempted to describe some of the problematic elements in modern agriculture. Here’s Young’s take:

“We’re up against a gigantic force that keeps coming at us from everywhere. And it’s centered in our government, and it’s backed up by multi-national corporations who are taking over the farmland of the United States…when you drive across this great country you see these lines and lines of corn…and they’re all corporate farms…the American farm is disappearing. This is a reality. We keep saying ‘we’re fighting, we’re fighting,’ but it is disappearing…they tell you that they are saving the world, that they are doing this so they can feed the world, and that is complete bullshit. They are doing this so they can patent the seeds and control the world…it’s about money and their corporations, and they’ve got to pay the government from somewhere…Don’t ever lose your focus on the fact that to save the American farm, and to save the American way of life as it’s been for generations and generations, we have to stand up to the American government and say ‘enough is enough.’” (Farm Aid, 2015)

For Young and Farm Aid, the enemy is still the collection of greedy multinational corporations motivated solely by control and profits and supported by the U.S. government. There is little to no mention of the infrastructure that makes these corporations economically viable in the first place.

Moreover, the branding remained the same—a masculine farmer riding a large tractor with an enormous American flag waving behind (Appendix D). One difference is that the farmer was placed within an illustration of the geography of the United States, shaped into a guitar body. The patriotic yeoman farmer continued to naturalize the machine. And even corporate agriculture’s most vocal opponents found it difficult to steer entirely clear of it in 2015—sponsors of Farm Aid 30 included national corporations Horizon Organic and Chipotle Mexican
Grill (“Thousands Rally for Family Farm Future”, 2015, n.p.). ‘Alternative’ agriculture was, to borrow a phrase from former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, “big business, to be sure” (“Earl Butz vs. Wendell Berry”, p. 52).

Farm Aid’s sentiments are closely paralleled by the documentary Food, Inc. (2009), the arrival of which helped to galvanize the Good Food Movement’s message. The documentary was one of the most widely circulated of a series of documentary films about food production in the mid- to late-2000s, and made a statement at the box office, grossing $4 million as of November 2009 (Lindenfeld, 2010; Box Office for Food, Inc., 2016). It was also recognized in the world of entertainment when it was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature (The 82nd Academy Awards, 2010). Food, Inc., which covers a wide range of issues relating to modern large-scale farming—from worker exploitation to pesticide use, and divided into different ‘chapters’—is similarly marked by the elevation of the yeoman farmer as mythic hero, safeguarding all that is good and right and valuable in America. A minute and fifteen seconds into the documentary, farmer Troy Roush gives the viewer its thesis: “How can a farmer defend himself against a multinational corporation?” (Kenner, 2008, 1:15-1:17). The clear thread throughout the documentary had to do with the dangers of industrial food production, and especially that of large-scale corporations. Roush himself had fought with Monsanto, a chemical manufacturer turned agribusiness giant whose patents on genetic seed varieties allegedly hamstrung small family farmers with corporate lawsuits over usage—and the apparent ‘enemy’ of the documentary.

Food, Inc. did, in some ways, make the machine and its logics more visible: at one point early on, the narrator, commenting on the factory methodology of fast food restaurants like McDonalds, said, “that mentality of uniformity, conformity and cheapness, applied widely and
on a large scale, has all kinds of unintended consequences” (Kenner, 2008, 5:00:04-5:00:12).

Several segments of the documentary seem to offer a critique of industrial farming, including one in which an industrial chicken farmer named Carole Morison threw open the doors of her chicken production facility for the cameras. “It’s just gotten to the point that it’s not right what’s going on…something has to be said.” she claimed. “It is nasty in here. There’s dust flying everywhere. There’s feces everywhere. This isn’t farming. This is just mass production, like an assembly line in a factory” (0:12:21-0:12:38). Roush also mentioned that his farm, as a “production” facility was “highly dependent on large amounts of petroleum.” “We’re going to use about 40,000 gallons of diesel fuel a year,” he added (1:24:43-1:24:51).

The market logic came close to visibility as well, when the film closed with what Lindenfeld (2010) termed “a call to active citizenship” (p. 382). Roush specifically noted the role of market-driven agriculture near the end of the documentary: “We farmers, we’re gonna deliver to the marketplace what the marketplace demands” (Kenner, 2008, 1:29:20-1:29:24). But he quickly turned this around, echoing the logic of the market himself: “People have got to start demanding good, wholesome food of us,” he said. “And we’ll deliver. I promise you.” (1:29:24-1:30:01). The market logic favored by Earl Butz had made its way into the major texts of resistance. Similarly, there is a segment profiling Gary Hirschberg, an organic food advocate and chairman of Stonyfield Farm, an organic dairy company, who sees the organic food industry as the solution to the problems of the conventional food industry:

We wanted to prove that business could be part of the solution to the globe’s environmental problems. At the same time we had to prove that we could be highly profitable. Today in 2008, not only are we the #3 yogurt brand in America, but we’re among the most profitable. (1:01:55-1:02:18).

In the segment, Hirschberg is shown selling his dairy products to Wal-Mart, which he sees as a major step in improving relations. “For me, when Wal-Mart enters the organic space, I’m
thrilled…I have dreamed of the day when I could sit with corporate titans and have conversations about organics and sustainability” (1:03:12-1:03:34). In a stroke of neoliberal logic, he argued:

I have no illusions about this. I don’t believe that Wal-Mart has come here because they’ve suddenly had a moral enlightenment. It’s because of economics. I can debate with my radical friends all day long, but nobody can challenge the fact that a sale of another million dollars to Wal-Mart helps to save the world” (1:05:06-1:05:30).

For Hirschberg, the solution to the problems of industry was simply better industry.

The battle in Food, Inc., like that of Farm Aid, is between big corporations and small farmers—both of whom happen to use similar machines. It’s about individual ownership, not relationship with the land. Yes, the machine has contributed to the problem, but this is the fault of the operator of the machine, not the machine itself. The best solution, the viewer was led to believe, would come from within the system itself—market pressure, placed on the industrial system by consumers, could still bring about the best possible results—especially when the yeoman farmer was involved.

D. A New Imagination?

There continued to be dissenting voices attempting to make the logic of the machine politically and culturally visible in the discussion of conventional agriculture—among them, predictably, Wendell Berry, who contributed prolifically in the decades since his debate with Secretary Butz. He wrote in a 2005 essay for Orion that “the tractor’s arrival had signaled, among other things, agriculture’s shift from an almost exclusive dependence on free solar energy to a total dependence on costly fossil fuel” (n.p.). Elsewhere in the same essay, he concluded:

We can no longer pretend that agriculture is a sort of economic machine with interchangeable parts, the same everywhere, determined by “market forces” and independent of everything else. We are not farming in a specialist capsule or a
professionalist department; we are farming in the world, in a webwork of dependences and influences probably more intricate than we will ever understand. It has become clear, in short, that we have been running our fundamental economic enterprise by the wrong rules. We were wrong to assume that agriculture could be adequately defined by reductionist science and determinist economics. (n.p.)

Berry had, by this point, become something of a patron saint of sustainable agriculture. And his writings influenced a generation of agricultural and environmental writers. Michael Pollan, a *New York Times* bestselling author whose books include *In Defense of Food* (2008) and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006), pointed to a single line of Berry’s—“eating is an agricultural act,” from a 1987 essay called “The Pleasures of Eating” (reprinted in Berry, 1990)—as a guiding force in his work (Fassler, 2013).

In many ways, Pollan picked up Berry’s torch, at least when it came to discussions of industrial food production. In “An Animal’s Place” (2003), from *The New York Times Magazine* (and subsequently reprinted in the *Best American Essays 2003*), he wrote that

…maybe all we need to do to redeem industrial animal agriculture in this country is to pass a law requiring that the steel and concrete walls of the CAFOS [Confined Animal Feeding Operations] and slaughterhouses be replaced with…glass. If there’s any new ‘right’ we need to establish, maybe it’s this one: the right to look. (Pollan, 2003, p. 210, ellipses original)

Later in the same essay he wrote, “Were the walls of our meat industry to become transparent, literally, or even figuratively, we would not long continue to do it this way” (p. 211). This concentration on visibility as a tool of cultural change is reflective of Berry’s early work, but it is also illustrative of my point in this paper. It is my contention that the continued dominance of the industrial machine is due in large part to its relative political and cultural invisibility, its naturalization and concealment behind the yeoman farmer. Pollan’s longing for transparency is a response to this concealment, a desire for a greater connection to the production of our food—and judging by the success of his books, he is not alone. Pollan’s *In Defense of Food* was a *New York Times* bestseller, and the *Times* named *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* one of the best books of
2006 (“The Omnivore’s Dilemma by Michael Pollan”, n.d.). Like Berry, Pollan attempts to make the machine visible as a cultural and political force, not simply a technological one.

Industrial agriculture has done significant damage to both culture and environment. Yet at the same time, the yeoman farmer caring ably for land and animals remains a salient mythic symbol, and the virtuous farmer is used to reconcile the machine to the garden. The machine is naturalized by linking it to the farmer, who remains in control of what happens in the middle landscape. The commercial narrative provides a measure of security by invoking this pastoral, agrarian ideal and portraying the machine as an important component of the middle landscape. Do not be afraid: the farmer is in control—with a little help from his truck. The yeoman farmer in the middle landscape has been adopted as the mascot of the machine producers, reassuring consumers that the middle landscape is better than ever, with the yeoman farmer tending it virtuously. Berry’s claim that the industrial landscape is undermining human (and ecological) values is rendered moot, especially because for a vast majority of Americans mediated representations of rural agriculture, like the Dodge commercial at the 2013 Super Bowl, are a primary ‘access point’ for the abstract system. The machine is neutralized, and the industrial, neoliberal capitalist worldview contained within it is simultaneously obscured. As a result, the political, cultural, and environmental issues brought on by the machine are themselves hidden behind the yeoman farmer—or, perhaps more to the point, the links between them are obscured. This is the legacy of the abstraction of American agriculture.
V. CONCLUSION

Over the course of the 20th century, American agriculture became a landscape of abstraction, one in which the human relationship to nature through food production was mediated as much by ideals and images as by machines. Industrialization fundamentally and extensively altered the human relationship to nature in its transformation of agricultural work. At the same time, the relative invisibility of the abstract industrial reality—the machine—in agricultural discourse obscured the social and economic realities of modern agriculture.

In the 1970s, dissenters like Wendell Berry attempted to make this machine and its implications culturally and politically visible by pointing out, specifically, the cultural and ecological impacts of modern industrial agriculture and focusing on the yeoman farmer as a cultural phenomenon, rather than simply an economic one. In doing so, Berry was directly contradicting the forces of neoliberalism and industrialism that, together, were coming to shape American agriculture—and therefore the human relationship to the natural world—through institutionalization in policy and emerging market-centric ideals like those advocated by Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz. I have argued that Berry’s ultimate argument is one in favor of a return to concrete understandings of farmers and farm life that adapts and re-interprets the yeoman farmer in order to address contemporary problems, rather than relying on the abstractions of expert systems and market forces.

But during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the abstract ideals embedded in the mythic visions of the yeoman farmer and the ‘family farm’ came to dominate agricultural discourse. By the 1980s the machine was obscured or naturalized—became politically invisible—as a result of the rise of the powerful, romanticized, and abstract yeoman farmer in public discourse and dissent. This abstraction was an interesting development in discourses of
dissent, as evidenced in the popular concert series Farm Aid, which reinforced a neoliberal-friendly vision of the yeoman farmer as individualistic, patriotic entrepreneur—similar to the one advanced by Reagan himself. This pattern, I have argued here, continued through the early part of the 21st century, in subsequent Farm Aid concerts and cultural touchstones like the documentary film *Food, Inc.*, which reinforced neoliberal logic through the patriotic, entrepreneurial yeoman farmer. Industry advertisements, too, obscured the machine behind the yeoman farmer, as Dodge recycled a 1970s-era speech praising the virtuous farmer in order to sell Ram trucks. At the same time, Berry and newer food writers, namely Michael Pollan, sought to make visible the machine and its influences. The centrality of the yeoman farmer and the family farm had two significant effects on social, economic, and political realities: first, it abstracted the farmer and the farm from relationship with the land, and second, it obscured the role of the machine as tool and agent in cultural and political change. These in turn—and, I think, often unintentionally on the part of champions of the yeoman farmer—helped to facilitate a strengthening of the global neoliberal economic and ideological program, and therefore the continued dominance and expansion of industrial agriculture.

The machine’s arrival in the garden signaled, among other things, a shift toward the abstraction of American agriculture. That same machine, as it spread across the country and overtook the garden, also provided crucial infrastructure for a large-scale transformation of American culture and politics, namely the expansion of neoliberalism. And its continued presence reinforces this state of affairs, as industrial farming practices have come to dominate food production in the country. In recent years, the effects of the machine’s presence in the garden have begun to be felt, and the machine itself has had moments of visibility, especially among certain subsets of the American citizenry. But in many ways, on a national scale, it
continues to be obscured by the yeoman farmer’s enormous presence. Americans’ relationship with the natural world is heavily mediated by machines, and governed primarily by market forces and the logic of capital. And so the presence of the machine in the garden is not only a central tension in American culture, as Leo Marx pointed out, but it is also a symbol for the process of modernity, and the cultural shifts that have accompanied technological, scientific, social and ideological developments in America.

The ecological outcomes of industrial agriculture are alarming, and the future looks to include more of the same. The Millenium Ecosystem Assessment cautioned that “the expansion of agriculture will continue to be one of the major drivers of biodiversity loss well into the twenty-first century” (Millenium Ecosystems Assessment, 2005, p. 13). Elsewhere in the report is this timely reminder: “the overriding feature of biodiversity is its complexity” (p. 115). It is not only the ecosystem that is complex, but also the relationship between culture and agriculture. It is this complexity, and the attendant need to take into account the specifics of each regional and local community and landscape, that the abstract, standardized systems that characterize modern industrial agriculture are ill-equipped to manage. Berry is right: agriculture is not only an economic practice, or an environmental practice—though it is certainly both—but also profoundly cultural and political, with political, cultural, environmental, and economic consequences. Within the scope of this project, I have regrettably been unable to adequately address the full range of these consequences—in fact, I have barely scratched the surface. One such consequence is the obscuring of the race-class and gender-related dimensions of food production made possible by the yeoman farmer’s prominence. Indeed, this project has been limited insofar as these dimensions are concerned, having focused primarily on dominant elements of agricultural discourse. Further study is needed in this regard. Another area in need of
further research has to do with the growth of farmers’ markets in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and the connection between this growth and the era of abstract systems in food production. Finally, what I have done here is, in many ways, limited to a diagnosis of a problem. And so there is a need for greater discussion of possible solutions, and, better still, coherent and plausible examples of alternatives. I have briefly touched on some such alternatives here, but much more work needs to be done in this area.

The consequences of modern abstract, industrial agriculture are real. They must also be appropriately imagined. The inability to adequately address the role of the machine, and the industrial-capitalist logic embedded in such infrastructural technologies, in American political and cultural discourse, helps to maintain this industrial reality. As mentioned in the introduction, the expansion of neoliberal economic policy is often supported by a “championing [of] abstract constructions of yeoman entrepreneurial capitalists and small businesses (as opposed to powerful, footloose multi-nationals),” obscuring the realities of economic organization (Heynen, McCarthy, Prudham & Robbins, 2007, p. 5). These abstraction constructions, I have argued here, also obscure the realities of industrial production, and the negative consequences that accompany it. When the machine is obscured in the cultural imagination—in favor of the patriotic, entrepreneurial yeoman farmer—the culture is ill equipped to accurately address the problems that have resulted from its presence in the garden. This is because it reinforces the commodification and wholesale consumption of the natural world.

Over the course of the 20th century, American agriculture became a landscape of abstraction, one in which the human relationship to nature was mediated as much by romantic imagery as by industrial machines. This development has failed to provide a healthy cultural imagination, one that can adequately address the ecological problems facing the world in the 21st
century, instead reinforcing an industrial, neoliberal practice that is primarily oriented toward consuming the natural world. We need a new imagination, one not characterized by abstraction. Pollan’s longing for transparency is a response to this disconnect, a desire for a greater connection to the production of our food. His ethic, like Berry’s, is based on concrete engagement, and recognizes the complexity of the relationship between nature and human culture. This might just be a solution.
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APPENDICES
Source: Humboldt State University
(http://users.humboldt.edu/ogayle/hist111/1970sand1980s.html)
APPENDIX B

Source: Joni Mitchell archives (http://jonimitchell.com/chronology/detail.cfm?id=1587)
APPENDIX C

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