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Frustrated farmers and the fee simple: property-stress, settler colonialism and race in the United States heartland

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ABSTRACT

The notion that farming is an unusually stressful occupation has become a cultural truism, with calls to investigate ‘root causes’ of stress on the farm. This paper argues the racialized, colonialist foundations of United States fee simple property is a ‘root cause’ of farm stress in the US corn belt. I build on work that sees farm property as not just a vehicle for economic gains, but imbricated in the performance and affective experience of whiteness and settler personhood. Drawing on interviews with Midwestern women farmers, I find many of their concerns fall into a category that I call ‘property-stress’. That is, while most are fiercely allegiant to the sanctity of the fee-simple farm and vigorously ‘defend’ their land rights, the very nature of the fee simple as abstract, commodifiable, and perpetual simultaneously engenders a competitive landscape that generates much stress. I argue that the racialized agrarianist logics undergirding Midwest agriculture produce particular racial and colonialist valences in land as well as a contradictory relationship with the federal sovereign who is ultimately the underwriter of white possession. These dynamics mean when the colonialist-capitalist vision of fee-simple property ‘fail’, it creates existential stress and forecloses opportunities to imagine a Midwest otherwise.

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Introduction

In the summers of 2020 and 2021, I engaged with 44 women farmers in Iowa, delving into their experiences and perspectives on farming and stress. While many spoke about gendered disparities in male-dominated Corn Belt agriculture or difficulties in balancing farm demands with caretaking and off-farm work (Nichols and Carter 2023; Nichols 2024), it was striking how so much of women’s worries revolved around a set of concerns that I call ‘property-stress’. Ranging from struggles over farmland transitions and estate splitting to grappling with regulations and farm programs perceived to infringe their land rights to lamentations about land’s sky-high prices, ‘property-stress’ showed up across every woman’s interview transcript.

However, the phenomenon of ‘property-stress’ extends beyond the confines of my study’s focus on women landowners. Extensive research underscores the significant

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barriers faced by new and underrepresented farmers in accessing farmland (Horst and Marion 2019). In Iowa, agricultural economists warn of a 'critical inflection point' in farmland markets, with land prices hitting record highs in 2023 as the amount of land owned debt-free climbed to 84%, up 2% from 2017 and 20% from 1983 (Tong and Zhang 2023). This 'tight land market' meant that a stiflingly small number of acres (74,000 or 0.25% of all cropped acres) went up for public sale in 2022, a trend predicted to continue even as the landowning population continues to age. All of this means that Iowa is increasingly marching towards a landscape of concentrated commercial family operators and a mosaic of small, increasingly absentee, landowners. This rentier landscape perpetuates consolidation and depopulation trends, and shows no signs of abating without substantial changes to tax laws, farm programs, or societal attitudes toward land ownership. While it is critical to note how these property relations are most destructive to those currently aspiring to own farmland, in this piece I contend that the contradictions baked into the United States settler colonial-capitalist vision of property also has had negative implication for the ostensible beneficiaries of the system: the majority of farmland owners themselves.

Taking an understanding of property as not a 'static, pre-given entity' but a 'continual, active, "doing"' that confers more than a bundle of rights (possession, exclusion, control, enjoyment) but also 'particular valences and political possibilities' (Blomley 2003, 122), this paper explores these women's 'property-stress'. I situate the analysis within recent US legal histories that account for how a Lockean labor theory of value was weaponized through settler colonial and racial capitalist logics, which continue to undergird contemporary ideas of 'possession' (Ablavsky 2020, Park 2022). I build on work that sees property held in fee-simple absolute as not just a vehicle for economic gains or a reward for productive 'improvement' but also as deeply imbricated in the performance and affective experience of white supremacy and settler personhood (Bhandar 2018; Moreton-Robinson 2015, Rifkin 2013). I use this literature to help unpack contradictions in women's 'property-stress'. I find while respondents expressed great concern around 'defending' their right to use property and retain it in perpetuity for their heirs, the very nature of fee-simple property threatens these goals. Most pointedly, the fee simple as a set of abstract rights to a physical piece of space that are (i) alienable, (ii) divisible, and (iii) perpetual simultaneously engenders a competitive, highly capitalized landscape that is a key producer of stress (c.f. Shoemaker 2021). Thus, though the socioeconomic and ecological consequences of capitalist, industrial family farm agriculture is well-recognized (IPES 2021), I argue farmers remain wedded to the structure due to the ways their connection to property and 'farm legacy' both secures their claims to racialized Lockean morality and merit and distances them from state-sponsored Native dispossession. I contend that unpacking and rendering visible the ways that racialized processes of settler capitalist-colonialism and its paradoxical allegiance to a Lockean labor theory of value continue to operate in Iowa farm country may allow for a reimagining of Midwest farm futures that presents alternatives to the current march towards a rentier landscape.

The following section offers a brief overview of my conceptual framework to understand the white, settler subject and their relations to land. This is followed by an abridged history of the emergence of private property regimes in the colonial and early republic US and a brief discussion of how these racialized property policies have played out in what we presently know as Iowa. This history forms a crucial explanatory context for the

empirical data I present of 44 interviews with woman farmers in the Corn Belt, where I highlight how investment in the racialized, settler logics of property are a core source of stress that also forecloses imagining alternative futures for Middle west landscapes. The conclusion suggests that deconstructing and making visible the settler colonial logics at work in property may help in envisioning less stressful futures from everyone, present landowners included.

The racialized colonialism of property

Recent scholarship from critical legal studies (Ablavsky 2020; Singer 2017, Park 2022, Priest 2022, Shoemaker 2021), settler colonial studies (Bhandar 2018; Moreton-Robinson 2015), and critical race theory (Harris 1993), among others, has worked to re-tell a more complete story of settler state property systems and economic development that accounts for the interconnected ideological, economic, and political processes involved in Indigenous and Black dispossession. While diverse, this work outlines how capitalist value was created through racial hierarchizations that enabled dispossession of Native land and Black labor, and continue to have impacts on how wealth are distributed among the nation's peoples.

Settler colonialism is a distinctive form of colonialism where the object is not the exploitation of resources for the metropole, but the elimination of Indigenous peoples and the seizure of territory (Wolfe 2006). While the threat of violence is an ever-lurking backdrop to colonization, settlers also employ discursive, socio-legal, and ideological techniques to justify the seizure of Indigenous land (Wolfe 2006, Morgenson 2011, Moreton-Robinson 2015). Scholars highlight how processes of racialization (defined as the ongoing exaggeration of 'regional, subcultural, and dialectical difference' as 'race' (Robinson 2000, 26)) are central to not just capitalist accumulation but also settler colonial projects. Thus, analyses of how property is racialized is a critical bridge between settler colonial and racial capitalist frames (Dorries, Hugill, and Tomiak 2022). Most pointedly, Bhandar (2018) contends the racialization of property and settler colonialist projects were 'twinning processes' intimately linked to natural rights theorists (most famously, John Locke) that set-up the formulation where labor mixed with nature conferred title to property. The racialization, as Bhandar details and I discuss concretely in the following section, occurs in the hierarchization of 'labor' that confers rightful possession, where non-white labor is systematically denigrated as wasteful and inefficient in relation to that of the white male (see also Carlisle 2014, Park 2022).

Bhandar (2018, 50) draws on Moreton-Robinson's notion of a 'white possessive' subject, where the 'ontology' of white possession implies that a subject can impose their will on the 'thing that is perceived to lack will; thus it is open to being possessed'. Moreton-Robinson argues the 'white possessive' as a subject emerged in a tautological, self-reinforcing relationship with the laws, norms, and institutions that facilitated contractual relations to land, labor, and other forms of property. The ontology of the white possessive uses a 'land-based' notion of subjectivity where claims on territorial sovereignty (i.e. on a personal property or national land mass) are co-constitutive with notions of a self-determined or 'sovereign subject'. Here, Rowe and Tuck (2017) insightfully contend that within land-based notions of settler subjectivity, there is a need to consider the role of affect. They look to Da Silva's (2007) innovative 'transparency thesis', which

contrasts a Euro-ancestried subject that views itself as self-determined and inaffectable, to a racialized other that is 'affected' by natural and social forces.

Bosworth (2021, 678) uses this notion of 'transparency' to analyze white farmer/rancher resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline, arguing that while the economic aspect of property was a 'crucial' element of landowner resistance, it is 'property's constituent production of white subjects and their desires for transparency through possessive ownership' that most fueled pipeline opposition. There was white outrage at the potential the government could 'treat them like Indians' through negotiating a price to their land, which they felt materialized their family 'legacy' and was thus 'priceless'. I build on Bosworth's analysis to show how even absent 'spectacular' threats such as eminent domain takings, the more pedestrian facets of contemporary farm life are also constitutive of 'property-stress'.

Both Bosworth's study and this work raise the question of why white landowners feel their multi-generational tie to land is superior to that of 'the Indians' centuries of stewardship and 'improvement' (see also Rotz 2017; Kepkiewicz and Dale 2019). Here I look to Rifkin's (2013) notion of settler common sense, which contends the ultimate desire of the settler subject is to re-indigenize themselves through performing an intimate connection to land above or beyond the machinations of 'politics' or 'law', where subjectivities become particularly centered on asserting ones 'politically unmediated relation to place shaped by one's own private labor'. He argues that variations of this hegemonic common sense informed by Lockean thought is integral to stabilizing a sense of settler personhood (see also Palmer 2020).

Thus, the settler project maintains its legitimacy, even 'naturalness', through trafficking in institutions, traditions, and 'myths' that reinforce land-labor connections as not just political economic but moral achievements to be celebrated. Such settler common sense is not a totalizing logic but rather 'saturates' farm culture, shaping everything from the celebration of farm legacy via century farm award agencies that reward families for operating land for 100 + years (see Figure 1) to the 'yeoman beginning farmer myth' (Calo 2020)



Figure 1. Century farm yard signage for families that operate a farm for over 100 years, awarded annually at the Iowa State Fair since the national bicentennial in 1976 (Source: The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship Website).

to car commercials that celebrate the ‘salt of the earth’ pick-up driving farmer (Carter and Lopez 2019). The notion that farming is more than a job, but ‘way of life’ provides an ideological force that farmers embody in their struggles to ‘stay on the land’. That contemporary farmers did not invent such logics but rather (perhaps) unwittingly reproduce them across shifting sociopolitical landscapes is a testament to the durability of these affective forms of world-making.

Together, this conceptual work offers analytics to unpack the constitution of the white possessive subject (and nation) as intimately tied to the production of property as land that one has full power to control. That racial hierarchies are constituted in and through possession of land and particular forms of land-use based on efficiency and productivity is core to understanding the formation of settler subjects. This subject is both legally constructed and an affective achievement that is invested in notions of its own ‘transparency’ or ability to be unaffected by social and natural forces. The violence, theft, and deceit necessary to secure land as a white possession makes the cultural production of a settler common sense central to the normalization of settler desire (Rifkin 2013). As I describe below, the focus on labor as the hinge by which land becomes property becomes the ideological force that drives not just frontier violence, but also, I will contend, contemporary ‘property-stress’. In this next section, I give a brief history of US property system formation as a way to understand subject-land relations in the Midwest.

Agrarianism and the rise of the fee simple freehold

Thomas Jefferson famously espoused a rhetoric of agrarianism, arguing landscapes of freeholders would create a moral backbone for the nation, where dispersed land ownership and self-sufficient, hard-working homesteads would prevent ‘corruption’ or ‘servility’ (Krall 2002, Devine 2013). Blending Lockean ‘natural rights’ that saw personal labor as the crux on which land became property, and a belief in the efficiency and meritocratic values of economic liberalism, agrarianism was the ideological engine of frontier settlement (Devine 2013; Krall 2002). While Jefferson’s agrarianist vision of an economically egalitarian nation of (white, patriarchal) farm families was grandiose, it was also practical in discursively mobilizing a form of ‘least cost conquest’ via settlement (Ablavsky 2020).

Jefferson’s vision was emboldened by earlier colonial property innovations (e.g, centralized registry, easy foreclosure, standardized title) developed to (1) more ‘legitimately’ dispossess Natives of their land, and (2) transform the land into a standardized good that could be easily bought and sold via emerging land markets (Park 2022; Priest 2006, 2022). These innovations, discussed below, were justified through colonialist constructions of Native land use as ‘savage’ and ‘wasteful’ within a Lockean hierarchy of labor that saw ‘tilling, planting, and cultivating’ as the pinnacle of potential land uses (Krall 2002). While many colonialists openly admired Native agricultural practices and much evidence suggests these ideological constructions of Native land use were plainly wrong, they were weaponized via Lockean theory to fuel a set of legal-political innovations in property creation (Park 2022; also Palmer 2020).

The histories detailing the development of US property law doctrines emphasize this was not a deliberate process but a motley mélange of ‘ersatz’ choices and ‘fixes’ that may have solved the immediate problems of settlers in a foreign land, but which have

aged poorly or even ‘failed’ (Fennell 2016; Krall 2002; Shoemaker 2021). For example, foreclosure – the practice of seizing land to remedy unpaid debt – was a colonial invention, virtually absent in English common law (Priest 2006). Foreclosure was first deployed as a means to dispossess indebted Native peoples (Park 2016), and later to gain access to credit through using land as collateral by banning ‘entails’ or ‘primogenitures’, property riders common in Britain that mandated property stay in family lineages (Priest 2006). These choices solved the problem of a ‘land-rich, cash-poor’ republic, yet did so in a way that forged new legal innovations to dispossess landholders and produced previously unheard forms of economic and social vulnerability (Priest 2022).

Moreover, fee-simples’ alienability created a commodity that was valuable in ways that land held by Indigenous people was not, and virtually ensured continued conquest of Indigenous lands (Singer 2017). A 1763 British decree adopted in the US’s 1785 Land Ordinance Act declared governmental preemption rights on Native lands, making the government the only legal entity entitled to purchase Native territory via treaty. This rendered Native land literally value-less (untradeable) until bought by the government and auctioned off to white men, marking an early example of white affirmative action (Katznelson 2006).

These new land systems were put to work in the early republic’s territories. The newly minted Federal government had to decide how to govern the huge expanse of trans-Alleghanian ‘public domain’ ceded by the British, but teeming with Native nations, settler-squatters, fur traders, and other Europeans, all with various claims on land title (Ablavsky 2020). Through the 1785 Land Ordinance and the 1787 Northwest Territory Ordinance the Federal government began a process of ‘conquest via settlement’ where Federal authorities could serve as a neutral arbitrator of the many conflicting land claims in the territories, avoid all-out military action, and ‘preserve the national character’ (Ablavsky 2020, also Banner 2005). Though federal policy forbade settler ‘squattling’ on Native territory, officials did little to stop illicit settler encroachment instead seeking to ‘manage’ it (Ablavsky 2020, Banner 2005; Park 2022, 1122–1125). As Native people resisted widespread settler squatting and settlers retaliated, Federal agents cloaked in the garbs of ‘peacemakers’ adjudicated conflicts and negotiated treaties to end frontier ‘riff-raff’. Federal authorities were clear they did not have capacity to wage preemptive wars, however, they could intervene for ‘just’ (i.e. ‘defensive’) wars and to demand Native land cessations to remedy unpaid debt. As I will describe below – both of these dynamics (‘just wars’ and ‘just creditor’ remedies) were central in the settlement of Iowa territory.

This strategy of conquest via settlement bred distrust among all parties. As the government mobilized settlers to squat on Native territory, then stumbled in – late – to adjudicate land or ‘Indian depredation’ claims, coercively negotiate treaties, and auction land with purchase requirements that only speculators could meet, it built a relationship with both white settlers and Native peoples based on what Ablavsky (2020) calls ‘mutual exploitation’. Settlers came to believe they were advancing the ideals of the republic, not *because* of government action but in spite of it (e.g. see Hill 2022), fueling a perception that settler labor – broadly conceived – was a type of pre-political and autonomous action that made property rightfully theirs.

These histories are critical context to understand the contemporary landscape of farmland ownership in America – extremely white¹ – but also the ideological and cultural

¹Nationally, 96% of farmland is white-owned, and in Iowa it is over 99% (NASS 2017).

currents to which property is inextricably connected. These dynamics not only animated European settlement of Iowa, but shape socio-ecological landscapes to the present day.

Iowa: a settler history in brief

After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, settlement tactics described above extended to present-day Iowa, which was then controlled by Sac, Meskwaki, Ioway, Sioux, and Oneota tribes. By the 1820s, settlers began encroaching on Native lands, particularly in Dubuque, where Meskwaki communities operated lead mines. This influx led to an increase in sporadic Native resistance, though attempts at pan-Indian resistance faltered due to the growing military power of the United States and tales of defeat from the Ohio Valley² (Jung 2022).

The Black Hawk War in 1832 marked the first official cessation of Native lands in Iowa, and exemplified how US and settler tactics worked in tandem to aggrandize Native groups into conflict. It stemmed from Sac/Meskwaki leader Black Hawk's defiance of a disputed 1804 treaty, attempting to reclaim their Illinois territory (Trask 2007). The defiance of Black Hawk escalated into a massacre, with an estimated 500 Native casualties. Black Hawk's capture and subsequent forced cession of eastern Iowa further symbolized the violent opening of the region to settlement.

This bloodshed sent a powerful message to Native communities; thus the eight subsequent treaty cessations were prompted by more mundane forces of dispossession. As the white population surged in the 1830s, pressures on tribes intensified due to competition for resources, exposure to diseases, and persistent food shortages (Jung 2022). The popular historical magazine, *the Palimpsest*, published by the Iowa State Historical Society features an essay depicting the 'dispossession of the tribes' in a 1928 issue dedicated to the 'Indians of Iowa' (Figure 2).

Aumann's (1957) essay calls attention to the charade that treaty processes had become. White settlement was the 'inevitable' outcome and treaties were the window dressing that made dispossession palatable to a new republic premised on individual rights to liberty, freedom, and property. 'Just creditors' were an important player in these scenarios (Banner 2005). As American fur trading outfits moved into eastern Iowa they would lend money to Sac/Meskwaki parties to finance hunting expeditions, which were repaid with pelts in spring. As game thinned due to excessive demand, the Sac/Meskwaki were unable to repay and became increasingly indebted. Traders used Native communities' weakened positions to flame simmering inter-Tribal animosities, making federal treaty negotiators 'well positioned' to demand further land cessions in return for annuity payments that would allow Tribes to repay debt to American fur traders (i.e. the 'just creditors' (Rigal 2009, Aumann 1957)).

It is striking how these transfers of sovereignty often looked uncannily like modern-day foreclosure proceedings. This gave the transactions – in the eyes of white settlers – a sense of justness and righteousness. The use of the 'color of law' and surrounding context of indebtedness was often depicted as 'evidence' of white racial superiority,

²One Dakota leader aptly summarized his refusal to participate in organized violent resistance saying 'What will you gain by war with the white people? ... They are too numerous for you to fight them ... and if they don't whip us, they will starve us' (Jung 2022, 27–30).

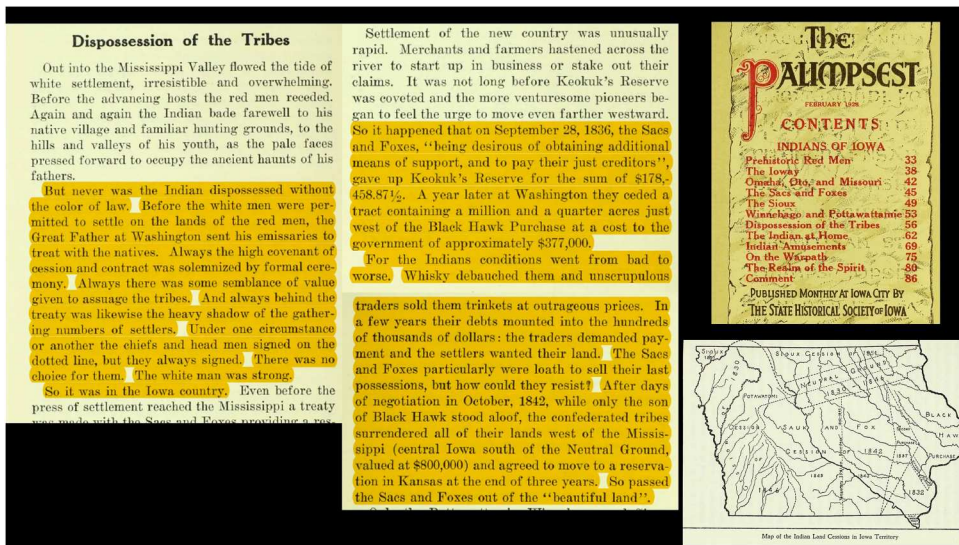


Figure 2. Excerpt from 'Dispossession of the Tribes' published in The Palimpsest February 1928 Issue on 'Indians of Iowa' (Available: <https://pubs.lib.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/issue/9582/info/>).

where accounts depicted Native people's as unable to successfully manage their finances or bodily compulsions, thus deserving their subsequent dispossession.

However, white desire for land had a 'savage' quality of its own. When the second Black Hawk purchase opened to settlers in 1842, thousands scrambled 'pell mell' to stake land claims upon the authorities' midnight gunshots (Smith 1992). Reports suggest over 10,000 land claims were made in the first two weeks, with some counties registering more than 1000 claims the first night. While in eastern Iowa 'claims clubs' managed to hold land for settler direct purchase, in central and western Iowa land speculators controlled large tracts, which they sold to settlers via unregulated high-interest loans (Murray 1946, 7). The demand for land was so frenzied, that by the 1862 Homestead Act, only 1/12th of the state remained untitled. Altogether, over a two-decade period, the US government bought the land now known as Iowa at an average of 8 cents/acre, which they turned around and sold for \$1.25/acre with prices reaching \$5–10/acre if buying speculator 'improved' parcels (Murray 1946). While this meant many indebted settlers immediately became petty commodity producers, compelled to earn surplus to stay on their land, most historians emphasize these settlers were not 'dupes' but profit-oriented individuals who felt land values were the key to real long-term economic mobility (Bremer 2017).

As Iowa settled, almost immediately a boom-and-bust cycle for commodities started as frontier production became central to support industrialization in land-scarce Europe (Friedmann 1978). Here, family farms had a competitive edge on capitalist operations in Europe and South America because they could self-exploit family labor, under-consume in lean years and still reproduce the farm (Friedmann 1978; Post 2011). Although operating at a loss for multiple years pushed the household and soil to exhaustion or crisis, an understated element of frontier agrarianism is the discursive link between proper whiteness and land possession.

Thus, the family farm not only served a political project of dispossessing and settling Native land to bring it into economic circulation under fee-simple, but ensured food production when capitalist firms would otherwise fail. The racialization of property as a yardstick by which to measure whiteness and racial superiority thus was a critical element that sustained family farm's proliferation. Furthermore, the 'mutual exploitation' between settlers and the state continued unabated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as settlers demanded federal resources while the state continued to depend on settlers to maintain political legitimacy of the US settler agenda.

Twentieth and twenty-first century Iowa agriculture

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, two significant shifts have shaped agriculture: increased government income support and the transition from labor-intensive to capital-intensive practices. Initially resistant to direct income support, the US government changed course in the 1920s due to pressure from an emergent agri-business lobby and fluctuating wartime commodity prices (Porter 2000). By the 1930s, the Great Depression spurred widespread calls for government aid, leading to New Deal programs like land set-aside initiatives (Kirkendall 1987). Concurrently, policymakers moved away from the agrarian belief that there needed to be a large populace engaged in agriculture and started advocating for technological modernization to boost efficiency and 'free-up' labor (Daniel 2013). Subsidies, primarily benefiting larger farms, accelerated the shift toward technology-intensive agriculture, leaving smaller farms dependent on off-farm income (MacDonald 2020). Today, agriculture is dominated by large, high-revenue operations and smaller farms maintained for sentimentality, lifestyle reasons, tax benefits or as an investment (Peters 2023). Despite this transformation, farm politics still revolve around preserving the family farm ideal, reflecting the enduring influence of agrarianist sentiments (Hall 2024; Kirkendall 1987; Mooney and Hunt 1996).

This shift in agricultural owner and operatorship has been propped up by tax-codes that treat agricultural land as a tax shelter (Prager, Tulman, and Durst 2018) and broader tax rules that protect the transfer of intergenerational wealth and capital gains on assets (Brown 2021b; Shoemaker 2021). Tax codes developed by avowedly racist democrats in the 1930s sought to protect 'white wealth' through a series of rules that exempted asset-rich individuals from capital gains taxes or tax on estate transfers (Ott 2022). In sum, these tax policies alongside the core features of fee-simple property (absolute, abstract, perpetual) worked to cement original distributions of assets that were created through the dispossession of Native land (Shoemaker 2021).

As of 2023 84% of farmland in Iowa is owned debt-free (Tong and Zhang 2023) with 2/3rd of all land owned by individuals aged 65+ (37% of land is owned by people 75+). Most landowners do not farm on their land, with 58% of total acres being farmed on lease. Over half of the land owned by nonfarmers is owned by someone without farming experience (either an heir or investor). Given the towering land prices (hitting nearly 12,000/acre statewide in 2023) the only entities able to purchase land are equity-rich commercial operations or the independently wealthy (Chandio 2023). This 'snowballing' of land means that small and mid-sized farmers who decide to sell their estate all but commit themselves to sell to a bigger farmer in the neighborhood or to an outside investor who will rent the farmland back to a (likely large) farmer with existing relationships to farm management

companies. The large amount of rented farmland and insecure tenure that accompanies it has a negative impact on rural population but also on conservation, as it is less likely farmers will invest in conservation practices on rented grounds that already have more challenging cash flow (Carolan 2005; Ranjan et al. 2019). While the structural impacts of the fee-simple are clear, they are complicated by the racial and colonialist hegemonies that surround land ownership.

This produces a dilemma for the farmer, who not only has their (racialized) identity interwoven in the land but is also confronted with the limitations of colonial-capitalist regimes of private property. Yet the ability to see outside of this lens is precluded by strongly sedimented racialized Lockean logics that see property ownership as fit for moral and rational individuals who are able to prudently manage their finances to ensure land retention and avoid the temptation of quick sales. Exploring these contradictions and the ways farmers negotiate them and make sense of them is crucial to envisioning how to address farmer stress around farmland transitions as well as thinking through how to build coalitions to repair socio-ecologically damaged landscapes.

The data I present below were collected as part of a mixed methods project looking at stress among women farmers in Iowa and areas immediately bordering Iowa (Nichols and Carter 2023). Of the 44 respondents the median farm size was 500 acres, with operational holdings ranging from 40 to 6000 acres (see Table 1). Sixty percent of women were full owners and 40% were partial owners who also farmed on leased land. Most women co-owned land with either a parent, partner, sibling or child, though 20% were single/widowed and made decisions independently though often utilized hired labor or sharecroppers (see Table 2). The majority of farmers grew corn-soybean rotations, with 6 (14%) also owning one or more concentrated hog feeding houses and 12 (28%) having cow-calf, cattle, or sheep that they grazed.

While the interviews were designed to engender open-ended experiential accounts of women's stress, I quickly became interested in two core themes: the complex, almost

Table 1. Respondent farmland and operational holdings ($n = 43$).

	Respondents' farmland holdings (only owned land)	Respondents' operational holdings (owned + leased in land)
<100 acres	12%	7%
100–199 acres	12%	9%
200–499 acres	37%	33%
500–999 acres	21%	23%
1000–1999 acres	5%	12%
2000 + acres	14%	16%

Table 2. Respondent farm work arrangements.

Alone (w/ hired help or sharecropper)	21%
Spouse	21%
Spouse + other family members (siblings, children, or parents)	26%
Parents or other family (i.e. siblings, aunt/uncle)	21%
Children	12%
Tenant/sharecropper	14%
Hired help	19%

contradictory relationship women seemed to have with the government, where they were sharply critical and libertarian in their anti-government sentiment but received much benefit from the government via subsidies and tax benefits discussed above. The second theme intertwined with the first and concerned the ways property – the defense of property, property prices, costs of property maintenance, anger over what other people are doing with their property, etc. showed up in interviews. I began to call this collection of problems ‘property-stress’, viewing it as a distinct component of broader notions of ‘farm stress’ that encompass a wider set of concerns including weather pressure, excessive workload, and commodity markets, among others (see Kroll 2022, Nichols and Davis 2024) I nonetheless saw ‘property-stress’ as a primary component, even driver, of ‘farm stress’ as it was central to the primary fear of ‘losing the farm’. I describe its basic manifestations below.

Property-stress in Iowa

Many of the women I interviewed crafted narratives that demonstrated their deservingness of land ownership due to hard work and frugality. These attitudes of deservingness are tied up in settler colonial logics – ‘settler common sense’ where settlers seek to indigenize themselves through emphasizing ‘extrapolitical’ connection to land formed through autonomous labor and moral qualities (c.f. Rifkin 2013) These are inseparable from racist and colonialist narratives that justified seizure of Indigenous lands due to poor management and immoral character traits (e.g. drinking, gambling) that led them into debt.

However, farmer commitment to the maintenance of private property as alienable, abstract, and perpetual (the core aspects of the fee simple) is also a root cause of stress. I highlight three ways that private property causes stress. First, farmers are very concerned with preserving their unfettered ability to use their land as they wish, and there is a strong antagonism to any government ‘interference’ from taxation or regulation. Second, the almost sanctimonious belief in people’s ‘right to earn a living from land’ creates tension when neighbors engage in environmentally harmful practices, which people dislike but feel uncomfortable confronting. Third, and most potently, as land and agriculture become more capitalized, and the cost-price squeeze intensifies, farmers with smaller acreage see less utility in working the land and a greater future in renting. As Iowa marches towards a rentier landscape that the fee-simple intended to avoid, many feel anxious about a future of big farmers as the only ones that can make high-valued rental land ‘pencil’, and yet the prospect of selling land or reimagining property rights is occluded, since retaining land remains intimately bound up with ideas around race, morality, and deservingness.

Settler common sense and morality of property

Across interviews I identified a similar set of narratives women told emphasizing how hard work, frugality, and often, faith in God, were central to their ability to command land resources. To take one example, Caroline, discussed how she did not worry about finances or debt on her farm, and though she still made payments on a mortgage from

when she 'bought out' her siblings she would have it paid off by the time she was ready to retire. She reflected:

I am very fortunate that I am at the stage of life that I am. We went through good times. I used those good times to pay off a farm, to put it towards my 401k. I didn't go out and buy a new truck. I didn't go out and spend it stupidly. You know, I've been doing this 35 years. I've sold corn under \$2 and I have dog paddled a lot, to keep my head above water.

And it also comes with generations of farming: My grandfather kept his farm by the hair of his chinny chin chin, through the depression. And he worked through it. So you hear stories like that, you know what struggles they have gone through, where you have to do without. We didn't ask for anything more than \$20 at Christmas because we just couldn't afford it. You know, that's just how it was; everything wasn't given to us. You didn't go to the government for everything, you work through it.

Other women told similar tales of sacrifices made, long hours worked, and smart financial decisions taken to maintain a viable farm operation. While these narratives were ostensibly about the woman who was speaking, they were laced with implicit judgements about those who do not continue to have a farm. Another farmer, Mary, was blunter in her assessment of what it took to be a farm owner. In a wide-ranging response to a question about how farmers cope with stress, she explained the broader picture of farm country:

See, farmers have a tendency to self-medicate. There is a lot of alcohol in farming. Well, things have gotten better in that respect, because the farming crisis weeded out all those people who are kind of on the fence of whether they were going to make it or not financially. So those people who smoked a lot of pot, drank a lot of beer, argued with their spouse, a lot of those people aren't farming anymore. It's Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest.

And so who is left farming? The people who are smart, the people, you know, who only drink socially. And people who have married somebody who's smart and talented and educated and has a good career.

Mary's statement bears striking resemblance to racist tropes around Indigenous dispossession presented in *the Palimpsest*, as she individualizes similar qualities (undisciplined, aggressive, subject to bodily craving/desire) to farmers who lost their land. Her suggestion that it is *natural*, even evolutionary, for certain people to lose land and others to occupy it not only invokes elements of manifest destiny but also a particular racialization of those who can and cannot keep property as not 'properly' white.³

Also instructive is how both Mary and Caroline emphasize farmer connections to landed property are 'extra-political', where their possession of land is due to their own hard work and morality rather than the brute force of political and juridical maneuverings. Caroline even noted how she 'worked through hardship' and did not 'go to the government for everything' in an implicit critique of those who benefit from government services or payments. Indeed, notably, when women did talk about challenges in retaining their farms – *they largely argued that it was the government who caused them* either through excessive regulation or taxation.

³I continue to follow Robinson (2000, 26) definition of racialization as *the ongoing exaggeration of 'regional, subcultural, and dialectical difference'*. Thus following Bhandar (2018) and Harris (1993) 'losing the farm' is akin to losing racialized status as a self-possessing white person.

This focus on government intervention in markets and taxation was curious since nearly all commodity farmers received some sort of subsidy from the government. Iowa as a whole is one of the biggest beneficiaries of federal farm bill largesse – pulling in 1.67 billion in 2021 alone (EWG 2023). These payments rarely came up in interviews, and when they did respondents mostly commented that while the payments were helpful, the money was insignificant to their bottom line or that they mostly helped the ‘big farmers’. A few women mentioned they would rather have ‘free markets’ than government checks, particularly in relation to the market facilitation payments implemented by President Trump to compensate for Chinese tariffs on soybean (see Hochschild 2016). Indeed, despite the benefits that farmers received from the government, one of the most common responses to interview questions about how the USDA or other government agency could better support women farmers was that people would prefer if the government would just ‘leave us alone’.

These sentiments are not new. Dudley’s (1996) ethnography of a Minnesota farming town in the tail end of the 1980s farm crisis similarly found that farmers largely believe that those who lost farms had only themselves to blame. Most rural farmers did not fault big ag or predatory lenders for the 1980s farm crisis, but rather blamed the reckless spending of a 1970s ‘welfare state’ along with undisciplined farmers who overleveraged themselves in a time of high land prices. More recently, Arlie Hochschild came to similar conclusions in an ethnographic study of rural Louisiana, as did Kojala (2019) in his study of northern Minnesota mining country.

While these forms of meaning-making among rural and farming communities are long documented, I argue that these agrarianist-infused narratives form a farmer common sense where occupation of Indigenous land is *natural* for those who display hard work, morality, and frugality. This Lockean focus on personal labor as the ‘glue’ that connects bodies to land and turns the earth’s surface into private property also helps explain farmers’ largely antagonistic attitudes toward government policies, which they often saw as existential threats to their ability to be ‘self-possessing individual’ (Moreton-Robinson 2015)

Bad apples, and the right to earn a living on your property

The notion that the government should have limited involvement in farming was strongly tied to the notion that ‘everyone has a right to earn a living on their land’.⁴ While respondents had diverse views on environmental regulations (some believed there should be more and others less), the majority felt that farmers in their area were ‘pretty good’ environmentally. There was a sentiment that generally farmers care about the land because ‘if you don’t take care of the land, it won’t take care of you’. Yet, many also concurred there are always, ‘a few [farmers] that kind of make it look bad for everybody else, because they are not as compliant’ (Lisa). These ‘bad apple’ farmers engaged in environmentally reckless practices (e.g. overapplying nitrogen or letting their manure pit leak) created stress for farmers, who then had to weigh the risks of confronting neighbors over their transgressions.

⁴The struggle between environmental and economic interests in agriculture has defined US Federal policy from the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act onwards, with economic interests long dominating (Ruhl 2002, Secchi 2024).

Layla, a large farmer in a part of the state that has been the site of high-profile lawsuits over nitrate pollution explained how stressful it was to watch neighbors farm in environmentally harmful ways. She said, 'My husband is big on you know, doing the right thing ... [environmentally] ... and we get very frustrated at neighbor farmers, who are not doing what they're supposed to be doing'. Yet Layla, like many, said that it was a tricky situation since it is difficult to disagree with neighbors who are making a livelihood on their own land. Layla continued to say that her husband has to 'pick his battles' in choosing what neighbors to talk to if he sees harmful practices. She says rhetorically – 'what will you do? call them and cause an issue and then that relationship is gone. And is it really worth it? Sometimes you just have to bite your tongue'. While she stressed over how to diplomatically regulate non-compliant farmers in her community, she also felt angry about the legal action taken against her county saying that legislation and regulation were also not the right answer.

Yet others said they wished the state Department of Natural Resources had more 'teeth', but still emphasized that there was little to do at the community level due to strong sentiments that people could do what they wanted on their land. This was especially prominent in areas where many concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) (which house greater than 1000 head of cattle or 2500 hogs) had sprung up over the last decade. Arial – a farmer who strongly opposed the rise of CAFOs explained there was little substantive resistance in her county:

people also don't want to push back [against CAFO proposals] because those people are still their neighbors. Even the people that own the larger operations, they all grew up in the area. And so [others] are really frustrated by it, but they don't push back, because they still have a belief that, well, it's their land, and everybody has a right to do with their land and to earn a living off of their land.

Arial continues that she can empathize because many people build CAFOs to ensure annual income because 'farming ebbs and flows so it can be really difficult' but says ultimately it is very frustrating because 'the air stinks and it effects other people's quality of life'. She continues that the same sympathetic sentiment exists towards soil-eroding practices of taking out fences to plant right up to the ditch, because 'maybe they did it for their survival even though in the long run it really hurts their land'. Arial interestingly highlights the structural challenges farmers face that incentivize them to take environmental risks to 'bring the next generation in' or pay down debt, and her comments are telling in that they implicate the tight-knit neighbor relations, where it becomes difficult to critique or 'push back' others without risking your own standing in the area (see also Hall 2024).

Similar to Arial, many farmers' environmental concerns were complicated by the political economy of farm consolidation, itself intimately tied to the structure of the fee simple. For example, while Heidi explained 'any farmer I know wants to do the best for their land [because] if they don't have good land, their crops are not going to produce', she quickly followed with the caveat 'well maybe big farmers with more than 10,000 acres might not care about people's land'. Large farmers often leased in some land, sometimes having upwards of 5 or 10 landlords – many of whom they may have never met because they were urban-dwelling heirs or private investors. Heidi implies for these farmers there is less investment in land conservation since they are merely leasing from landlords, many of whom they may have never met or have no direct

contact (see Ranjan et al. 2022 for recent evidence review on tenancy-conservation behavior research that suggests the relationship between tenancy and conservation is more complex).

Another woman, Lisel, reiterated this sentiment from a different perspective. She says she came from a line of German farmers who said, 'you are never farming for yourself, you are farming for your children and grandchildren' (i.e. the future farmers of the land). She then lamented how times were changing and children did not want to farm like they used to, so the 'built-in imperative' to preserve land for future generations had waned in the last few decades. While Lisel was deeply committed to conservation practices, this was an instructive insight speaking to the way responsibility and stewardship has been constructed among settler farmers. With the proper social reproduction of the family farm, conservation becomes an ingrained imperative, but with its demise some contend farmers are more reckless with land management.

That farmers felt a foremost responsibility to their immediate family and land than the broader socio-ecological landscape is important, but the divide between interests in 'family' and 'society' was also not clear-cut. Women seemed to feel deep tension in exploiting the rights inherent in fee simple property for *themselves*, while worrying its degrading impacts on the landscape in which they were embedded.

This tension was most palpable when women discussed the broader shifts in Corn Belt political economy, where nobody could make a living from a row crop farm less than 1000 acres, yet sky-high land prices and intense competition created stress as many women considered Iowa's farming futures.

Fee simple 'forever' rights and the politics of who wants to be a farmer

While commitment to property shaped farmers' stress around government interference and 'bad-apple' neighbors, by far the most stressful aspect of the fee-simple was how it commodified land, making its value untethered from its actual use value, while simultaneously being a 'forever' right that exists in perpetuity but it also divisible and alienable.

In combination, fee-simple's core features created unique tensions. While land prices in Iowa have been on a steady upward march, the notion of racialized self-possession and settler common sense that equated land with security, independence, and freedom rightfully owed to those who labored, produced a *discursive value* of continued land occupation that seemed to supersede financial value. Thus, while land values tick up, the economic lure of selling for a quick buck is counterweighted with the 'sentimental' value of land and the prudence of keeping land for rental income.

Yet, while farmers were all keen to hold land in their family (thereby keeping the 'supply' of land scarce), almost all of them (except for three larger ones) also expressed stress over the price of land. Women lamented that it was impossible for someone to become a farmer unless they inherited land, and even then, many suggested the odds of success were slim and would require working off-farm to supplement the income or secure health insurance. While several younger people (i.e. < 50 years) aspired to buy land they were unable to do so without taking on excessive debt. One woman who farms thousands of rented acres with her husband explained:

I feel like until we can pay cash for it, or guarantee that we can make money on it, we can't afford to [buy land] right now. I mean, we've had the opportunity to buy it, but it's really hard to try to pencil out making it work paying \$10,000 an acre. I can't financially make that work. I don't have a pot of gold sitting for me to pull out of for the one year that it doesn't work.

She continued later that she was hoping once her household was more 'financially set' they could buy, but it would be some time, explaining 'that is why only old people own land or else you inherit it'.

While most bemoaned the high price of land, the two larger farmers I interviewed felt it was a testament to their agricultural and business skills. One woman who owned and farmed more than 3k acres with her husband and sons responded to my question on whether she felt stress around accessing enough land by saying 'I don't understand the question. This is not about stress, it is about economics. Either you have the money and buy the land, or you don't' and later stating her favorite part of farming was 'the pride in being a good businessperson', clarifying:

I can't think of a single person whose sole job is to be a farmer that is not a very savvy person. Once in a while, I come across someone who is an excellent and lovely person, and probably wouldn't be capable of making farming their full-time job. Farmers aren't just making money by accident, they know what they're doing.

Yet, big farmers' pride in their ability to expand their operations created a significant amount of tension for the other farmers I spoke with. For example, Mary diplomatically explained when she sees big farmers she thinks,

... how did he get so big? Did he become a big farmer being a good businessman? or did he take advantage of people along the way to get to be such a big farmer? I'm trying to be very tactful and say, you know, who did he really screw along the way to get that big.

Among all respondents (except the two bigger ones), there was strong consensus that land competition had become increasingly intense – both from outside investors as well as big farming families.⁵ While women noted an increased presence of private investors from places like Omaha in land bidding wars, *everyone* spoke with frustration about the 3 or 4 'big farmers' in their counties that aggressively bought ground. One woman complained that if land adjacent to any big farms went for auction, 'you would have a very hard time getting it', while another woman fumed about how big farmers in her county bid up the price on a small lot adjacent to her home remarking, 'the big farmers in this county are like snakes in the grass and they think they can farm the whole county'.

More pressingly, almost every woman argued that current market prices meant land 'would never pencil' and some expressed frustration that these families had 'old money' or 'other money' that enabled them to pay such high prices. Emergent investor pressure exacerbated consolidation as these investors would then contract through a farm management company who would often tap a big farmer. A few women noted that overcapitalized land had created a culture of greed among farming communities. Emily, for example, expressed disgust with the practice of 'funeral chasers' who would cozy up to ageing landowners hoping to have an inside sale before they passed.

⁵In 2022, 68% of Iowa land sales were to an existing farmer, and 27% were to investors (14% local and 13% non-local), with only 4% of sales with beginning farmers (Chandio 2023).

Thus, while women justified land ownership with notions of agrarian morality, the commodification of land – its value above annual extraction of surplus – also posed a major problem to such morality. One woman exemplifies this point in her comments about how she ‘hates it’ when articles come out that talk about high farmland prices. She said:

I feel, you know, connected to the land and the farming operation. It’s how we raised our family, and I want to pass that on to my kids. And farming today is so difficult, so expensive ...

You know, ‘we’re asset rich, but cash poor’. Because my bottom line on a spreadsheet looks like I’m more than a millionaire but you know, farming takes money. I mean, it’s good for collateral at the bank, and it gives you warm, fuzzy feeling, but if you want to pass [land] on from one generation to the next, you can’t be concerned about the price of land because you’re not going to sell it.

This sentiment was widespread. Most women emphasized they wanted to provide their children an opportunity to farm recognizing if they sold the land, they would foreclose this future. Yet while women reported ‘holding’ land for their children, many still felt stressed about the outcomes. For example, Allison, who owns 900 acres and has ‘excellent equity’ argued she could ‘play the game’ like big farmers and grow her operation but that she felt ambivalent about whether her kids would have a good life farming.

I worry about what will happen with my kids ... Like, should they? Should they try to farm? Because I don’t feel like that’s that great of a life anymore. ... It’s a hard life. And so I don’t know, that part. That part I get a little nervous about, like, you know, if I would allow a child in or not, or just say let’s just live off the land like we are now instead of actually being, you know, buying the new combine and all that.

Allison raises an important issue: she does not want her children to sell the land, but is conflicted about whether they should farm, instead suggesting they rent it on a cash basis. Cathy summarized many women’s worries of the future, stating, ‘it is somewhat stressful not knowing what the future holds for the farm [i.e. if you have non-farming heirs who might sell]. But it’s also stressful if you had a kid who wanted to come back to farm right now’. Cathy continued that the future looked very uncertain, estimating that 50% of people in her area were approaching retirement and going to rent their land on a cash basis, which she reiterated hardly helped the beginning farmer since rented land ‘is harder to pencil’ (see also Hamilton 2017).

Despite the contradictions inherent in current landholders production of rentier landscapes, they would often situate their continued occupation land a noble stand against the forces of farmland consolidation or government overreach, and justified it by invoking the familial labor invested in the land over the years (see also Nichols and Carter 2023). This view became especially prominent when there were proposals floating in 2021 to change estate tax laws and remove the ‘stepped up basis’ privilege for inherited assets.⁶ This was a hot topic among all the women interviewed, with many making impassioned arguments for why it was an unjust proposal. One woman animatedly explained:

⁶‘Stepped up basis’ is a tax benefit for heirs of assets. The cost basis of an asset (like farmland) is the initial purchase price, with any gains on appreciated value taxed at sale. If heirs inherit assets they get a ‘step up in basis’ to fair-market value at the time of death, dramatically reducing tax liability. See Brown (2021a).

If you've inherited it [farmland], you should not have to pay those capital gains. What will happen is it'll ruin family farms, because people won't be able to afford the taxes on it. You know, basically, they'd have to give half of each farm or more to the government, if they inherited it. It will just put a nail in the coffin for family farms, because it makes it so that your children can't inherit it properly.

Under the original Jeffersonian invocation of Lockean property, the freehold estate or 'family farm' is imagined as independently owned and operated using family labor. However, for many respondents this ideal had devolved into simple retention of ownership. Thus, within these incisive critiques of stepped-up basis reform were assumptions that the farmland would go to 'corporations', another big farmer, or the government itself. Thus, the thought of selling off part of the farm (at fair market value) to pay a capital gains tax on profits was seen as not just a government 'taking' of farmer's hard work invested into the land, but also a deterioration of the moral fabric of the rural. Our respondent continued to plead:

We need to call our representatives and have them talk to Vilsack about saving the family farm because it'll just turn into a big business. And they [family farms] are already being killed off anyway. I mean, you've heard all the horror stories of businessmen buying up these farms that have absolutely nothing to do with farming.

Women's critiques of stepped-up basis reform had a dynastic quality that indicated holding land in their family would be the safest, most noble way to ward off an overreaching government or outsider speculators. Thus, settler common sense and a commitment to the fee-simple meant that the only future a women could imagine beyond consolidation or government takeover was that they retained control of the property. This inability to imagine an alternative future to the family farm (e.g. selling land at a below-market rate to an aspiring farmer or placing it in a conservation trust), I contend, leads to an existential stress that is a 'root cause' of farm stress.

Potential openings for the future

Three respondents, however, did articulate alternative visions for their land. I close with an explanation of one, Sallie, who farmed her family land with her brother and had children uninterested in agriculture. However, rather than bequest them the land with the hopes of 'keeping it in the family', she expressed in a rolling drawl,

I think I would prefer to help some young person who wants to start farming; help them get started instead of giving it [selling it] just because of the money or to some rich big farmer.

I asked her if she knew of other people who had done this in her area, and she said not really but that many of the old-time landlords she and her brother had rented from often said they considered them family and wanted them to buy the land before they passed on. She trails off then says softly,

I think there are still some people that want to help the young person, but I don't know maybe I'm just weird. I just don't necessarily value the dollar like some of the other people do, I don't make it all about money. I just believe we're all community and we should be helping one another, so yeh but that is kind of weird.

Indeed, within the study sample, Sallie's comments were a bit weird. Almost every other respondent vied for century farm status; if they did not have direct heirs, they spoke about nephews or nieces that might be interested. While Sallie's interest in 'helping a young person out' was an outlier in this study, it is noteworthy that nearly 75% of Iowa farmland owners said they were interested to sell to a beginning farmer, given 'the right state and federal tax incentives' (Chandio 2023). While half of these respondents said their main concern with selling to a new farmer was finding one that was suitable (i.e. able to buy) and 'not getting top dollar'.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper attempts to position a historicized understanding of fee-simple farm property as a critical component of farmer stress in 2023. Following a long line of scholars, I argue that US agriculture alongside the broader rural landscape is at a 'critical inflection point' – not just because of a 'tight land market' monopolized by a handful of legacy farm families, but also due to the environmental and social harms produced from landscapes responsible for everything from the Gulf of Mexico dead zone to rural depopulation and economic decline and the social distress this begets (IPES 2021, Shoemaker 2021; Fairbairn 2021). The issue of land access is a core battle among agencies dedicated to assisting beginning farmers and those with marginalized identities (Calo 2020; Carlisle et al. 2019), and paradoxically the issue of land maintenance, transfer, and continued occupation is a core area of stress for many landowners.

While the fee-simple absolute – abstract, commodified, and perpetual – is arguably at the core of this crisis, it is also an institution which many farmers view with sanctity and thereby vigorously defend. The histories of property, however, reveal that these institutions were forged piecemeal in a project of racialized conquest by a state struggling both to pay back wartime debts and develop legitimacy amongst skeptical settler constituencies. Situating white settlers as moral, hardworking subjects vis-à-vis racialization of Indigenous and Black peoples as lazy, irresponsible, and wasteful developed a framework that justified exclusion of some from land for the accumulation of others.

Shoemaker (2021) offers several suggestions for more ad-hoc piecemeal interventions as well as larger structural reforms to address fee-simple-fueled rural decline. She is part of a growing chorus of legal scholars emphasizing that property law is not a sacrosanct creed but a set of social choices that may have served the project of settler-colonial-capitalist state-making, but in ways that benefit fewer and fewer settlers as land becomes increasingly commodified. Shoemaker looks to non-profits and land trusts that use the legal arsenal of 'easements' to decommodify land and retain it as agricultural land to be used for specific purposes (i.e. for sustainable practices or for marginalized farmers). The Sustainable Iowa Land Trust (SILT) is one Iowa example which works to find amenable landowners willing to put an easement on their land to ensure it is farmed in sustainable ways and then connects beginning farmers to help them lease or buy (SILT 2023). Other 'land access navigator' programs work in much the same way, serving as linking infrastructure to match the landed with the landless. These programs also represent a very (very) small percentage of cropped acres and rely on passionate cadres of volunteers or beneficent landowners to make a small dent in a landscape-level problem.

Shoemaker (2021) also proposes more ‘structural’ reforms such as increased use of property titles similar to condominiums which require active occupation and limiting the number of rentals in a particular location. Such ‘active-use’ zoning could create systems that limit the number of absentee owners and thus remove the existential dilemma women face in either pushing their kids to farm or worry that they might sell. However, given the distrust of governmental regulation and the fierce belief in Lockean labor theory – that their labor and that of their ancestors make land into property to be held in perpetuity, Shoemaker’s suggestions seem idealistic at best.

While I did not ask women their opinions on these proposals, given the data presented it seems the thought of creative redistribution or more active zoning laws would not be attractive to many given the strong ‘sentimental’ value to the land and being part of a history or a ‘legacy’. When women discussed their histories of farming they often invoked ancestors who labored on the land or held the farm together through the 1980s farm crisis. They also discussed about their early farming years and the personal, embodied struggles, which they feel tie them to the land in a way that makes them outraged that the government would impose capital gains taxes on their heirs. A common sentiment across interviews is the claim ‘we put everything we have into this farm’ and therefore it is morally wrong for the government to ‘take’ it away via taxation or greater property restrictions (i.e. regulations).

This autonomous seemingly pre-political connection to land is a hegemonic narrative of the farm stress literature. It is both true and also false. It is true in that these affective attachments are materially rooted – ontologically real – yet they are false because such connections are presupposed on the coercive, violent, and racialized colonization of the Middle West through the forced removal of Indian tribes by the US government. The belief that such connections and affective inclinations, narratives, and experiences are personal and extra-political is a dangerous myth that has propped up agricultural settlement and also propelled the existential crisis surrounding farmland concentration and rural depopulation. Yet it is also affectively *real* and *felt* in a way that complicates, even hinders, tough conversations among those committed to a vibrant rural (e.g. see Carlisle 2014; also Hall 2024). Indeed, the ongoing performance of agrarianist-land connections – the sentimental emotionality tied in with settler family land – obscures the broader failings of the fee-simple that first dispossessed Natives and now works to further concentrate land and power among fewer and fewer, a primary source of stress for most. Thus it seems clear that to broach some of Shoemaker’s bolder reforms there needs to be what Roman-Alcalá (2024, 10) calls a ‘values-based commitment’ among a broad network of individuals, groups, and landowners themselves to marshal historical and contemporary data to support demands for progressive land reform agendas. While his arguments around why ‘land reform’ in the US seems like such an anathema resonate with much of this present paper, I argue his call to develop ‘shared values’ around an inclusive, broadly prosperous rural need to include more compassionate truth-telling around landowners’ anxieties and fears around the future, which themselves are powerful evidence that support changes to the status quo.

Thus, this paper’s goal of unpacking and making visible forms of settler ‘common sense’ is to see it ‘neither as a structure, ontology, nor logic’ but rather as ‘pervasively action without being totalized as a self-generating, somewhat uniform whole’ (Rifkin 2013, 326). It is unreflexive, yes, but it has the potential to be questioned, denaturalized,

and dismantled through understanding the emotional seemingly 'autonomous' ties to nature as an affective artifact of the political-juridical project of settler colonialism. Foregrounding the history of property formation in the US and critically examining how legal institutions developed in the service of racialized dispossession is not a persecution of present white landowners but a necessary analysis to confront the challenges of property and agriculture in present day. This history is generative of alternate futures for middle west agriculture as it highlights how very tenuous and ad-hoc many property 'choices' were that shape present landscapes. Thus, if we take Lockean labor theory seriously there are important reckonings given the centuries of labor that Native communities performed in stewarding what we know as the US heartland. There is thus always the potential to tell 'different stories about property' (Calo et al. 2021; Park 2022; Shoemaker 2022), a project that is increasingly underway in many arenas of not just food and farm organizing but also scholarship. This article represents a humble attempt to sow the seeds of some of these more honest accounts of rural landscapes in Iowa as we have come to know them today.

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Ethical approval

This human subjects research was approved by the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board. IRB ID# 201911290.

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