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"To Work Without Stopping": Masculinity and the Midwestern Farm Novel

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16

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Andy Oler

In *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), J. Hector St. John de Crèvecouer describes the admirable work ethic of Andrew, an aspiring farmer who has recently arrived from Scotland: "From the first day he began to work, he was indefatigable; his honesty procured him friends, and his industry the esteem of his new neighbours" (79). To support himself and his family, Andrew clears some swampland, plants corn and potatoes, and works with the neighbors to build a house. For Crèvecouer, Andrew becomes an exemplar of the American farmer: hard-working, honest, a pillar of the community—an image that holds from Crèvecouer's time to our own, nearly 250 years later. This chapter focuses on two Iowa farm novels that take up Crèvecouer's imagery, including the self-made aspects as well as the settler colonial assumptions justifying the whole enterprise.[1] Ruth Suckow's *Country People* (1924) and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991) feature hard-working young farmers who, like Crèvecouer's Andrew, develop their land and gain the esteem of their community. As they age, however, their abilities decline and their reputation erodes, not only revealing their personal flaws but also exemplifying the harms of American masculinity on farmers and their families.

In *Country People*, Suckow tells the story of August Kaetterhenry, from when he first begins working as a hired hand to his retirement, decline, and death. August and his wife Emma raise their family in the Wapsipinicon River Valley in eastern Iowa, on a farm they acquire from Emma's father on a rent-to-own basis. August clears the land and makes numerous improvements, and he is determined to own the farm free and clear: "He meant to work without stopping until he had paid for the farm. He had a genuine Kaetterhenry obstinancy [sic] and a desire to do things for himself. He would not stand interference" (54). August is the very model of a modern Midwestern farmer.[2] He works tirelessly, he's stubborn, he's self-directed—he is going to make something of himself, by himself. And he does. The farm grows, and so do his profits. Eventually, August and Emma hand over the farm to their son and retire into town. There, he loses purpose, gets sick, and dies. Emma is left alone in their new house, watching one of her grandkids, making sense of her bills, and commiserating with a neighbor.

A Thousand Acres revolves around Larry Cook, who owns the titular acreage in north-central Iowa, near Mason City, and is narrated by his eldest daughter, Ginny. In this retelling of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Larry decides to expand his hog operation and turn the farm over to Ginny, middle daughter Rose, and their husbands, Ty and Pete.[3] Larry begins to feel sidelined and acts erratically, eventually suing Ginny, Rose, and their husbands to take back the farm. While preparing the case, Rose and Ginny's lawyer says that handing over a farm is always difficult, partly because of

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farmers' pride in themselves: "Every farmer remembers what an unusually sober and industrious young man he was himself" (283). Smiley has described Larry's work ethic throughout the novel, echoing both August Kaetterhenry and, further back, Crevecoeur's Andrew. But even while implying the links between work ethic and self-making, Smiley acknowledges that much of Larry's land was inherited from his father and grandfather, and when the attorney points out the corrupting influence of memory, the novel explicitly questions the farmer's self-image.

Starting with their emphasis on appearances, work ethic, and the demanding physical realities of farm life, these two books share a number of characteristics with other twentieth-century Midwestern farm novels.[4] For instance, set in the period of westward expansion, Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) and O.E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927) portray the challenges of settler colonial immigrants on the plains, including the untimely death of characters struggling to become the self-sufficient small farmer lionized in Jeffersonian democracy. Many novels of the 1930s-40s, such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Paul Corey's *Acres of Antaeus* (1946), show the effects of the Great Depression and the financial industry on farm communities. To that, William Cunningham's *Green Corn Rebellion* (1935) and Wright Morris's photo-text *The Home Place* (1948) add the physical decline of aging farmers, as well as anxieties about who will work the land in the next generation.[5]

Many other texts represent farm labor, but due to race and class, their subjects' industriousness does not allow them to approach the status of the idealized American farmer. For instance, Josiah Henson, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass show enslaved people doing skilled agricultural labor yet being denied its benefits; Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) also explores such limits. Other southern works, such as Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) show how racist violence and the legacies of slavery affect rural life throughout the South.[6] Furthermore, the white Alabama sharecroppers of James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), the Filipinx immigrants of Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1946), and the Chicanx migrant laborers of Tomás Rivera's short-story cycle *...y no se lo tragó la tierra/...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1971) demonstrate the restrictions on ownership and struggles for dignity faced by farmworkers across the country.

Land ownership facilitates the appearance of respectability, a combination of racial and economic privilege that is central to notions of American masculinity. In *American Manhood*, Anthony Rotundo describes the development of "self-made manhood" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which "a man took his identity and his social status from his own achievements, not from the accident of his birth" (3). Self-made manhood is an instance of what Raewyn Connell calls hegemonic masculinity, and its emphasis on individual achievement masks the fact that white men are more likely to have access to the opportunities which allow others to see them as self-made. Imperialist doctrines such as Manifest Destiny underly these enhanced opportunities for white men, and Gail Bederman demonstrates how conquests of Native American people and land play a foundational role in the development of white masculinity in the American West. Furthermore, Marlon Ross and Michael Johnson show the conflicting expectations imposed on black men and, hence, the barriers they face that are not placed in front of white farmers like August Kaetterhenry, Larry Cook, or even Crevecoeur's Andrew.

In "Three Visions of Masculine Success on American Farms," Peggy Barlett explicates common structures of masculinity available to twentieth-century American farmers. According to Barlett, farmers customarily approach their work according to one of three models: agrarian, industrial, and sustainable. Agrarian farmers feel successful because of their independence and connection to nature, as well as their ability to support their family and community. August Kaetterhenry embodies this ideal throughout *Country People*, particularly in that "agrarian men take pride in developing their farms and keeping up with new technology, but generally try to avoid risk and a heavy debt load" (Barlett 55). Larry Clark begins *A Thousand Acres* espousing similar agrarian caution, though Smiley shows the family's shift to industrial farming as they take on a large debt burden to finance new hog barns, an

example of the kind of risk-taking behaviors expected of entrepreneurially minded farmers. Sustainable farming, which Barlett describes as a willingness to diversify both crops and economics, also appears in the novel when Rose and Jess Clark attempt to switch to organic fertilizers and interspersed cover crops. Demonstrating the cultural difficulty inherent in such shifts, Jess's father meets those ideas about changing farm practices with hostility, while other family members are skeptical at best.

These two books, as with many Midwestern farm novels, underscore the importance of reputation by investing in family and communal histories. Early in *Country People*, Suckow highlights the Kaetterhenry family's local reputation and German heritage: "He was a good worker. All of the Kaetterhenrys were. '*Ach*, those Kaetterhenrys!' people would sometimes say, meaning that they were stubborn and silent and *dumm*" (21). From the time August was eleven, Suckow writes, he hired out to local farmers who knew his family's reputation, which was not entirely positive. (For those who don't speak German, *dumm* translates just the way you think it does.) But the important thing—and the reason he was able to make his way in their community—is that he could work. He was known as somewhat shrewder than his siblings, but with the same work ethic, and he made good on that promise: working steadily, improving the farm, remaining out of debt. By the time his boys start pushing him to purchase new buildings and equipment, it has become fairly clear that he will be able to—as Frank, Carl, and Johnnie tell their mother, "He's got more than most farmers have" (93). Their combined labor cements Suckow's representation of the Kaetterhenrys: August is more established, and he may now be willing to buy a car, but "he worked as hard as he had ever done, except that he had the boys to help" (94).

A Thousand Acres takes place several decades after *Country People* and consequently recounts a longer, more elaborate family history. Like the Kaetterhenrys, the Cooks trade on hard work and thrift, but it becomes apparent that their actual history is more complex than the stories they tell about themselves: "My father always said that frugality was the key—his father had managed to save money on machinery, and when the acreage came on the market, they could afford to pay a dollar more per acre for it. Some time later, I found that this was only true of the first piece. The story of the second parcel was more complicated, less clearly imparting one of those simple lessons" (133). The moralistic stories that Ginny's parents told her when she was a child break down when she learns more details about her family—including but not limited to the fact that her father sexually abused her and Rose. Ginny's surfacing memories, along with her experience of the farm, show that the universalizing perspective of the farmer as an upstanding family and community member, the arbiter of national values, is a flawed narrative—and in the case of her father, a false one.

Still, Larry maintains his standing among area farmers. The reader follows along with Ginny's revelations, and some local women seem to suspect that Larry was abusing her and Rose, but Smiley clarifies that men's reputation in their community rests on appearances:

> A farmer looks like himself, when he goes to the café, but he also looks like his farm, which everyone has passed on the way into town. What his farm looks like boils down to questions of character. Farmers are quick to cite the weather, their luck, the turning tides of prices and government regulations, but among themselves these excuses fall away. A good farmer (a savvy manager, someone with talent for animals and machines, a man willing to work all the time who's raised his children to work the same way) will have a good farm. A poor-looking farm diagrams the farmer's personal failures. Most farmers see farming as an unforgiving way of life, and they are themselves less than indulgent about weedy fields, dirty equipment, delinquent children, badly cared for animals, a farmhouse that looks like a barn. It may be different elsewhere in the country, but in Zebulon County, which was settled mostly by English, Germans, and Scandinavians, a good appearance was the source and the sign of all other good things. (199)

Because Larry keeps his grounds tidy, because he can work with his animals, because his children are themselves hard-working farmers, he is seen as a "good farmer." Above all, he is seen as a success because he is "a man willing to work all the time," dealing with abstractions like government regulations as well as concrete, mechanical labor such as cleaning and maintaining farm machinery. In this community, being a good man and a good farmer are the same thing. The labor required to meet Zebulon County standards for masculinity also facilitates the competent husbandry of a good farmer. And these ideals have a history—Larry's grandfather laid the drainage tiles by hand, creating the possibility for those well-kept, picturesque fields.

In these novels, hard work marks a man's position in the community partly because farm labor never ends; one consequence is that, for both Smiley and Suckow, men privilege the farm over their wives.[7] For instance, August is disinterested in Emma's comfort, shown when he wires the barns for electricity before the house. For Larry, the farm takes precedence even in the immediate aftermath of his wife's death: "Nothing about the death of my mother stopped time for my father, prevented him from reckoning his assets and liabilities and spreading himself more widely over the landscape. No aspect of his plans was undermined, put off, questioned" (Smiley 136). It's true that Larry's crops won't farm themselves and, in August's case, that the farm's profitability supports their family and must come first. Even so, both narrators suggest that things could have gone otherwise. August's decision about the wiring is linked specifically to his reluctance to dip into their savings, and Ginny notes how little Larry's work life changes after his wife dies. He continues to work in the fields and to be rigid in the home. The main difference is that Ginny and Rose are now expected to care for their youngest sister, Caroline. Beyond giving birth to their daughters, Larry's wife (who remains unnamed) appears entirely incidental to his plans.

Larry and August have claimed the farm for themselves, limiting their wives to the house, which suggests one reason why their rigid adherence to codes of hard work begins to break down as they age. In *Country People*, this becomes clear when the two youngest Kaetterhenry boys are drafted to fight in the Great War.[8] "It was a queer time at home. It was so strange to be without the boys! August was a big, vigorous man, but now he realized for the first time, now that he had everything to do alone, that he was getting older. He had never stopped working hard; but now he saw that, strong and dogged as he was, he couldn't quite do the work he had done in those days when they first went on the farm" (Suckow 106–107). The Kaetterhenry farm has expanded, and August has become reliant on his boys. When they are drafted, he can no longer manage the farm by himself. This is coded in terms of strangeness—time has passed, and while August has always worked, it is suddenly apparent that he is not working the same way, or with the same capability.

Despite his diminished abilities, August continues to work away, an act that is consistent with scholarship on aging farmers.[9] In an editorial for the *Journal of Agromedicine*, Deborah Reed claims that "for aging farmers the decision to remain in agriculture may simply be a matter of when they have had enough, or it may be viewed as prideful perseverance" (69). Certainly, August Kaetterhenry and Larry Cook bear all the marks of "prideful perseverance"—a trait that they cultivated as young men and which comes to fruition as they age. But these characters also reach a point in which they no longer want to persevere, in which they've "had enough," with all that phrase's implications of frustration and impulsiveness.

In *Country People*, August has worked tirelessly throughout his life, and he decides to leave the farm only when that no longer feels possible. Still, Suckow presents it as a snap decision: "Those years of the war, when he had had everything to do, had tired August. He had always intended to retire, take it easy, when he could afford it; but all these things brought him to it now. He announced to Emma one day that they might move in to town and leave the farm to Carl" (132). Suckow gives readers plenty of reason to suspect that under different circumstances August would have delayed his retirement perpetually, unable to give up his daily routine while trotting out unsubstantiated excuses like financial viability. This would not have been an entirely unexpected

outcome, as many farmers choose to remain on the farm well past retirement age, adapting their practices and attitudes toward the farm as they get older. In a study of aging Australian farmers, Judith Gullifer and Anthony Thompson found that "to be productive and useful involves adjusting to change and making transitions into different methods of operating" (91). A few years earlier, August had adjusted, expanding his operation to include his sons. But when they are gone, the entire workload rests on him, and he can't keep up. Once the boys have returned from the war, and after Emma has gotten sick enough that they go to the Mayo Clinic, August decides he's done.

Gullifer and Thompson indicate that generational handover can allow older farmers to maintain their connection to the land—to "find new roles on the farm that promote a sense of continuity and a rewarding sense of identity" (93). From this perspective, passing the farm on can be a net positive for both generations, but August shows how challenging succession can be. After he has moved to town, "August worked on the farm, but then what did that mean when he was no longer doing it for anything? The life had gone out of his work. Sometimes he hated to go out there, although he couldn't stay away" (164–165). On its face, August frequenting the farm after moving away seems to exemplify Gullifer and Thompson's findings. August remains attached to his family's land, and he is finding a new role that will allow him to bridge his long-time farm labor with his newfound, in-town retirement. Of course, there's not much to suggest that August feels particularly rewarded. He feels compelled to go to the farm, even though he does not derive the same satisfaction from it that he did as a younger man. Still, he drives out there, force of habit pushing him to be on the place, to work.

Perhaps more acutely, August misses the sense of ownership that he had when he was working toward something and all those buildings and machines were under his control—an unsurprising response, given the historical importance of self-making and individual control for American men. Carl, particularly, chafes at August "thinking he could do anything he pleased there" (165). With the farm established and Carl in charge, August has lost the self-made aspects of the farm. Unable to rest on his laurels, to remain content with having made something, August withers. His decline is both mental and physical, and "He let himself sink into bitter depths of hopelessness" (172). Similarly, Larry withdraws. Once he has turned the farm over to Ginny, Rose, Pete, and Ty, he sits in his house, angry, staring across the fields. As Rose says, "This is what his retirement is going to be, him eyeballing Pete or Ty, second-guessing whatever they do. You didn't think he was going to go fishing, did you?" (Smiley 67). Separated by a half-century, these two characters respond similarly when they no longer have exclusive control over their farms. They feel sidelined, they quarrel, they withdraw, they seethe, they begin to have health problems.

Neither August nor Larry successfully transitions out of the fields, and the research on aging farmers suggests that one reason why might be a tension between the needs of elderly farmers and the expectations of American masculinity. In a study of British farmers, Mark Riley found that, as aging farmers shifted their labor, they were "keen to ensure that those symbolically important, and highly visible, tasks—tidy hedges and well-tended crops in this case—are completed" (105). For these British farmers, appearance becomes increasingly important. In the context of an Iowa farm, we might have expected August and Larry to keep the equipment clean and the grass trimmed, to paint the doors of the barns or make sure the gates swing smoothly. They don't. After ceding control of the farm, August withdraws to town almost entirely, then gets sick. And Larry specifically rejects polite appearances, spitefully buying some unnecessary kitchen equipment and letting it sit in the barnyard, rotting in the rain. Larry's is a petty protest—"Quit telling me what to do" (81), he says, when no one was telling him what to do—but it gestures toward his attention to appearance at a much larger scale.

From the very first chapter of *A Thousand Acres*, Smiley makes plain that a farmer's reputation does not rest solely on arrow-straight corn and a clean barnyard: "Acreage and financing were facts as basic as name and gender in Zebulon County" (4).[10] At the beginning of the novel, Larry promotes the same kind of cautious spending practiced by August Kaetterhenry in *Country People.*

Owning land free and clear was a marker of respectable, stable farmers. But as time wears on, Smiley introduces discourses of the professionalization of agriculture, which in this novel rests on quantification and, therefore, expansion: "You didn't have to wait long if you had some money to spend and were set on putting up new farm buildings, hardly long enough for a few second thoughts" (167). The Cook family's expansion plans are exploited by companies selling specialized equipment, reinforced by the neighbor's college education in farm management and animal science, and underwritten by Marv Carson, the local banker. According to Carson, "A *family* can be debt-free, that's one thing. A *business* is different" (325).

Thus, when Larry impulsively decides to form a corporation and hand over the farm to his daughters and their husbands, his decision is based on their understanding of what it takes to run a successful farm in modern Iowa. In this sense, to be and to appear successful requires ambition and risk, in the form of debt. Furthermore, because this decision links generational handover with best practices in professional agriculture, it can also be coded as caution: "Hell, I'm too old for this. You wouldn't catch me buying a new tractor at my age. If I want to listen to some singer, I'll listen in my own house" (19). When Larry explains his plans to the family, he uses many of Barlett's markers for masculine success. In terms of agrarian values, he shows a commitment to his family and the land. He also presents this idea as old-fashioned and fiscally responsible—not only does he not want to buy a fancy tractor, but he goes on to describe how this plan will help his daughters avoid inheritance taxes. The plan itself is more in line with Barlett's description of the industrial approach: structuring the farm as a corporation, approaching it as a competition with other farmers, willingness "to take big, 'courageous' risks" (Barlett 56). In short, this is an industrial farm in agrarian packaging.

While Larry's plan updates historically proven approaches to farming with the trappings of modern industrial agriculture, he leaves unexamined the risk that he will not adapt well to his new, subordinate position. Like August Kaetterhenry, Larry withdraws from the farm, and his daughters begin to see evidence of declining physical and mental health. Unlike August, however, Larry lashes out:

> He says, "You look me in the eye, girly." He says, "I'm not going to stand for it." His voice rises. He says, "I've heard enough of this." His fists clench. He says, "I'm not going to be your fool." His forearms and biceps buckle into deeply defined and powerful cords. He says, "I say what goes around here." He says, "I don't care if—I'm telling—I mean it." He shouts, "I—I—I—" roaring and glorying in his self-definition. (306)

In this passage, Ginny narrates a composite of her father's growing frustration, which Michelle Massé describes as "unchecked narcissism and aggression" (50). Even though the plan was his idea, he feels as if he's been tricked. As a result, Larry attempts to reclaim his power in multiple ways: as Ginny's father; as the person who decides, controls conversation; in anger; as a physically powerful man; as someone who's not beholden to others. All of these add up to his ability to self-define, self-determine, control his own outcomes—which, as Todd Nothstein argues, supersedes the experiences and feelings of everyone around him. In short, Larry feels that he was a self-made man (forgetting, of course, that he inherited much of his land), and he has come to resent that he can no longer tell that story about himself.

Larry's struggles, like August's before him, are not unusual among aging farmers. One reason might be the tendency to hold on to a way of life—defined for these two Iowa farmers as a combination of occupation and self-image. In a 1962 study of aging U.S. farm populations, Marion Clawson argues, "Men do not withdraw from farming, even under considerable provocation.... Having made his choice and spent a major part of his adult life as a farmer, he is reluctant or unable to leave, even in the face of low returns" (27). Clawson frames the inability to leave agriculture as an economic problem that occurs when farm returns are so poor as to decrease mobility. Suckow and Smiley, however, offer a psychological version of this problem, one that blurs the line between reluctance and inability.

August clearly wants to remain on the farm, and he is compelled to drive out there, at least until he realizes that he cannot work the way he used to; at that point, deteriorating health makes him unable to farm, a provocation that he cannot ignore. Larry, on the other hand, enthusiastically gives control to his children, on the assumption that they will continue to defer to him. He is reluctant to cede responsibility and, as seen above, becomes unable to control himself. When Larry feels provoked, he sues his daughters to take back the farm (and loses, and then he dies).

Country People and *A Thousand Acres* are Midwestern tragedies of rigid, patriarchal masculinity. August and Larry die having lost their farms and their motivation, not to mention their work ethic and vitality. But that was not a foregone conclusion. In each novel there are communities of retired farmers that might have sustained them. August tries, but he is unfulfilled by their repetitive conversations about crops, roads, and the weather, and the Kaetterhenry boys are unsurprised when he starts to go back out to the farm. Ginny knows better than to expect that of Larry. After she ticks off several ways retired farmers pass the time, she admits, "the thought of Daddy doing any of these sociable, trivial, or, you might say, pleasant things was absurd" (112). Because they have options, the tragedy here is not that August moved into town, or that Larry lost control of all those acres. Rather, it is that they rejected community and clung to individualism—that they tried "to work without stopping," giving in to an expansionist impulse that is, in the end, unsustainable for them, their families, or their communities.

At the end of *A Thousand Acres*, Ginny has left the farm and divorced Ty. She works at a restaurant in St. Paul. Rose has died, leaving Ginny to care for her daughters. She appreciates the limits of this life, its momentary nature, that she is not constrained by history or obliged to a specific future. While the people she meets there are friendly, she keeps them at a distance, in part because "there is no man like Jess, graceful and mysterious, no man like Ty, forthright and good and blind, no man like Pete, mercurial and haunted, no man like Daddy, who is what he is and can't be labeled" (369). For all the work Smiley has done to show how these men are parts of a larger system, Ginny still sees them as exceptional. How tricky, that after all this time, after she has realized the harm done to her and Rose, after their family has dissolved because of her father's allegiance to impossible ideals of masculinity on American farms, that Ginny continues to internalize it, to let it govern her behavior. The tragedy is not that Larry Cook couldn't "work without stopping." It's that everyone else keeps trying.

Notes

1 Doug Kiel argues that settler colonialism is central to both historical and popular storytelling about the Midwest, which foregrounds Euro-American pioneers and largely ignores indigenous experience. According to Kiel, "Such a framework is not simply exclusionary; it is a colonial narrative of absolute replacement" (10). Such narratives contribute to the erasure of Native American people from mainstream society, and Kasey Keeler shows their fallout through mid-twentieth-century Native American military veterans navigating bureaucracies and dealing with the effects of relocation. Sarah Rotz shows the present-day consequences of settler colonial relationships to land and history, as she documents twenty-first-century Canadian farmers' matter-of-fact dismissiveness of Native American claims that their land was stolen by white settlers. Parallel to historical erasures of native people, Tony Hughes-d'Aeth argues that in settler colonial farm novels, "indigenous dispossession—the key fact of settler colonialism—often disappears completely" (342). Accordingly, *Country People* and *A Thousand Acres* do not show the removal of the Meskwaki or Winnebago, but they recount the clearing of fields and draining of marshland that Stephen Gasteyer and Cornelia Butler Flora show were "rationalized on the grounds of modernity and progress" (129). In this vein, Sarah Farris counts *A Thousand Acres* among her examples of "American Pastoral," which she describes as "an ideal premised on ownership and conquest" (27).

2 Ruth Suckow's writing has been approached most commonly through her realistic portrayal of Midwestern life. In a 1931 essay, John T. Frederick, editor of the little magazine *The Midland*, praised Suckow's Midwestern regionalism, arguing that she "infuse[s] the familiar with new significance" (5), though it should be noted that he praises *Country People* the least among her works. Later, Margaret Stewart Omrčanin

contextualizes the novel's four generations of Kaetterhenrys within a chapter describing Suckow's merits as a social historian, William Holtz tracks Sinclair Lewis's appraisal of *Country People* as an exemplary Midwestern novel, Cherie Dargan surveys Suckow's career through the lens of "realistic regionalism," and Becky Faber turns her gaze on Emma Kaetterhenry's adaptability, calling Suckow's representation of farm women "neither flattering nor glamorous" (119).

3 Scholarship on *A Thousand Acres* customarily addresses Smiley's adaptation of *King Lear*. Mary Vermillion, for instance, argues that tragedy in the novel is based on the promises and potential losses of American exceptionalism. Sinead McDermott articulates Smiley's revision in terms of memory and longing, and Marina Leslie demonstrates how Smiley makes explicit and revises the "suppressed incest narratives" of Shakespearean tragedy (31). Sharon O'Dair layers adaptations, exploring the rhetoric of toxicity within Smiley's reworking of *Lear* as well as the 1997 film version of *A Thousand Acres*.

4 In *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century*, Roy W. Meyer argues that farm novels must realistically represent farm life. For Meyer, that means an accurate accounting of its material realities, characters' use of vernacular language, and the presence "of certain attitudes, beliefs, and habits of mind characteristic of farm people" (9), which include conservatism, individualism, anti-intellectualism, and hostility toward townspeople—characteristics which describe Larry Cook as well as they did August Kaetterhenry. Meyer also discusses Lorna Doone Beers's *A Humble Lear* (1929), an earlier adaptation of *King Lear* set in rural Minnesota.

5 Cunningham and Morris link farm work and aging through a kind of "masculine fatigue," which I discuss in *Old-Fashioned Modernism: Rural Masculinity and Midwestern Literature*.

6 See Mary Weaks-Baxter's *Reclaiming the American Farmer* on the links between pastoralism and modern black life: "Toomer deals with issues of identity, an escape from the South and a return in recognition of the significance of the past and its influence on the future, and the essential—but conflicted—ties of the southerner to the southern land" (61).

7 These two novels reflect the complex history of Midwestern farm women. Mary Paniccia Carden shows how *A Thousand Acres*, in particular, shows what happens when women disrupt men's control of the land. In studies of the farm enterprise, Mary Neth shows how the development of agribusiness corresponded with the enactment of patriarchal agricultural policies that attempted to sideline efforts at community building that that women historically facilitated in Midwestern farm communities, while Jane Adams argues that "the story of agricultural technification is in part the story of policymakers' attempts, only partially successful, to remove women from farming and make them full-time homemakers" (2). Regarding rural women's construction of and participation in modern life, Janet Galligani Casey and Marilyn Irvin Holt draw links between culture, capitalism, and agricultural professionalization.

8 August opposes the draft for a number of reasons, including "fear of change" and loss of independence: "To have someone tell his boys to do this and that! To take away his help on the farm just when he needed it most!" (103). Still, he cannot resist partly because his German ancestry could make him suspect within the community. William Cunningham's *The Green Corn Rebellion* similarly takes up rural opposition to the draft, contextualized within bankers' and other outsiders' attempts to control farmers.

9 August's and Larry's behavior lines up with Peters, Gupta, Stoller and Mueller's findings that "farmers are often unwilling to recognize or accept their physical limitations and the subsequent dangers to life and limb" (114). Similarly, David Kavanagh and James Stewart might classify August and Larry as "reluctant" retirees, though their health problems (and Larry's alcoholism) also accord with "indisposed" farmers who have been forced out of their fields.

10 Noting the significance of "name and gender" suggests how farming communities may be especially transphobic. Isaac Sohn Leslie interviewed queer and transgender farmers in a rural New England community and found that they regularly experienced heterosexism and transphobia, particularly in the form of microaggressions, and Julie M. Koch and Douglas Knutson describe obstacles faced by transgender people in rural areas regarding maintaining privacy and accessing mental health care. Such challenges contribute to Jack Halberstam's concept of metronormativity, in which queer people are assumed to desire and move to the city. Colin Johnson suggests that such narratives develop in part because the "hard evidence" of rural queer behavior "resists being easily incorporated into many of the narratives that govern what we claim to know about the history of gender and sexuality in the United States" (115). Miriam Abelson complicates metronormative expectations, however, by noting that transgender men who perform "rural working-class masculinities and whiteness" are able to integrate into US farming communities (1536), while nonwhite and more visibly gender nonconforming people were less easily integrated into the community. Still, through their analysis of the images circulated after Matthew Shepard's death, E. Cram shows the violent limits of integration for even someone who looks like "*everybody's brother* or *anybody's son*" (277).

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