Reparation Ecologies: Regimes of Repair in Populist Agroecology

K. Valentine Cadieux, *Hamline University*
Stephen Carpenter
Alex Liebman
Renata Blumberg, *Montclair State University*
Bhaskar Upadhyay, *University of Minnesota - Twin Cities*
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Kirsten Valentine Cadieux, Stephen Carpenter, Alex Liebman, Renata Blumberg & Bhaskar Upadhyay

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Abstract

Amidst the backdrop of attention to populism in general, it is instructive to understand populism through social movements focused on food and agriculture. Agrarian populism is particularly salient in agrifood movements. Agroecology has been widely identified as a domain of populist claims on environmental and social governance surrounding agricultural-ecological and political-economic systems. As authoritarian populist leaders gain power throughout the world at a time of expanding economic globalization and contingent socio-ecological crises, contests over populism in agrifood regimes can highlight current dynamics relevant for formative evaluation of alternative political agroecology strategies, and of populist environmental governance more broadly. Can populism be harnessed by radical political agroecologies to simultaneously contest the hydra-headed nature of capitalism, authoritarianism, and pollution, and implement forms of environmental governance based on repair? We argue that populist agroecology has untapped potential for repair, and that the mechanism of focusing social movements on repair may help address some of the more problematic authoritarian tendencies of populism.

Keywords: agroecology, agrofood activism, emancipatory rural politics, food movement, populism, rural geography

The basis of all wealth is the combination of land and labor, and to be self determining we must liberate both. We know the fight for the liberation of Black people will require us to build thriving movement hubs, to meet our basic needs, and to practice and engage in self governance. Access to land gives us the greatest opportunity to realize those steps towards liberation. … Let us be clear that the value of suffering can never be calculated and the lives lost never returned. However, reparations is about repairing our relations.

(Reparations for Black Land and Liberation Manifesto 2017, italics in original)

Food and farming social movements in a populist and agroecological context

As a framework for social organization and political action, populism has considerable potential for engaging people in food system transformation and repair, especially repair of relations with food, land, and labor. A rich literature explores the impacts of various food regimes -- organizing sets of principles and power relations and practices to enforce them (Friedmann 1987; LeHeron and Lewis 2009; Wittman 2009; Schneider and McMichael 2010; Grant 2017). We pick up themes of populism and repair in the agroecology turn toward food sovereignty in these analytic traditions (Altieri and Toledo 2011; Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2012; Timmerman and Felix 2015), particularly where they fit with what McMichael (2009) describes as emerging regimes in tension with “the global food/fuel agricultural complex … on the grounds of democracy, ecology and quality” (142). Populism is used to critique but also to erase, defend, and exacerbate exploitative food systems (Slocum et al. 2011; Dreher 2012; Holmes 2013; Beck and Bodur 2015, especially in light of the American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture 2015). Popular responses to -- and defenses of -- genetically modified foods, for example, show that popular imagination about what food is,
where it comes from, and how it is produced remains a powerful populist force, in multiple ways. Beyond
the role of temporary food relief in buying votes (Ullekh 2013; in contrast to commitments to structural
change, Cadieux and Blumberg 2014), populist agrifood politics tend in predictable problematic directions:
toward agribusiness-aligned defenses of the virtue and necessity of food producers against unappreciative
and ignorant urban elites (Murray 2018) and toward retreat to idyllic, local, and individualistic consumerism
(Johnston and Baumann 2014). Both the well-rehearsed extractive populist “feeding the world” and
idealized, foodie “defensive localist” versions of agrifood populism often fail to engage in systemic analysis
of the intricate and linked processes of exploitation underpinning food systems (Aubrun, Brown, and Grady
2005; DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Guthman 2007; Slocum et al. 2016; Carpenter 2017; Patel and Moore
2017; Blumberg 2018). We identify some of the central populist features of agroecological social
movements, in contrast, as focused on social and ecological repair. Repair is a recurring theme of an
emerging food regime that we see as potentially corrective to the extractive regimes that have dominated
agrifood-related environmental governance. We see the strong strand of repair-oriented agroecological
regimes as operationalizing both literal repair and negotiative, collaborative governance processes that
acknowledge harm and the need for repair, as we discuss in two cases below. While recognizing the dangers
inherent in populism, such as a vulnerability to symbolic but empty political action, and worse, political
demagoguery that vilifies largely powerless people, we argue here for understanding agroecological populism
as a potential reparative food regime.

The multilayered accounts of populist agroecological “repair” we describe connect instances of regenerative
efforts in diverse economies with systemic critiques of agrifood harms. Such repair can offer green
infrastructure and community engagement while also, in the languages of the communities using repair to
organize, functioning as a framework to build egalitarian grassroots solidarity and new forms of dispersed
power, such as community-based land trusts (Davis 2010) and gardens centered around shifting narratives
on racial justice. Given the slippages in this usage of repair narratives, it is important to acknowledge that
rural and urban agricultural land is valued for many different reasons, which are often contested. As
described in recent Annals articles by McClintock (2018) and Ekers and Prudham (2017), agrifood
environments provide investment opportunities for many diverse arrangements, from formal circuits of
capital investment in farmland and gentrification to the everyday practices like kitchen gardening that enable
social reproduction. The frameworks they and others provide are helpful in considering agrifood
environmental governance in light of tensions between precarious fixes facilitating extractive, racialized
investments and regenerative repair strategies that attempt to refigure agrifood political ecologies in terms of
their values for circulating nourishment and supporting healing (Canty 2017). We consider reparative strains
of populism, using a political agroecological reading of reparative agrifood practices that shape
environmental governance, shifting state agro-environmental policies and the social organization of food
producers toward frameworks that, we argue, represent regimes of repair. We analyze the logic of repair that
is mobilized in populist food strategies that contest elite domination of the governance of food
environments. We focus on agroecology’s provision of ecological understandings that contest extraction in
both environmental and social terms. By linking agroecology and the right to food, La Via Campesina, the
United Nations, and others highlight ways that food regimes make claims to environmental governance (De
Schutter 2011). Food sovereignty efforts, particularly, contest the extractive nature of dominant
agroecologies and contrast populisms focused on repairing food, social, economic, and soil systems with
extractive populisms reproducing agro-export regimes (Via Campesina 2001; Wittman 2009; Schneider and
McMichael 2010).

As scholar-practitioners who teach about and observe agrifood movements, as well as participate in them
(both in the U.S. Upper Midwest and also much more broadly, nationally and internationally, Carpenter
2012, 2017; Cadieux et al. 2016; Upadhyay et al. 2017; Blumberg et al. 2018; see also the work of the Twin
We have taken the opportunity of this broader conversation, concern over the demise of democracy with the rise of authoritarian populism, and ineffectual food movement activism to confer across our projects to identify reparation ecologies. We have used this construct over the past eight years to reflect and amplify the socioecological processes we have witnessed (e.g. Cadieux 2014), and we have appreciated and built on prior and subsequent uses of the construct of reparation ecology (e.g. Cairnes 2003; Caney 2006; Hale et al. 2014; and particularly Patel and Moore 2017). We come to this analysis of a potential food regime of repair through our work as farmers, organizers, and academics engaged in these dynamics during the past decade, during which time we have observed that one of the overarching dynamics characterizing Twin Cities agriculture is one of reparative populist formations.

We draw on historical and archival sources, along with our observations as participants, to trace the continuities in our contemporary case study of urban agriculture organizing in the legacy of the historic Farmers Holiday movement of the 1930s. All of the authors participated in public discourses and praxis around the contemporary case via the prominence of reparative agrarian populism in Twin Cities school gardens, food policy councils, land use conflicts, and other domains in which we were active in our research, teaching, professional, and volunteer capacities. We have been influenced considerably by the movement connect to the epigraph, including Grant’s (2017) leadership of community food justice work here and by the case networks we describe. Further, Upadhyay’s work on parallel issues in Nepal (Upadhyay et al. 2019), Liebman’s in Chile and Columbia, Cadieux’s in Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand, and Blumberg’s in Eastern Europe (Blumberg 2018) prompted us to also compare notes more systematically about parallel observations in our more geographically dispersed experiences and research relationships.

By comparing analyses that had emerged across the authors’ research areas, and identifying two case studies in which to explore agrarian populism as a regime of repair, we set out here to understand whether conflicts between community food systems and public-private food security practices are successfully able to mobilize populist agroecological strategies -- as well as whether these can challenge extractive paradigms of food production by encouraging reparative environmental governance. We examined themes of reparative agroecological populism emerging from our widely divergent research programs (in Canada, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Aotearoa New Zealand, South Asia, and with contemporary urban community farmers in the U.S. Midwest and mid-Atlantic regions, particularly in black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities) to focus on two case studies that explore how environments are known and governed through populist approaches to food regimes. Although the focus of this article is on two case studies, our methodological approach has involved weaving together conceptual insights gained through sustained scholarly engagement in diverse places. Following Massey (1994, 2005), we deploy a relational understanding of place, which underscores that places are open, unbounded, and forged by a multiplicity of material and immaterial flows, including the ongoing dialogue that forms the foundation of our collaborative effort of knowledge production (Blumberg et al. 2018). Like scholars of transnational feminist praxis (Katz 2001; Nagar and Ali 2003; Pratt and Yeoh 2003), our research process has involved crossing multiple, complex borders to trace connections between analogous processes experienced in diverse locales. Even as these locales are remade as sites of rupture by capitalist processes, we have analyzed how people contest these processes and forge collective efforts informed by regimes of repair and populist agroecology to take control over spatial flows and relations and remake their everyday places.

The following sections explain our use of “populism,” how we read populism in agrifood movements, and how we see reparative populist dynamics at work in two case studies from a region central to extractive agrifood practice. These cases, of the midwestern Farmers Holiday movement in the 1930s and the current community agricultural land movement, suggest ways that the reparative focus of social movement agroecology may mitigate troubling aspects of populism, particularly in the domain of farmland governance.
On Agrarian Populisms

Part of what appears to fuel current reactive and authoritarian strains of populism is a reaction against calls for transformative change. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW 2017) calls out the Trump version of “populism” when describing the women’s march: “Millions of men, women and children poured into the streets … to declare that people of the world would not allow the growing (and terribly misnamed) ‘populist’ movement, rooted in fear and repression, to turn back the clock on their civil, political, and fundamental human rights.” Lost in this common representation is the notion of populism as a liberatory or emancipatory force, such as many U.S. agrarian struggles throughout the 20th century, radical democracy populism, or contemporary “indigenous populist” movements in Latin America (Brienen 2016; Grattan 2016; Bosworth 2019). In the contemporary moment, people seem vulnerable to what Judis (2016) describes as right-wing triadic populism, which, rather than just rallying “people” against “elites,” “sets up a triadic antagonism between the people, the elite, and a third segment of the population that is supposedly being coddled by the political establishment: Muslims, immigrants, effete intellectuals, and so on” (Mounk 2017). Mounk points out that Judis may be overly sanguine about the left’s avoidance of the dangers of populism, as politicians claim to speak for the “real” people, with what Jan-Werner Müller calls a “moral monopoly of representation” (2016). In many cases this quickly devolves into scapegoating of others and performative gestures of provisioning seeking to signal leadership’s allegiance to the people. We find Benjamin Moffitt’s 2015 article on the performance of populism useful in contextualizing the performative aspects of populism in agrifood movements and as we distinguish reparative characteristics of populism from other conceptual baggage that populism may bring. We use three characteristics of populism he reviews to establish the context of our argument that reparation ecologies may be an important populist aspect of agroecological social movements.

First, we use the term popular to distinguish movements made on behalf of a claimed “people,” often in relation to land. In most of the cases we refer to, people distinguish themselves not against other people so much as against mechanisms of state and capital that they argue are dispossessing them, generally on behalf of finance. Following from this, it seems important to distinguish the modes of crises, solutions, and claims for equivalencies in value made in the agrifood populisms we discuss. The crisis in question in most of these cases is the extended crisis of extractive, racist (neo)colonialism, which is not the kind of “populism being an extraordinary phenomenon that only arises periodically during crisis” dramatically sweeping a population (Moffitt 2015, 193). In populism, Moffitt argues, “actors actively participate in the ‘spectacularization of failure’ that underlies crisis, allowing them to pit ‘the people’ against a dangerous other, radically simplify the terms and terrain of political debate and advocate strong leadership and quick political action to stave off or solve the impending crisis” (190). In our cases, we see urgency in the calls to heed the harms of finance capital and neocolonial racism and reject the ongoing reproduction of the status quo, but contrary to authoritarian populisms, our cases likely understate crisis (e.g. of persistent rural or urban poverty, stress, etc.), often in favor of building community capacity to deal with the situation at hand. Central actors are less focused on leadership in a perpetuated state of crisis than working towards repair and changing the rules of procedural justice to reflect the populist principles they promote, as in the cases analyzed below.

Moffitt (2015:201) argues that “the ‘slow politics’ (Saward 2011) of consensus and negotiation are presented [by populists] as ineffectual, while strong and decisive political action, unencumbered by procedural checks and balances, are seen as desirable.” “Procedural simplification is evident in the often crude and immediate policy solutions offered by populist actors in the effort to stop crises,” he notes (205) and, on p. 206, quoting Zizek’s (2006: 555) explanation of this formulation: “the enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity (even if this entity is spectral) whose annihilation would restore balance and
justice’. In such formulations, the cause of the crisis is not the system or general structure as such, but rather always the enemy.” In contrast, reparative populism identifies and addresses structural and systemic problems. These may be personified in simplified form as state or financial actors, and may be countered with community process but generally not by eradication of the enemy. In the contemporary case we analyze, we see widespread efforts to connect interest in food in “the neighborhood” (the salient social scale of “the people”) to complex issues of political economy, global finance, and structural racism, as we discuss later. This contrasts the often-critiqued representational poverty of populism, and also speaks to the often deliberative and process orientation of reparative populism, particularly around establishing a plurality of operational value(s) of food system practices. Moffitt (2015:199) summarizes one of Laclau’s key claims about the “emptiness” of the populist demand being key to populism’s political saliency: “the so-called “poverty” of the populist symbols is the condition of their political efficacy’ (Laclau 2005: 40)” -- however, although this emptiness may be characteristic in nationalist racist forms of authoritarian populism, we see reparative populist efforts often hampering problematically efficient and not publicly accountable “progress” by interrogating exploitation and extraction and making procedural efforts to avoid them, as with anti-oppression and anti-racism trainings.

Reparative agroecological populism as a mode of environmental governance

Populism -- disruption of elite power by mobilization of “the people” to redistribute that power -- has, in the agrifood domain, tended to arise and be noticed during particularly acute moments of crises. Crisis points such as food shortages, natural disasters, economic depressions, and dispossession of land have prompted social movements with ephemeral success at protecting common interests against threats posed by perceived elites, particularly around the control of land, credit, infrastructure, and governing ideology and imagination (McMath 1995; Moffitt 2015). Agrifood and agrarian populisms often focus on tension between defending the interests of people facing dispossession and exploitation -- farmers against creditors, the hungry against hoarding, gatherers against state conservationists -- and the challenge of enrolling a larger populace in solidarity. This involves socio-spatial strategies we characterize as a form of ecology of repair, a regime we understand to have analytical, educational, and political-ethical functions (Campbell 2009).

The analytic category of a regime of repair focuses our attention on long-term, community-based efforts to build nourishing agroecologies and address land dispossession. Representations of family farming often provide the basis for reactionary populism in environmental governance and politics. Folksy farmers, and the populism they represent, are now staple images in the United States that are used to attack endangered species protection, promote subsidies for federal crop insurance that supports monocropping, defend agribusiness from a wide array of environmental regulations, support the end of estate tax, and even sell pricey pickup trucks, along with the erasure of racialized rural labor (Holmes 2013; Beck and Bodur 2015). Efforts to internalize the immense social costs in the agrifood sector are often opposed with agrarian populist imagery (Hollomon et al. 2017; Williams and Holt-Gimenez 2017). In the United States, at least, farm and food politics is populist politics (Murray 2018), often across the political spectrum. U.S. society in general has long responded to populist appeals (Phillips 1982), and nowhere has that logic been stronger than in the world of food and farming. Facing considerable co-optation of populist agrifood movement logic, questions about populist engagements are consequently centered around about the kind of populism and populist methods used. An embrace of agrarian populism focused ecological repair directly confronts, names, and challenges what we call “extractive populism.”

We turn to agroecology, particularly as it has been understood through political ecology (Altieri and Toledo 2011; Méndez et al 2013), as a salient domain for understanding social and ecological repair in agrifood systems. Agroecology, the study and practice of supporting ecological functions in agricultural ecosystems, is sometimes understood superficially as a technology of replicating ecological functions in agriculture. A more
rigorous and socially embedded interpretation of agroecology sees institutional arrangements and political ecological formations that enable food production in regenerative socio-ecologies (Bawden et al. 1984; Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2014; Holt-Gimenez and Altieri 2016; Montenegro de Wit and Iles 2016; Bezner Kerr et al. forthcoming) -- what political ecologists might study as political agroecology (Méndez et al. 2013; de Molina 2013; Meek and Tarlau 2015). Peer-to-peer modes of knowledge sharing and respect for regenerative systemic perspectives, which decenter the dominance of extractive systems (for example as perpetuated by dependence on corporate input suppliers for farming knowledge and extension), are examples of agroecological priorities (Varghese and Hansen-Kuh 2013).

Analytically, in contrast to corrosive authoritarian blood-and-soil nationalist and socially xenophobic populisms based on eradication, exclusion, and narratives of scarcity, agroecology’s social movement toward food sovereignty focuses significantly on what can be gained by agroecological methods, both mechanical and social, of food production (Bezner Kerr 2008; Wezel et al. 2011; Snipstal 2013; Bezner Kerr et al. forthcoming). This simultaneously critical and constructive framing enables broad public audiences to better understand the social and ecological consequences of agri-industrial externalization of the costs of production and exchange -- as well as to understand a plurality of ways to internalize these costs, an important feature of a non-hegemonic regime (Wark 2015). Educationally and ethically, by enrolling all eaters in agricultural and environmental relationships (Gussow 1991; Berry 1992) who bear responsibility for transforming agrifood systems to be less violent and more equitable (Thompson and Wiggins 2009; Holmes 2013; Reynolds and Cohen 2016; CIW 2017; Alkon and Guthman 2017; Marquis 2017), agroecological social movements move beyond direct participation by agrifood producers or laborers only to mobilize broader intersectional, reparative performances of populist solidarity.

Repair functions as a mode of approaching ecological dynamics with respect to the need to address harm and build regeneration into agricultural ecosystems. Rather than to focus on romanticized restorations, as environmental regimes metaphors often encourage, reparative restoration ecology recognize “that ecologies are always in flux,” that “climate change disproportionately affects marginalized races, nationalities, genders, and classes of people, [so that] natures must be restored with the consent, participation, and design of those so affected,” that “In the Anthropocene, there is no clean slate with which to begin; colonial and racist injustices have given rise to neocolonial injustices that climate change exacerbates,” and that corporate support of environmentalism “might be an attempt to offer reparations for its history of plundering”; hence “restorative processes like native plantings, prairie burnings, or invasive removals aim to redirect ecological systems—in order to set them in motion again” and to “ask, what lessons have we inherited, and what skills can we hone, from our participation in both Earth-destroying, and Earth-regenerating, activities?” (Garvey 2016). Repair also functions as a regime of relationships and diffuse informal sanctions for preventing and dissipating concentrated power and resource control (Robinson and Tormey 2009), revealing some of the paradoxes around traditional conceptions of farming and environmentalist success, and disempowering capture of popular agrifood discourses and practices. As we hear particularly in arguments for addressing black and indigenous land loss in the United States, the need for repair of food systems is a constant refrain in contemporary community agrifood organizing -- but there are very few well-established rubrics for the evaluation of repair (although see Anderson et al. 2009; Merkle 2013). Focusing on repair in engaging these narratives helps differentiate political ecologies of claims around land loss, vulnerability, and harm from losses suffered by privileged commodity farms and their investors. Agroecological framing of repair points advocates toward more socioecological, rather than merely symbolic, modes of repair work.

The Farmers Holiday fight against dispossession as agrarian populist repair
A 1930s farmer movement, the Farmers Holiday, mobilized thousands of farmers and disrupted the capitalist consolidation of agriculture in the Great Depression. By the early thirties there were about six
million farms in the United States. A large proportion of these farms were in the Midwest. Although continuing to be self-sustaining in some ways, these farms fit closely into an ideal type of household commodity production (Friedmann 1978). Midwest farmers had significant debt, paid substantial cash-based taxes, and sold commodities into a largely undifferentiated market. Midwestern tenant farmers were not under the day-to-day control of landlords. While popular conceptions of farmer struggles during the Depression center around drought and the Dust Bowl, for the majority of farmers the central issue was dispossession.

In the early 1930s Midwestern farm prices dropped dramatically -- by about 75 percent. Farmers already earned far below average incomes (Rochester 1940). Rural midwesterners had valued literacy and public education and borrowed for schools; that borrowing was repaid with property taxes paid by farmers. Tax delinquency and dispossession via tax sale became common. Farmers had borrowed to buy farm equipment and land, so mortgage foreclosure and the repossession of personal property, along with post-foreclosure deficiency judgments, also became common. By 1932, no close observer could deny that dispossession threatened virtually all Midwestern farmers (Dyson 1968; Shover 1965).

Farmers turned to protest via the Farmers Holiday Association, a brief but influential populist movement (Saloutos and Hicks 1951; Kramer 1956; Shover 1965; Luoma 1967; Dyson 1968; Nass 1984). The name was a bitter nod to the “bank holidays” of the era in which banks closed and depositor savings were lost. Farmers Holiday was a quasi-national organization. The strongest presence was in the Midwest, but in every state from Pennsylvania to the West Coast, farmers forcibly stopped foreclosures. The movement’s ideology was populist in the sense that it was anti-elitist, in particular regarding class, but also in the sense that it remembered the original agrarian populism of the 19th century that had struggled against Gilded Age inequality (Goodwyn 1978; McMath 1990; Postel 2007).

The movement was populist in two further ways. First, it was an insurgency. The Holiday mobilized and forced attention on farm issues in hopes that government would respond -- preferably with by an increase in farm prices. In addition, farmers challenged state authority by creating a farmer-run set of rules that regulated the dispossession of farmers. Second, the Holiday movement was populist in its antelitism. Milo Reno, the most famous leader, had struggled as a farmer, was a part time preacher, and played a fiddle at rallies. When founded in 1932, the Holiday’s platform fit on a single page: ten paragraphs, and fewer than 400 words. A fair price for farmers and debt relief were the two main points. Political, intellectual, and journalistic elites, for their part, were unsympathetic to the movement, and the main farm organizations of the day -- even the left-leaning Farmers Union -- had no sympathy for the movement and its tactics. Even New Deal politicians who generally sympathized with farmers did not endorse the movement. The Holiday movement, for its part, berated New Dealers but refused to embrace the Klan-like organizations that expressed some interest in farm protest. (Dyson 1968)

Farm protest took two main forms: movement mobilization and a quiet shadow system of debtor-creditor law that usurped state power. As an original tactic, farmers sought to strike to drive up prices. These actions largely failed to move prices. Then, Holiday farmers engaged in protests that made tax and foreclosure sales essentially impossible. At the outset, this meant a “penny auction,” in which no one bid more than a nominal amount and the farm was returned to the owner. Writing about the Holiday, to the extent it exists, tends to focus on dramatic confrontations. Farmers set up barricades, and could seemingly mobilize hundreds any time anywhere to stop a foreclosure or tax sale. Sheriffs, judges, lawyers, and lenders were intimidated, and many chose not to proceed with creditor actions. While the political history of the agricultural New Deal is complicated, there can be no doubt that Farmers Holiday movement helped push political elites into reform -- both with federal and state policies (Shover 1965; Dyson 1968).
Holiday farmers also created “councils of defense” that were “intended to adjudicate all disputes between creditor and debtor,” and acted utterly outside of the legal system (Dyson 1968: 131). Each council had from five to eleven elected members, and rarely included anyone who was not a farmer. Councils addressed mortgage foreclosures, chattel sales, and landlord tenant disputes. They operated as a hybrid of mediation and court adjudication. The goal was to reach a peaceful accommodation. If the farmer wanted to avoid foreclosure, the council decided if it should proceed. Some farmers agreed to foreclosure, but hoped to avoid a deficiency judgments, and in these cases the council considered the deficiency judgments. Chattel sales were dealt with in a similar way. Councils also heard cases between landlords and tenants. For foreclosures, councils often recommended a moratorium on creditor action, but called for the debtor to pay a fair rent for the land in the meantime. In rental cases, the result was generally reduced rent. Local councils heard thousands of cases and the practice extended across wide areas in the countryside. When the councils of defense failed to arrange an accommodation, farmers often blocked the forced sale. Journalists at the time wrote extensively about farmers halting foreclosure through direct action; the quiet work of the councils, however, stopped far more foreclosures (Dyson 1968; Shover 1965). The true extent of this effort will never be known, because of oaths of secrecy for council members, and the secret existence of Holiday auxiliary organizations that were local, kept few records, and used pen names in correspondence. Farmers created a parallel state that prevented the official state from performing its perhaps most essential function in a capitalist economy -- collecting taxes and enforcing debts. The populist repair here is one that moves utterly outside of legal, but not community, limits, and creates a new, farmer-based control that eased the disruption of the worst economic crisis in agriculture in the country’s history.

Depression era farmers assumed a market economy could function in a moral way, but watched it stray into disaster, and concluded it was as up to farmers themselves to repair the rupture and hold fast until things improved. Holiday populism depended on organizing, and for a social base depended on a relatively egalitarian rural social structure. With the advent of the New Deal and various state reforms, the Farmers Holiday Movement soon disappeared.

The agricultural New Deal was flawed in many ways. The programs created failed to protect the interests of struggling farmers over the long term, for example, and were often used effectively as a means of protecting class and especially racial inequality in the rural South. The Holiday triggered reform but was unable to shape the nature of the reform or to defend it over the long term. That said, real reform and real resources came with the New Deal and were in significant part due to the polities of farmer populist repair.

**Midwestern community urban agriculture movements as a mechanism of repair**

Because of the efforts of a diverse network of agrifood organizations to contest accumulation interests and to raise up community leaders, community urban agriculture in the Twin Cities metropolitan area of Minnesota provides a useful subsequent case study for exploring how populist agroecology movements can attend to repair, particularly in relation to the linked ecological and social composition of environmental governance challenges. The Twin Cities is home to significant communities of displaced Southeast Asian, East African, Latinx, and black farmers, in addition to significant communities of displaced Indigenous peoples, as well as rural-to-urban migrants whose farm families participated in egalitarian agrarian populist movements. Urban agriculture here has reproduced the agrarian question central to family farms' resistance to finance, as seen in the Farmers Holiday movement, and in movements the authors have all taken part in, as scholars, teachers sending service-learning students, and active members. Reparative agrarian populism can be seen in the way that agrifood movements in the region have engaged racialized dynamics of repeated dispossession to work on repairing relations with food and land.
Despite shifts rightward in politics and challenges from state, financial, and structural forces, the Upper Midwest has retained an agrifood culture with foundations in populist values of equity and cooperation (see the Land Stewardship Project). Grappling with structural barriers to equitable, successful agrifood and related environmental governance has refined the regional agrarian populist culture, adding more attention to solidarity with Indigenous peoples and People of Color, often centered around questions of reparations, or at least repair of trauma, and relationally-accountable, community-led action (LaDuke et al. 2010; IATP 2012; Homegrown Minneapolis 2018). For example, the Hope Community Listening Project begins: “We live in an era of food- and stress-related health crises, increasing disparities, and cultural and environmental erosion. We not only have to find solutions together; we must also honor each other so that we can work together to achieve them” (Hollomon et al. 2015, 5; also see how the Land Stewardship Project adds “racial justice” to its legacy of “keeping the land and people together”). The Twin Cities is proud of its history of adopting one of the first food policy councils in the nation in 1986 (the Saint Paul - Ramsey County Food and Nutrition Commission) and of its active network of rent stabilization and affordable housing efforts working to address strong racial disparities in access to housing, healthy food, and other supportive infrastructure (Lindeke 2015 shows the tensions, particularly between food coops and housing needs; Burga 2016 provides a sampling of many organizations addressing these in integrated ways; see the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs for community-based research on many additional such projects). The integrated relationships, across topics and communities, of these efforts prompt us to argue for the value of considering repair ecologies as an emerging food regime. These ongoing efforts have contributed to residents -- especially Indigenous and People of Color -- contesting development pressure in the Twin Cities and organizing to address environmental harms with specifically repair-focused food provisioning projects.

Over the past five years, following the introduction of the AB551 urban agriculture enterprise zone legislation in California, a large Twin Cities network was convened by the Council of Minnesotans of African Heritage to advocate for statewide urban agriculture support legislation (Project Sweetie Pie 2015). An extensive network of supporters collaborated over several years of community listening sessions. This effort attracted bipartisan support across the state, successfully recruiting rural districts as allies to urban agriculture. This involved recognizing that rural livelihood strategies do not pre-empt experience of the need for repair (Shea 2013), and that (re)conciliative outreach to commodity producers asking for solidarity action that recognizes exclusions and harm can help to build reparative critical agricultural literacy in both the organizing and policy domains (Van Sant and Bosworth 2017). The urban agriculture legislation effort retained a broad platform of community development, positive environmental impact, and economic justice, promoting a progressive populist platform -- without collapsing into single-leader or single-issue simplifications. Prioritizing a range of ways that urban agriculture could benefit broad publics, the result of this legislative effort (e.g. MN bills HF 1461 and HF 2076 in 2016; MDA 2018) was the assembling of a set of nineteen criteria that combined agroecological repair of degraded food systems (environments, bodies, livelihoods) with anti-racist acknowledgement of the settler land dispossessions that have led Indigenous and People of Color to need access to land for food while residing in urban spaces (cf Williams and Holt-Gimenez 2017). Keeping a repairation frame in the forefront of these conversations as a way to understand how land access could repair harms continuing to be experienced in dispossessed communities led to the central prioritization in the resulting grants rubric of serving “communities of color or Native American tribal communities,” despite the controversy of such language in the region. This also led Voices for Racial Justice to recognize these legislative efforts as some of the most progressive environmental justice work seen in the recent legislature (Racial Equity Tools 2016).

As with many disinvested metropolitan neighborhoods of the United States of America (and more globally), the urban agriculture and community food production being supported with this legislation in the Twin Cities has experienced a significant rise in visibility over the past few decades (Hollomon et al. 2017).
Interest in inclusive agrifood movement politics has also grown (Hollomon et al. 2015; Union of Concerned Scientists 2014, 2015), while institutional supports, particularly via foundations, NGOs, and schools (IATP 2012, 2014), have been variable, and land has been relatively abundant, especially due to disinvestment, foreclosure crises, and limited development throughout the urban core of Twin Cities Metro region, although this last trend is now sharply reversing (Orfield and Stancil 2017; Goetz, Damiano, and Hicks 2017). As elsewhere in the United States, urban agriculture ranges from many backyard and informal vacant lot gardens to school gardens, church gardens, both new and many-decades-old community garden plots, intensive hydroponics and capital intensive indoor agriculture, enclaves of immigrant growers, and small-scale urban farm businesses, often run by white college graduates.

One such urban vegetable farm, Stone’s Throw Urban Farm, a partnership in operation from 2011 to 2016 across three acres of dispersed sites, marshalled creative placemaking and small business legitimacy to change zoning codes in Saint Paul while collaborating with a broader network to push for region-wide debates on land access for urban agriculture. This farm project and its supporting community served as a venue for exploring community food movement issues, such as the precarity of urban year-to-year land access, and experimenting with ways to contest gentrification. Stone’s Throw’s land access was gained through a variety of means -- lease agreements through city council offices, contracts as part of landscaping for businesses, and private leases with landowners -- and their tactics for using land centered around active and organized resistance to the association between urban agriculture and whitening ecogentrification. Working in close collaboration with the Twin Cities Community Agricultural Land Trust to pressure the metropolitan land use governance agencies to rethink a Highest and Best Use policy in favor of indicators of success that address racially disproportionate stress and dispossession, the Stone’s Throw farmers (like many others, e.g. Daftary-Steel 2015; fooddignity.org) harnessed urban agriculture to education about and repair of structural harms. In addition to encouraging policy supports for agricultural land uses that meet community needs beyond conventionally recognizable garden plots (Phat Beets 2012; Jacquemet 2016), they coordinated efforts to reject the appropriation of agriculture by growth coalitions and boosterism. They frequently intervened in education efforts for the networked Twin Cities land access community on being accountable to work with and not on behalf of communities, with particular attention to power, space, and race (balking elite philanthropy models that fund most conservation land trusts). They acquired and managed their spaces in ways that built relationships, sharing growing practices with neighbors and immigrant farmers around their core sites and distribution networks. This shared development of space as well as business and advocacy networks eventually led to turnover of sites to neighbors and Twin Cities people’s movement organizations, such as Tamales Y Bicicletas. This trajectory of land stewardship provides a significant contrast with the much more available transient land access often proffered by developers seeking to mollify neighbors of construction sites in waiting.

The Urban Farm and Garden Alliance is a volunteer network of backyard gardeners and community gardens working to connect largely African-American church and neighborhood service-provider spaces. The Alliance was established to cultivate community and neighborly relationships based on social justice and reconciliation, as well as community and leadership development, gardening, nutrition, and environmental education -- and to organize backyard gardeners, in particular, to get people to know each other across different cultures, and to learn to work together. They work with the state Department of Health, Extension nutrition and gardening programs, health insurance providers, and community clinics to support the growth of gardening programs as spaces of repair -- not only for food-access related health issues, but also for repair of stress and trauma and for racial reconciliation. Used in this way by the Urban Farm and Garden Alliance, the concept of “repair” becomes a boundary concept, organizing support for linked regenerative agricultural and social repair across domains that would not usually share justifications for such work. They are able to funnel devolved healthcare funding into community organizing, using (and creating legibility and
legitimacy for) deliberately different metrics and framings, for example anti-racism training, stress and trauma amelioration, building of community health and wealth outside capital circuits, educational efforts explicitly adversarial to accumulation strategies, and the reframing of institutional contexts for building sociocultural capital as under the guidance of the neighborhood. They are known for leadership in community responsiveness training with County Extension programs, for example asking “Master Gardeners” to acknowledge their problematic nomenclature and legitimacy claims (based on mastery) and to simultaneously work as community and environment regenerating “land connectors” in facilitated collaboration with tenant advocates, police, and press. In this context, their emphasis on recognition of how often-marginalized communities have already regenerated themselves in challenging conditions uses “repair” as a tool to redirect and modify funding streams, modes of governance, state surveillance and policing, and press coverage. In venues such as the regular Reconciliation Lunch, they ask do-gooders to reconsider their assumptions about race, societal improvement, and reform (Slocum 2006), while also attending to the harm continuing to be enacted by dominant systems.

Food regimes of repair? Regeneration in relations of value through populist agrifood movements

The efforts of the Stone’s Throw network to transform urban agriculture environmental governance in Saint Paul -- along with networked collaborations including the Urban Farm and Garden Alliance to effect recognition that prior displacements of well-established black farmers, gardeners, and orchardists to build affordable housing could have been avoided by communities’ negotiating multifunctional landscapes -- coincided with efforts in Minneapolis to promote the restoration of wild rice lakes on a chronically-flooding publicly-owned golf park, as a food forest. Along with pressure by Black Lives Matter leaders, Parks and People, and other organizations and candidates to politicize the larger question of the ownership of 16% of the city’s land by the elected Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, this attention to reparation ecologies brought attention to investment and disinvestment in racially differentiated neighborhoods and influenced subsequent significant turnover in park commissioner seats in 2017 elections after repeated social media reports revealed the reluctance of the existing Park Board to allow public participation or comment in its meetings. These efforts -- often organized around public access to public land for food production -- show the emergence of strong support for popularly designed and negotiated reparative responses to environmental governance challenges.

We have described how highly networked groups of farmers, gardeners, and academic-activist organizers working in the Twin Cities have facilitated the emergence of reparative agroecologies, repairing relations with land and across communities. These efforts have built community action and resistance on the margins of capitalist development and state governance. Simultaneously, they have made demands upon state, finance, and non-profit actors for redistributive programs and reparations-based land and financial access. This dual form of organizing is seemingly paradoxical. Efforts to build local forms of power and resource governance that explicitly shun inclusion into formal political processes and turn away from seeking recognition from and making claims on the state are seemingly anathema to the participation in mechanics of city governance, state funding applications, and meetings with housing development projects. Yet reparative agroecological efforts in the Twin Cities have had success in this two-pronged approach of representation and resistance. Individuals and groups make claims for repair through land and wealth redistribution, through the implementation of agroecological methods that are closely attuned to neighborhood dynamics, and through linking agri-environmental sustainability, agrifood labor conditions, and food distribution with other social movements.

In contrast to what has been seen in many other regions, this pluralistic reparative agrarian populist political formation that we describe here has largely thwarted an alignment of urban food land efforts with singular, charismatic, popular leaders. Instead, the focus on reparation of dispossession often involving non-
hegemonic models of community land relationships, what Larsen and Johnson (2017) describe in terms of a pluriversal way of making place. This is not “a populism of THE people,” or recourse to legitimization by hierarchies or absolute authorities. Instead, it involves acknowledgement of the need for negotiative collaboration, mutual recognition, and consent (Whyte 2013), and it contests the shallow claims, made by what we call extractive populism, “that American agriculturists are rural, Christian, white, and hard working” (Martin 2014). Drawing on the agrarian populist legacy of the region evident in the Farmers Holiday case, the movement has remained critical toward the incursions of capital and land control (including via capital switching into secondary and tertiary circuits of capital, Ekers and Prudham 2017, although gentrification pressure is strengthening, Value Walk 2018) and retained ongoing focus on anti-racist politics that has linked the “food movement” to broader social and political concerns in the region (White 2011, Sbicca 2014, Reynolds and Cohen 2016, and McClintock 2018 detail the dominant themes of ecogentrification and lack of movement support while also pointing to contrasts). Contesting the appropriation of the value of urban agriculture that McClintock (2018) and others describe as contributing to “racialized processes of uneven development,” Twin Cities urban ag communities refuse and disrupt political formations framed around claims of sustainability or cultural capital, increasing property taxes or investment potential, or “frontiers,” “pioneering,” or scarcity, as the preceding examples demonstrate.

This is not to say that Twin Cities agriculture does not share with other American cities the conjoined problems of gentrification, agrarian idealism, and non-profit and corporate co-optation of radical agrifood politics. But Twin Cities agriculture also shares agrarian populist characteristics such as skepticism of expert knowledge, extra-legal land tenure arrangements that challenge zoning specifications and insurability, and reclamation of personal and popular autonomy in the spheres of land, labor, and governance. And especially as a center of global agrifood finance and industry (the metro region hosts headquarters of Cargill, ADM (Archer Daniels Midland), General Mills, C. H. Robinson, Dairy Queen, Land O’ Lakes, and CHS for example), the Twin Cities agrifood movement scene is unusual in its confluence of community-focused production and food organizing with critique and activism surrounding structural food system issues (for example, with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy headquartered here, focused on the volatility of grain and food markets and how movement actors can change enabling regulatory frameworks).

A core theme of the reparative agrarian populist efforts we have briefly surveyed is the need for public subsidy of land rents for reparative agrarian ecologies -- or reparations in the form of land back to the people, particularly recognizing the disproportionate effects of dispossession on communities vulnerable to discrimination. Seeing these acknowledgements reflected in popular agrifood movements and state responses to them has led Midwestern agrifood movement actors to explore how these aspects of populist environmental governance can be amplified elsewhere -- particularly within the domain of conventional agriculture, where farmers are subject to considerable stresses and perhaps fewer entry points to critical populism than their historical or urban counterparts. As reparative efforts are threatened by the ongoing appropriation of agrarian populism by foodies, agribusiness, and increasingly financialized agrifood and agricultural land sectors, the concept and practice of regimes of repair can be useful for highlighting the difference between movement efforts that result in repair and those that use populism as a public relations strategy. Literacy about a reparative food regime, for example, might help contest Bayer’s appropriation of the populist aesthetic of Farm Aid concerts for its “Here’s to the Farmer” down-home country music farm tour. This campaign appears to be a PR effort to address their fear that “consumers remain emotionally skeptical about trusting science and research” in the field of agriculture,” consequently not only trying to break the association between agrarian populism and suspicion of big businesses and banking, but more ambitiously attempting “to recuperate that banker [about whom prior country musicians have sung reliably anti-banker sentiments], not just including them among the neighbors but singling them out for praise and gratitude” (Murray 2018). This is a classic example of extractive populism’s “moral monopoly of
representation” (Müller 2016), equating “feeding the world” with Bayer-supported commodity agriculture, a false equivalence that ignores the antagonism “between the desire for autonomy or self-sufficiency and growth of capitalism, which requires people to submit to the market” (Murray 2018).

Continued populist agroecology will be necessary to repair broken socioecological relations in food and farming. Agrarian populism is a way people involved in agrifood movements often understand what is broken in their world. While populism can veer right or left, and therefore rightly makes many wary and requires continued critical engagement, populism has worked as an ideological vehicle for agroecological repair. As scholars and practitioners continue to build analyses supportive to reparative praxis and regenerative relations of agrifood value, a central question for farm and food systems is not whether there will be an agrarian populist understanding of the world, but rather how to repair and regenerate such understanding and practice in an ongoing way, to resist extractive appropriations and to continue to make agrifood repair logics legible, legitimate, and actionable.

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**Authors:**

KIRSTEN VALENTINE CADIEUX is Director of Environmental Studies and Assistant Professor in the Anthropology Department at Hamline University, St. Paul, MN 55104. E-mail: kvecad@post.harvard.edu. Using art and science approaches to society-environment relations and specifically the political ecology and moral economy of agrifood systems, she builds publicly-engaged participatory research and exploration
processes for people to learn together about differing ways of understanding and valuing environments and food systems in collaborative ways.

STEPHEN CARPENTER is Deputy Director and Senior Staff Attorney of Farmers’ Legal Action Group, Inc. (FLAG), St. Paul, MN 55102. E-mail: jstephencarpenter@gmail.com. His work at FLAG has centered on discrimination in agricultural lending, debtor-creditor issues, disaster assistance, federal farm programs, sustainable agriculture and direct marketing, and the problems of farmers contracting for livestock production. He served as Senior Counsel in the Office of the Monitor in the Pigford case, and is at present the court-appointed Ombudsman for the In re Black Farmers Discrimination case. He has been an adjunct assistant professor at the University of Minnesota Law School.

RENATA BLUMBERG is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ 07043. E-mail: blumbergr@montclair.edu. She conducts research on alternative food networks in the United States and Eastern Europe, embodied geographies of food, critical management studies on institutional food systems, and feminist agroecologies and pedagogies.

ALEX LIEBMAN is a researcher of plant-soil dynamics for Lurralde, a Chilean team of activists and scientists supporting Atacameño and Ayamaran groups in their struggle for territorial sovereignty and water rights against multinational mining companies in the Atacama Desert. E-mail: alexliebman@gmail.com. He holds an MSc in agronomy from University of Minnesota and a B.A. from Macalester College.

BHASKAR UPADHYAY is Associate Professor of STEM Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55414. Email: bhaskar@umn.edu. His areas of interest include: science as an agent for change in communities; empowerment and social justice for urban minority youth; the intersection of science and socio-cultural habits in urban school settings; issues of science learning for the students from immigrant families and roles of immigrant parents in their children's science learning; and social justice and equity in the way that science, food, and the environment are taught.

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