Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM)
This is the author-accepted manuscript of a chapter published as:
Fochesatto, A. (2025). *Who Gets to Farm? Reshaping Just Transitions in (Agri)culture.*
In **Post-Carbon Futures: Imagining (and Enacting) New Worlds through Transition Studies**, edited by Anna Willow and Bürge Abiral. Routledge.

The final published version is available from Routledge.

Who Gets to Farm? Reshaping Just Transitions in (Agri)culture

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Abstract: This chapter explores the application of Just Transition (JT) frameworks within animal agriculture, arguing that applying JT to agriculture not only highlights the necessity of expansive theories of justice within JT itself but also enriches our understanding of agricultural issues through JT's focus on labor exploitation and environmental degradation. Drawing on extensive qualitative fieldwork in the Upper Midwest USA, including ethnographic research and participatory action methods, this chapter examines how farmers, workers, and communities navigate shifts in (agri)culture through agroecological and grazing practices. At the heart of these efforts, participants are challenging hierarchies that shape human and non-human lives, reshaping labor and environmental relations, and revaluing farm and food work. Drawing on agroecology, food movements, and labor studies, this chapter situates agriculture as a vital space for rethinking the cultural values that underpin narratives shaping who gets to be a "farmer" and what counts as "agriculture."

Introduction

All around us, we find an ecology of systems that thrive on extraction, profiting from the exploitation of people, animals, and the environment. Just Transition (JT) embodies a call for a radical break from these destructive patterns—not as a singular new path, but as many new encounters and returns to enduring, healthier ways of relating to work, land, and community. These practices draw on Indigenous and ancestral epistemologies rooted in communal well-being and interconnectedness with more-than-human communities. Such traditions remind us that not all systems are extractive; they persist today as vital alternatives that challenge hegemonic models, reshaping the present to build more just futures.

While JT seeks systems-level change, much of its theoretical foundation and popular discourse has been captured by a narrow conversation on the energy sector and green jobs. This emphasis on phasing out fossil fuels has been crucial, particularly in addressing the urgent need to stop fossil fuel extraction and ensure economic security for workers. For example, progressive Democrats in the United States advocate for a "Green New Deal" centered on green energy, electrification, and large infrastructure projects to transition to a low-carbon economy. Globally,

initiatives like the International Labor Organization's guidelines promote a "Decent Work Agenda" emphasizing benefits such as job quality improvements and poverty eradication in the shift to a post-carbon economy. While these frameworks highlight critical issues—like the economic insecurity faced by workers (Paret 2016) and the disproportionate environmental impacts on communities of color (Sachs et al. 2014; Weiler 2022)—they also risk narrowing JT's potential to a menu of sector-specific solutions that could reinforce the very silos, alienations, and cultural divides that support our current systems of harm.

This chapter argues that applying JT frameworks to agriculture, specifically animal agriculture in the U.S. Midwest reveals the necessity of embracing expansive theories of justice within JT. Simultaneously, JT's focus on labor exploitation and environmental degradation enriches our understanding of agricultural issues by offering an integrated framework that ensures neither environmental integrity nor worker dignity are considered acceptable sacrifices.

JT originated from labor and environmental justice groups in low-income communities of color who advocated for a future rooted in health, equity, and justice (Climate Justice Alliance n.d.). As the Climate Justice Alliance emphasizes, these strategies emerged to phase out harmful industries and build pathways to dignified employment, especially in racialized "sacrifice zones" (Fox 1999; Lerner 2010). This history drives JT to an important intersection that seeks solutions beyond the "environment versus jobs" divide and, further, beckons deeper questions about human-environment relations. Drawing on local and Indigenous knowledge, Just Transition movement members and scholars emphasize a holistic, relational approach that moves beyond anthropocentric thinking. This approach aligns with broader scholarly work that honors human and beyond-human life (see Kimmerer 2013; Tsing 2015).

Little research in JT has extended its principles to agriculture (Blattner 2020; Murphy et al. 2022; Harrahill et al. 2023). Agriculture—and animal agriculture in particular—plays a central role in climate change (FAO 2006) and exhibits exploitative labor conditions in the U.S., often described as "slavery-like" (Kosegi 2001; Guerra 2004). This area demands greater attention, as agriculture is a critical site for rethinking cultural values around labor, environmental stewardship, and our relationships with beyond-human beings.

However, rather than advocating for a sectoral focus within Transition Studies or movement efforts, which could render JT a buzzword or reduce it to a list of fragmented projects, there is a need to see interconnections across different domains. I draw our attention to agriculture not as a sector to transition on its own but as a pivotal site for understanding the depth and breadth of JT. (Agri)culture challenges us to confront the views and values that underpin our relationships with the environment and beyond-human beings, urging us to rethink these relations. Agriculture is a major way humans alter the Earth, covering about 40% of ice-free land, often through draining wetlands and clearing forests and grasslands (Ramankutty et al. 2008). While extensive scholarship addresses agriculture's intersections with environmental justice, social equity, and sustainability transitions (Anderson et al. 2021; Holt-Giménez 2017; Mares & Peña 2011;

Davenport & Mishtal 2019), questions of agricultural transition through the lens of JT remain less explored.

Throughout my doctoral research, I have immersed myself in the complexities of animal agriculture in the U.S. Midwest to gain insight into the visions and movement efforts of small-scale farmers, workers, and communities of color. The Midwest is a pivotal region for this work, known for its fertile soils originally sustained by grassland ecosystems that supported vast herds of grazing animals like bison. This region has a deep history of diverse grassland and forest ecosystems alongside cultural practices rooted in the land.

My fieldwork in the Midwest involves ethnographic methods, semi-structured interviews, and community-based Participatory Action Research (PAR). Alongside Erin Lowe and Adena Rissman, I conducted nearly 130 interviews with farmers, organizers, experts, and government agency employees involved in grass-based agriculture across Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, and Iowa between 2020 and 2023. These interviews provided insights into participants' visions for the future and their engagement with JT (Lowe et al. 2023). We conducted interviews in person and on Zoom. We also organized three online workshops with nonprofit professionals and farmers to analyze findings and identify actions to support JT in agriculture (Lowe and Fochesatto 2023). Concurrently, I have led a community-based PAR project with Latin American immigrant farmers and white farmers implementing regenerative poultry systems. Supported by an organization called Regenerative Agriculture Alliance (RAA), these farmers integrate animal agriculture with perennial crops, drawing on Indigenous knowledge to build equitable and sustainable food systems.

Although I am not originally from a Midwestern agricultural community, my grandparents' backgrounds in farming and organizing meatpacking workers in the Pampa region of Argentina have deeply shaped my connection to this research and my ability to relate to and understand the struggles of the communities with whom I work. Being bilingual and bicultural, with fluency in English and Spanish, has helped me connect meaningfully with diverse farming communities. I approach my connections with insight drawn from both my academic training and lived experience of the generational challenges faced by land-based peoples and food workers.

Drawing on my extensive qualitative fieldwork, this chapter explores how farmers, workers, and communities in the Midwest are navigating (agri)cultural transitions through agroecological and grazing practices. These efforts center on reimagining labor and environmental relationships by challenging hierarchical structures that shape both human and beyond-human lives. By integrating animals as active participants in ecosystem restoration and fostering more equitable labor relations, participants are re-skilling and restructuring agriculture to confront capitalist systems of exploitation, alienation, and power concentration. In doing so, they envision agriculture as a relational and restorative process grounded in equity and ecological care.

Just Transition Theories and Animal Agriculture

Not all approaches and touted solutions to addressing the climate crisis consider the deep interconnections between environmental and social inequities (Sovacool 2021; Swilling 2020; Williams and Doyon 2019). The concept of "Just Transition" (JT) has emerged as both a movement and a theoretical framework to address these intertwined challenges. At its core, JT emphasizes that achieving environmental sustainability requires simultaneous attention to social equity, recognizing that technological advances alone cannot resolve systemic injustices. Rooted in justice theories—distributive, recognition, and restorative—JT advocates for restructuring economic and societal systems to tackle poverty, reduce environmental harm, and promote community well-being (Wang and Lo 2021; Welton and Eisen 2019).

While many lineages of JT theories exist, I find the “labor-oriented” conceptualization particularly compelling for its roots in movement work and its focus on centering labor as a critical issue (Wang and Lo 2021). This perspective emphasizes JT’s historical emergence in the 1970s when unions grappled with the impact of emerging environmental regulations on employment (Wang and Lo 2021). Recognizing the connection between quality jobs and environmental challenges, labor unions advocated for JT rather than opposing environmental regulations. Although initially unpopular in the U.S., the concept gained international traction, influencing global labor unions' role in environmental negotiations (Stevis and Felli 2015). By the 1990s, sustainable development discourse included “decent green jobs” and “just transition” thanks to labor unions' efforts during the 1992 Earth Summit (Stevis and Felli 2015). Across governance scales, conflicts between environmental protection, job creation, and economic sustainability continue to persist. For instance, the contested politics of JT among labor unions and environmentalists in Germany highlight how differing justice perspectives can hinder transition processes (Kalt 2021). Nevertheless, cross-movement collaborations seek to resolve these differences, fostering strategies that address both social and environmental priorities. For other contexts, Peter Newell and Dustin Mulvaney (2013) show that climate action support decreases when social issues like jobs are ignored, and Brian Obach (2004) suggests that environmental organizations succeed when they balance environmental and social justice concerns.

JT is deeply intertwined with the Environmental Justice (EJ) movement which confronts economic and social injustices across various sectors and scales (Berkey 2017; Faber 2008; Taylor 2000). EJ advocates for a comprehensive approach to environmental policies that goes beyond distributional justice to include participatory and recognition justice, ensuring that marginalized communities have a voice in the processes that affect them (Pellow 2005). This expansion of JT and EJ frameworks reflects a growing recognition to not only address unequal distribution of environmental risks and benefits but also interrogate the root causes of injustice (Berkey 2017; Faber 2008; Taylor 2000; Dunlap and Larrate 2022). Further, some JT scholars such as Benjamin Sovacool et al. (2021) critique JT for relying exclusively on Western philosophers of justice and call for a framework for energy justice that incorporates non-Western

justice theories such as Confucianism, Taoism, Indigenous perspectives, and others (Wang and Lo 2021).

Indigenous scholars like Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) challenge the "human vs. nature" dichotomy, advocating for a conception of community that includes all beings—people, crops, animals, and ecosystems—emphasizing holistic well-being and relationality (Kimmerer 2013; Simpson 2017). Kimmerer emphasizes transformative power of "the grammar of animacy," fostering kinship with non-human entities, while Simpson calls for "radical resurgence," reconnecting with Indigenous knowledge to resist colonialism and extractivism.

Arturo Escobar (2018) introduces the concept of the "pluriverse," envisioning a world where diverse ways of knowing and being coexist. He calls for transformative changes that challenge the universalism of Western modernity, emphasizing relational and pluralistic approaches to governance and community well-being.

A relational and pluralistic approach to JT, grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and diverse justice frameworks, is particularly well-suited to agriculture. In applying JT theories to agriculture, and specifically to animal agriculture in the U.S. Midwest, we confront the sector's reliance on underrecognized labor forms—ranging from unpaid family labor to the unauthorized immigrant workforce—as well as the severe environmental degradation and deplorable conditions endured by animals within these systems (Blanchette 2020; Klassen et al. 2023). Alex Blanchette's ethnography in *Porkopolis,* based in the Midwest, reveals how the pursuit of standardized, uniform animals, such as pigs in large-scale farms, necessitates rigorous and intensive human labor, performed largely by marginalized, racialized workers who face high physical and emotional tolls. Blanchette demonstrates how this push for productivity wears down workers and animals alike, creating a system in which human and non-human lives are managed for efficiency rather than well-being, destabilizing rural communities in the process (Blanchette 2020).

JT frameworks have focused on more visible, unionized sectors like energy, often overlooking the complex ways labor, environmental, and animal welfare issues intersect in agriculture. Applying JT to agriculture highlights the need for expansive justice frameworks that address marginalized labor, environmental care, and animal well-being. JT's focus on labor also exposes systemic inequities in agriculture, offering a lens to tackle these interconnected crises with a commitment to justice for both human and beyond-human communities.

Confinement livestock production systems, ranging from large-scale Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) to smaller operations, intensify animal suffering through crowded, restrictive conditions and drive environmental hams, including water pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and biodiversity loss (Ramankutty et al. 2008; Liu et al. 2010). The expansion of CAFOs has contributed to rural depopulation, economic decline, and the rise of precarious, low-

wage jobs, filled by immigrant workers who face high injury risks and limited rights (Fox et al. 2017; Panikkar and Barrett 2021; Son et al. 2022). Legislative exclusions have systematically compounded vulnerabilities for farmworkers, who remain excluded from critical labor protections, including collective bargaining rights under the Wagner Act of 1935 and minimum wage and overtime protections in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (Gray 2013; DeWitt 2010). While some protections were added in later years, these provisions remain minimal, especially for those employed on small farms where Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) oversight is limited (Gray 2013; Carrillo and Ipsen 2021). This degradation of both labor and the environment reveals how exploitative practices targeting humans and animals alike reinforce one another.

Federal agricultural policies sustain an unjust system in animal agriculture by prioritizing commodity crops like corn and soy, which feed CAFOs. Subsidies artificially boost confinement farming profitability, with CAFOs receiving up to $766,000 annually in feed-related payouts, and the largest hog CAFOs earning up to $5.01 million per year (Gurian-Sherman 2008). These policies drive industry consolidation, displacing small- and mid-sized farms, increasing low-wage labor demands, and embedding economic inequity across the farm sector (Gurian-Sherman 2008; Lyson et al. 2008; Thompson and Stinnett 2018; Harrahill et al. 2023).

Despite the clear impact on labor, climate, and community, animal agriculture has received limited attention in JT scholarship. I argue, in agreement with Charlotte Blattner (2020) and others, that applying JT to animal agriculture could mobilize community support and political power to counteract these exploitative systems. Agriculture's privileged status in national policy, often termed "agricultural exceptionalism," means that it is exempt from crucial labor, animal welfare, and environmental regulations (Blattner and Ammann 2019; Gray 2013; Rodman et al. 2016). While the policy landscape remains challenging to navigate, farmers and rural communities have long been driving grassroots efforts to transition toward more equitable systems, offering a hopeful path for meaningful change from the ground up.

Grounding JT in (Agri)culture: Stories of Change in the Midwest

A pasture walk is a staple ingredient in the culture of Midwest grazing communities—a hands-on event where farmers, agricultural agents, and curious community members come together to walk the fields, observe rotational grazing practices, and exchange knowledge about managing animals on the land. In the Driftless Region of Wisconsin, with its rolling hills and valleys, pasture walks are particularly popular. The unique topography of the region often makes intensive row cropping challenging and less efficient. Instead, this hilly landscape, spared from glaciers during the last ice age, has nurtured a vibrant community of graziers, and on a late May day, the familiar rhythms of grazing drew a small gathering to John's[1] farm.

John had been especially excited about this event because it wasn't just a showcase of his grazing dairy but a collaboration with the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship,[2] inviting other farmers

to learn about sustainable practices and to meet with USDA agents to discuss programs to support graziers. John had gone out of his way to spread the word about the event, trying to recruit Hispanic farmworkers and aspiring farmers from other farms to join in, and working to ensure there would be Spanish language interpretation. He knew how often they were excluded from such events, despite being integral to the farming workforce in the region. Despite John's efforts, the turnout of Hispanic attendees was small. The group that gathered was mostly composed of older white men—farmers from the area, many of whom were either grazing their own beef or dairy herds or were interested in learning more about switching to a grazing system. As we did a round of introductions, there was only a single Hispanic young man, Gabriel. I was expecting to see John's own crew of workers there, especially José, his "right-hand man" whom I had previously interviewed. However, the crew greeted us on their way out as they explained they had some errands to run.

As the introductions concluded and John began leading us toward the first paddock, I made my way over to Gabriel, greeting him in Spanish. His face brightened, and he quickly launched into conversation, sharing that he had come with the owner of the farm where he worked nearby. He told me how much he enjoyed working in farming, although he admitted that life in the rural Midwest felt isolating. Being away from his family in Honduras was hard, he shared, and there were few community activities available that could really distract from the long hours of work. As we continued along the pasture, he and I hanging behind the rest of the group in our own conversation, Gabriel spoke enthusiastically, sharing photos of his family and a gym he had helped them start with his earnings from farmwork. When I asked about his experiences farming, he shared some positive aspects I'd also heard from José about working in a grazing operation—having time off during the winter, getting along with his boss, and not having to operate heavy machinery—which highlighted a contrast with harsher experiences he'd had at other farms. He emphasized that he felt more respected at his current workplace, compared to past jobs where he had faced discrimination. He hesitated when I asked him about those experiences, preferring to keep the conversation light as he shared about his family and snippets of his life back home. At one point, Gabriel paused, apologizing for talking so much but explaining that it was exciting to talk in Spanish to someone outside of the farm. He alluded to the challenges of living without legal status, which limited his ability to move freely or make connections outside the small community where he worked.

The dynamics at John's pasture walk not only showcase the collaborative spirit of Midwest graziers but also reflect the broader trends and challenges reshaping the dairy industry. Over the past few decades, small and medium-sized dairy farms have been increasingly pushed out due to industry consolidation, declining milk prices, and the dominance of large-scale confinement operations (Barham 2007; Shields 2010). These pressures have fundamentally altered the agricultural landscape, reducing opportunities for smaller farmers, reducing grasslands, and concentrating control within corporate agribusinesses. Graziers like John are fighting to stay in the industry by carving out niche markets that value sustainable practices and environmental

stewardship. By focusing on management-intensive grazing (MIG), these farmers aim to differentiate themselves from industrialized dairies, offering products that appeal to consumers concerned about the climate crisis, animal welfare, and environmental impacts (Brock and Barham 2009; Winsten et al. 2011). Through events like pasture walks, graziers support each other by sharing knowledge and building a community around sustainable agriculture. This struggle is not only economic but also cultural, embodying a contest over what dairy and animal production will entail. Will being a farmer evolve into merely managing a business from an office, or will it continue to involve walking the pastures, tending to animals outdoors, and connecting with the land through daily hands-on work? Graziers advocate for the latter, emphasizing a farming identity rooted in direct relationality with the land and animals.

Harrison and Lloyd (2013) argue that changes in dairy labor relations have redefined who is considered a "farmer," with the role becoming professionalized and distanced from manual labor, relying on deskilled jobs filled largely by unauthorized Latin American immigrant workers. This shift enables business owners to achieve middle-class aspirations through wage labor exploitation. Similarly, Keller (2019) highlights the industry's heavy dependence on unauthorized workers, with some farmers often facilitating informal guest worker systems by lending money for travel or family reunification. These arrangements arise because animal agriculture's year-round labor needs fall outside the H2A visa program for seasonal work.

While farmers in small and medium-scale grazing dairies continue to work directly with the land, when they hire farm labor, they too—like large dairies—employ Latin American immigrants, thus reflecting broader patterns of racialized labor exploitation. John reflected on this issue with me during an interview:

> The majority of the ownership of land is white and it's male... when the majority of the workforce of agriculture is mostly Hispanic... there's a problem with that. There needs to be an opportunity for people who are doing the work to get to the point where they're a part of something bigger... If we had opportunities to allow these people to be here legally and had a decent immigration system...You can't build a sustainable future here if you don't have legal status. We already know that people are doing jobs that are really important and without them our entire industry collapses... *farmers need to start speaking up for that*.

Farmers like John, who advocate for a reimagining of agriculture centered on "sustainable community growth, not just maximizing yield at any cost," may not yet represent the majority. However, John's vision—where "the cows are happy and healthy," where farmers share the "responsibilities and rewards of the farm with employees," and where there is "more diversity, more equity, more opportunity to break out of a formula that is killing the land"—reflects a growing movement in the Midwest. More people are connecting the dots across the various inequities in farming. Beyond John's individual story, such efforts are evident in the Wisconsin

Farmers Union's campaign for farmer-labor solidarity (Wisconsin Farmers Union n.d.) and in the 2020 alliance formed between United Farm and Commercial Workers Union and regional farmer and rancher groups to push for critical safety measures in meatpacking plants during COVID-19. This collaboration showed a glimpse of the potential for farmer-labor cooperation to address shared vulnerabilities under corporate-dominated food systems, as argued by dairy farmer and scholar Sarah Lloyd (2020).

However, at the core of these intersecting inequities and potentials for solidarity is a capitalist logic that hinders sustainable farmers and denies workers the recognition and support they deserve (Holt-Giménez 2017). The rise of corporate power and consolidation in agriculture marginalizes and displaces small farmers, creating a workforce that is increasingly precarious and reliant on only wage labor. Those who own capital—and thus wield economic power—have greater control over labor conditions and profits. While both small farmers and wage laborers feel the impact of consolidation, the power dynamics and vulnerability play out even more starkly for wage laborers. Through my fieldwork with grazing communities across the Midwest, I frequently encountered resistance when discussing wage labor issues. Many farmers would respond with variations of, "How can I pay my workers better when I can't even pay myself?" This reflects the economic reality of small-scale farms where owner-operators and their families often provide labor, leading to self-exploitation amid economic pressures (Chayanov 1966; Friedmann 1978; Kautsky 1958; Mooney 1983). Further, studies have shown that ecological and conservation practices on farms do not automatically equate to fair labor practices (Gray 2013).

I have found that initiating conversations around labor rights can be challenging; however, farmers like John are beginning to question the dominant cultural norms that render wage laborers invisible and limit discussions about their opportunities for advancement. John and his long-term worker, José, are actively exploring alternative business models to create opportunities for upward mobility. John envisions a future where his employees can become part-owners or equity partners. In an interview with José, he expressed strong support for such structures but emphasized the structural issues that prevent him and other workers from becoming farm owners or equal partners, such as limited access to credit and high land costs. Reflecting on these challenges, José shared his vision for a fairer system:

> If the banks could take into account the amount of experience and the fact that the person likes to work in the field, maybe that would help us qualify for a loan or any other type of support. There's a need for more support in the farms right now. *People need to value farmers more*.

For José, a structure that recognizes farmworkers' contributions and supports their path to ownership would not only honor workers but also strengthen what it means to farm and be a farmer by valuing the "work in the field." Capitalist dynamics and institutions, such as lending structures and family inheritance of farms, reinforce people's dependency on their wage labor.

However, Jose's call to value "experience" highlights the need to recognize undervalued contributions. While programs like the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship provide support for new farmers, they often fall short in reaching out to farmworkers because the necessary supporting structures such as access to land, credit, and immigration protections are built on systems that devalue workers' contributions and exclude them from being recognized as deserving farmers. These structures perpetuate the idea that farmworkers' labor and experience are not enough to merit full inclusion in the farming community or pathways to ownership.

This case offers crucial lessons for the broader context of JT. While immigration issues add layers of precarity and disempowerment for workers, as Gray (2013, 156) notes, "immigration reform on its own will do little to change the structure of these jobs." Farmer organizations often argue that legal status would protect workers from exploitation, but Gray contends that this alone leaves farming with little to no labor protections. As José explains, the lack of access to capital makes it difficult for workers to buy land or operate capital. Without addressing the deeply entrenched inequities that structure farm work, transitions in agriculture risk perpetuating the same exploitative structures. Labor justice, then, is essential to JT in agriculture because it challenges the systemic devaluation and commodification of work under capitalism, forcing us to rethink how labor, land, and ownership are valued and distributed.

Further, Jose's insights suggest that participants are not only taking local action but also envisioning and discussing broader systemic changes. John's invitation to Hispanic workers, his call for farmers to advocate for worker rights, and his partnership with José to explore alternative ownership pathways underscore how individuals are actively engaging in transition within the constraints of Midwest agriculture. These efforts—situated at the intersection of cultural meanings about who gets to farm and what farming entails—demonstrate a commitment to expanding the concept of farming and its communities. Through these small but significant actions, John and José are stewarding a transition, grounded in relationships and mutual respect, even as they navigate violent structural barriers.

For many farmworkers and aspiring farmers, particularly within immigrant communities, entry through smaller animal systems offers a more feasible path than dairy or beef cattle, which often require substantial land and capital. In this context, a group of farmers is working to establish regenerative poultry systems as an accessible alternative. Founded in 2018 by Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin and a small group of friends, the RAA has become a key vehicle for organizing and "scaling up a systems-level regenerative poultry solution that restores ecological balance, produces nourishing food, and puts money back into the hands of farmers and food chain workers" (Regenerative Agriculture Alliance n.d.). Through RAA and the purchase of a processing plant, Haslett-Marroquin and others share principles of a model they call regenerative poultry. They established Tree-Range® Farms, a company that buys, markets, and distributes their products, engaging a diverse group of farmers—especially Latin American immigrants—to raise poultry in silvopasture systems.

My fieldwork with nine farms in this network has revealed the motivations, aspirations, and obstacles these individuals face as they work toward reshaping the agricultural landscape to align with their values. Despite the significant role people of color play in animal agriculture, they are often confined to low-wage labor roles, facing substantial barriers to owning and operating farms. As Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern observes in *The New American Farmer*, there has been notable growth in Latinx-operated farms in the United States, particularly in small-scale crop production. From 2007 to 2012, the number of farms operated by principal farmers of "Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin" grew by 21%, reaching around 67,000 farms. These farms are generally small in both acreage and revenue, with 58% operating on less than fifty acres and generating lower-than-average income (Minkoff-Zern 2019, 9).

In line with Minkoff-Zern's findings, I have also found that these farmers pursue alternative farming systems that are small-scale, diverse, and ecologically friendly. While crop farming provides some accessible entry points, animal agriculture presents higher barriers, such as greater capital requirements and regulatory challenges. Yet, many small-scale farmers of color and immigrant farmers are interested in farming animals or are actively incorporating animals into their diverse cropping systems.

Research rarely examines how these farmers engage with animals, despite their critical role in agroecological farming. As Miguel Altieri (1995) has shown, animals support nutrient cycling, soil fertility, pest control, and biodiversity, enhancing ecosystem resilience and reducing external inputs. Many farmers of color bring valuable experience in animal agriculture, often acquired through years of labor in the industry or from agrarian traditions in their home countries. Working alongside animals may reconnect them to familial practices and cultural connections to the land, while also reshaping labor relations in an industrial landscape that often exploits both human and non-human lives. Haslett-Marroquin, or “Regi” as many affectionately call him, proposes to fellow immigrants from Latin America and others that collectively they can shape the transition toward more equitable systems by working with animals to reforest the Midwest and beyond.

Regi, who immigrated from Guatemala, has spent decades working with Indigenous farming communities. In Minnesota, he developed and refined a poultry-raising method using perennial grasses and native trees on a 75-acre farm. Regi emphasizes that this approach draws on the importance of backyard chickens across Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East, where, as he explains, "the culture isn’t about confinement. It is about naturally letting chickens be in the original environment." The silvopasture systems in Minnesota incorporate local varieties and trees like hazelnut, oak, and sugar maple, providing shade and foraging opportunities for the chickens while enhancing soil health and biodiversity. Regi and other members of RAA explain that the agricultural practices and governance system they hope to create come from Indigenous systems of perennial agriculture and self-organization, particularly from the Maya people of Guatemala.

Although narratives around agriculture may be slowly changing, many scholars and communities disparage Indigenous farming practices because they do not abide by productivist models governed by the supremacy of the plow (Mt. Pleasant 2015). The premise that Indigenous and peasant agricultural methods are inferior to industrial methods along the lines of productivity has been argued to be erroneous. Agronomists and scholars maintain that Indigenous farmers and communities before colonization could support modest populations with integrated methods that kept soils healthy and productive (Mt. Pleasant 2015; Holt-Giménez 2017).

Regi contends that many in the Latinx community have experience with backyard chickens, and harnessing that expertise makes it easier for immigrant farmers to start poultry operations. An advantage of poultry farming is the shorter production cycle; chickens grow from chicks to market-ready in around 12 weeks. As Rodrigo Cala, who operates a diversified farm with the help of his son and daughter, reflected, the workload farming animals in regenerative systems can be lighter on a day-to-day basis than vegetables: “We can work for two hours a day and then we are free. Right now, we grow produce… sometimes the money is not there. I think with this system, it can be different." And yet, while the labor dynamics of the farm may be different with lower input costs and shorter production cycles making it more feasible for immigrant farmers, the scale and pace of production still tie farmers to market forces that can undervalue their labor and final products.

Within the network of regenerative poultry farms, immigrant farmers operate small family farms, often involving several generations, such as grandparents, parents, and children. RAA provides critical infrastructure and facilitates decision-making across the supply chain, including managing Stacyville Poultry Processing and coordinating with Tree-Range® Farms to market and distribute the poultry. These support systems help farmers navigate structural barriers, such as lack of access to processing facilities or markets. However, RAA’s efforts to establish collaborative governance across the supply chain remain an ongoing and iterative process. Farmers, Tree-Range®, RAA, and the processing plant must navigate challenges such as coordinating pricing agreements, ensuring fair compensation, and balancing consumer needs. While striving to redistribute power and build a more equitable supply chain, they remain entangled in the constraints of existing economic systems as Regi explained here:

> Most of what you see out there [about regenerative agriculture] has been reduced to just what you do on your land. … What farmers can and cannot do truly depends on how the system is governed, how the wealth is created and distributed. … Colonizing structures are coming in [co-opting existing practices] to extract more value… That is not regenerative.

At the heart of their work is a reimagining of agriculture itself, seeking to transform not only economic realities at a local level but also relationships between farmers, animals, the land, and broader society. Regi elaborated on this vision, explaining: "What we call farming is truly not the

production of anything, but rather just a rearrangement of forms of energy into physical edible forms that we can then harvest and either sell or eat ourselves." By seeing themselves as part of this ecosystem, farmers engage in a multispecies approach that recognizes the interdependence of all living beings within the agricultural landscape. Rodrigo shared a similar perspective: "What we are learning is how we adapt ourselves to their [chickens'] requirements and the impact on the pasture and the trees. When I am very stressed, I go work with the trees, and after spending some time with them, I calm down."

For these farmers, animals are not merely units of production but active contributors to a vibrant ecosystem. Such a relational approach requires farmers to adapt to the rhythms and needs of the animals and plants they work with, recognizing them as co-participants in creating a resilient agricultural system. Regi's observations about energy transformation and Rodrigo's connection to the trees and animals reflect a farming ethos rooted in care and interdependence, aligning with JT principles of integrated social and ecological well-being. Yet, as Regi's critiques reveal, these efforts remain tethered to capitalist systems that co-opt and commodify both human and non-human contributions. Navigating these tensions, regenerative poultry farmers are cultivating new ways of relating to land, labor, and animals, even as they confront the persistent pressures of wealth extraction and market survival.

Conclusion

The stories I have shared of John's grazing dairy and the farmers of the RAA are just some of the many current efforts that illuminate the complex journey toward JT. Both cases show how people are redefining farming practices and labor relations by seeking sustainability, equity, and a deeper connection with the land and animals. Yet, they also expose the systemic barriers that complicate these aspirations, particularly for immigrant farmers and workers striving to reshape an industry deeply rooted in exploitative structures.

In the dairy sector, efforts to build more equitable labor relations are complicated by structural inequities and cultural norms. Farmers like John and workers like José and Gabriel attempt to forge new paths, exploring cooperative ownership models, and advocating for immigrant rights, access to capital, and labor protections. They grapple with a system that limits opportunities for workers and pressures small farmers to prioritize economic survival over social well-being. The capitalist dynamics at play often force even well-intentioned farmers to make compromises that perpetuate existing hierarchies and injustices. The regenerative poultry farmers and RAA's initiative grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, represents a profound reimagining of agriculture. By embracing collaborative and relational approaches and fostering multispecies relationships, they challenge the industrial norms that have long marginalized people, animals, and whole ecosystems. However, they face substantial barriers in access to land and capital, exacerbated by racial discrimination and economic inequities. While they endeavor to cultivate reciprocal relationships with animals and the environment, they are still constrained by extractive

market dynamics. In their everyday efforts for systemic change, they live within the fundamental tension that even as they strive to transform agriculture toward more equitable and regenerative systems, they operate within an economic framework that often undermines these values.

These narratives illuminate the essential insight that achieving a just transition in agriculture requires more than adopting specific practices or formulaic business models. It demands a fundamental reckoning with the capitalist systems that underpin agricultural production and perpetuate inequities and exploitation. The JT framework offers a lens through which to understand and navigate these complexities, emphasizing the necessity of systemic change that addresses intertwined issues of labor exploitation, environmental degradation, and the challenges faced by farmers and workers enacting change.

(Agri)culture is not merely a sector of the economy but a cultural landscape where identities, relationships, and values are continuously negotiated. The efforts of Midwest graziers and RAA farmers highlight how agriculture is a site of contestation and change, where new models of relationality and community can emerge. However, they also remind us that without systemic change, these initiatives risk being constrained by the very structures they aim to challenge. It is also crucial to dismantle barriers to land access, redistribute resources, and recognize the rights and contributions of immigrant farmers and workers. This includes challenging agricultural exceptionalism that exempts the industry from labor and environmental regulations, advocating for robust labor and environmental reforms to protect workers and ecosystems, and pushing for immigration policies that recognize and safeguard the essential contributions of immigrant communities. Equally important is fostering a cultural shift that, while acknowledging the economic pressures farmers face, strives to value multispecies well-being and redefines success to include ecological sustainability and social equity, challenging the notion that economic returns are the sole measure of agricultural success.

Ultimately, the pursuit of JT in animal agriculture calls on us to critically engage with the systems that shape our world, honor the labor of all beings involved in agricultural production, and cultivate relationships that nurture both the land and our many human and non-human communities. These Midwest narratives reveal a collective re-working of agriculture, a reimagining of who farmers are and what farming means, emphasizing that even in the face of significant challenges and unanswered questions, communities are persistently laboring to sow the seeds of new possibilities.

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[1] I have assigned pseudonyms to most of the farmers and workers mentioned in this paper to protect their identities and respect their wishes for anonymity. However, a few highly visible participants in the sustainable agriculture community are referred to by their real names, with their permission.

[2] Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship (DGA) is a national program offering hands-on training in managed grazing dairy systems: www.dga-national.org.