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## **The coloniality of US agricultural policy: articulating agrarian (in) justice**

Garrett Graddy-Lovelace

Drawing on participatory action research with La Via Campesina's US member groups, this paper traces the coloniality of US agricultural policy – and the uses of this analytic lens. The framework of coloniality conjures history, contextualizing US Department of Agriculture (USDA) racism within long legacies of subjugation, while paying homage to historical resistance. It raises the stakes regarding the neo-imperialism of agribusiness monopolies, while highlighting divide-and-conquer strategies and the colonialist mentalities that linger on despite reform. Assertions of coloniality, however, risk nostalgia for 18<sup>th</sup> century pastorals, or may jeopardize hard-fought-for relationships of trust with USDA personnel. Deployment demands self-reflexivity, on the part of academia, which like the USDA is neo-colonial, yet not monolithic. Most importantly however, the discursive impact of coloniality builds upon existing, grassroots articulations of the need to decolonize agricultural policy. Calling out the coloniality of US agricultural policy echoes global revalorizations of peasant agriculture, while overcoming the constraints of the term 'peasant' in US-English-speaking contexts. Accordingly, it could facilitate dialogue among grassroots agrarian alliances within the US and, internationally, with international advocacy for peasants' rights.

**Keywords:** US agricultural policy; US agrarian politics; coloniality; discursive impact

### **1. Coloniality in – and through – US agricultural policy**

#### **1.1. *Relating US and transnational agrarian movements***

The transnational peasant movement, embodied in La Via Campesina (LVC)<sup>1</sup> and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other Rural People, has gained improbable, historic ground (Desmarais 2007; Edelman and James 2011), but what is its relation to agrarian dynamics and struggles within the United States? This question becomes pivotal when contextualized within the US government's antagonism against the Declaration and its vote against a 2015 United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council Resolution on the Rights of Peasants (the only nation in the world to reject it). Importantly, key parallels exist between US agrarian mobilizations and their international counterparts. Diverse growers are forging alliances across the country to overcome discriminatory and oligopolistic tendencies of US agricultural policy and to decry its neocolonialist legacies.

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<sup>1</sup>The organization currently has 200 million members through 164 organizations in 73 countries (LVC 2015).

This paper draws upon participatory, community-partnered research<sup>2</sup> with two of the three US agrarian groups within the LVC network: Rural Coalition/*Coalición Rural* (RC)<sup>3</sup> and National Family Farmers Coalition (NFFC).<sup>4</sup> RC and NFFC members are chiefly concerned with chronic agricultural crises, structural discrimination, and corporate consolidation across the agri-food sector. Environmental pressures and externalities weigh heavily as well, as does rural and urban community food insecurity – which RC and NFFC often ascribe to lack of community food sovereignty. These concerns echo critiques and calls to action put forth by LVC and the Declaration of Peasants Rights. In both international and national realms, growers are professing the need to decolonize agricultural policy (Grey and Patel 2015).

In light of these parallels, this paper proposes the concept of ‘coloniality’ to help explain *how* neocolonialism persists in and through US agricultural policy, even amidst reform, protests and interventions. As an analytical tool, it sheds light by linking seemingly disparate neocolonialist habits, namely: replicating discrimination and enabling agro-industrial empires. Translating the theoretical lens of *colonialidad* from Latin American scholarship builds upon what is already being accomplished through grassroots invocations of decolonization in the US and beyond. It connects critical race and feminist theories of colonialism to political-economic analyses in peasant studies scholarship; it could also help overcome unintended discursive impacts of the English term ‘peasant’ in US contexts.

In the 2013 and 2014 RC and NFFC annual meetings,<sup>5</sup> the term ‘peasant rights’ did not arise publicly, and the focus stayed primarily on assessments of national agricultural programs and local community initiatives. When the international dimension did arise, it concerned immigration, labor and the harm of neoliberal trade agreements on domestic producers. Why has the UN Declaration of Peasant Rights not (yet) emerged in these grassroots strategic sessions? Firstly, small-scale growers in the US are struggling merely to keep farming; the Farm Bill remains so complex and changeable that it often precludes attending closely to global agricultural politics. Likewise, a broad array of farm and food justice movements is currently working to build alliances among civil, indigenous and labor rights movements and anti-hunger, environmental justice, and nutrition and public health advocates. Exemplified by the Getting Our Act Together On the Farm Bill (GOAT) network – comprised largely of RC, NFFC and allies – these dialogues strategize how to reform and transform US

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<sup>2</sup>Facilitating community assessment of US agricultural policy entails mixed research methods with graduate students – from focus groups to agricultural statistical analysis to mapping to participant observation – and collaborative, dialogic analysis with community partners.

<sup>3</sup>Since 1978, RC and its

70 grassroots member organizations ... seek to build a more just and sustainable food system which brings fair returns to minority and other small farmers and rural communities, establishes just and fair working conditions for farm workers, protects the environment and brings safe and healthy food to all consumers. (Rural Coalition 2016)

<sup>4</sup>Since 1986, NFFC represents US family farm and rural groups ‘whose members face the challenge of the deepening economic recession in rural communities caused primarily by low farm prices and the increasing corporate control of agriculture’ (National Family Farm Coalition 2016).

<sup>5</sup>Annual Rural Coalition and NFFC meetings gather member organization leaders, allies, and US Department of Agriculture (USDA) officials in Washington, DC, to strategize agricultural policy reform.

agricultural policy.<sup>6</sup> The work, time and resources of forging communication and consensus across diverse groups within the US often preclude the work of international alliances.

Repeatedly, these strategic conversations return to the discursive conundrum of articulating past discrimination while upholding agrarian dignity; this parallels the international debate on the discourse of ‘peasant’ (Edelman 2013). I argue that attending to the discursive impact of analytic terms could facilitate dialogue across borders and languages, but also between movement actors and academic partners, particularly in the context of community-partnered research.

In his research on US colonialism, Goldstein asks how can

the diversity of colonial pasts, settler claims, territorial annexations, and overseas occupations be understood in relation to one another? How have specific normative forms of jurisprudence, racialization, violence, militarism, politics, property, and propriety served to at once facilitate and delimit the conditions of colonial dispossession? How and why do these formations matter now? (2014a, 4)

I suggest that US agricultural agendas, laws, programs and national identity help clarify how colonialism took place historically and how it continues to take place(s) now. This essay asserts the usefulness of the concept of coloniality in particular for understanding – and thus decolonizing – agricultural policy. The lens of coloniality helps describe how and why US agricultural policy remains internally as well as externally neocolonialist, but also builds upon articulations already underway within La Via Campesina member groups in the US and beyond.

## 1.2. *Colonialidades*

US agricultural policy demands critical investigation for its powerful role in forging and expanding colonialist disparities within the US and abroad, through material and psychological dispossessions. Tracing the ‘mythic character of agricultural legislation’ reveals how US farming has been constructed as individualized, white males, feeding a hungry planet (Dixon and Hapke 2003), even as such food aid or subsidized exports undermine local agri-food systems around the world. Accordingly, current interest in food politics requires reckoning with the intrinsically colonial history – and present – of agricultural policy.

Colonialism proper refers to the political-economic process of an imperial power’s territorial expansion into and violent occupation of other lands to achieve primitive accumulation of and capitalization of their natural and human resources for its own economic and political enrichment. It also refers to the historical age characterized by these missions of dominance and exploitation. Though some colonies continue to exist, most successfully fought for and declared independence, ushering in a post-colonial era. Yet colonialist dynamics and disparities have persisted, even after revolutions, in what scholars and activists call post- or neocolonialism. It also smolders on within national borders as internal colonialism.

How does such persistence happen? Latin American theorists have proposed the concept of *colonialidad* to elucidate how the *mentality* of colonialism survives official liberation, how it takes root in language and geographies of place, institutions and norms – and thus how it reproduces itself. Such recurring colonized subjectivities are encompassed in

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<sup>6</sup>GOAT is a diverse, national collaboration working to ‘strengthen capacity of grassroots communities in influencing national food and farm policy’. They focus on ‘equity, justice, and access across the titles of the 2012 Farm Bill and beyond’.

Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano's landmark concept of the 'coloniality of power'. Quijano's critique examines how the early capitalist world system developed through the violence of colonialism in the Americas, wherein two axes came to constitute *colonialidad del poder*: the codification of race and racialized hierarchy, and the political-economy of a new world market structured on control of labor and resources (2000). Both developed for European benefit – through Eurocentric projections of imperial rationality. These patterns of power remain, even as Eurocentrism becomes 'globocentrismo' (Coronil 2000), governed by neoliberal hubs of capital and authority. Coloniality 'encompasses the transhistoric expansion of colonial domination and the perpetuation of its effects in contemporary times' (Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui 2008, 2).

The concept of *colonialidad de saber* (coloniality of knowledge; Lander 1993) explains how the coloniality of power justifies and perpetuates itself through totalizing claims of expertise. Here, the geopolitics of knowledge and Eurocentric rhetoric of power re-inscribe spatialized, colonialist dichotomies of modern/traditional, developed/underdeveloped, us/them. Territorial, military colonization is complemented and sustained by epistemological colonization, through alleged universals imposed by colonizers and their legacy (Palermo 2012). The theory of coloniality moves beyond questions of authenticity or dependency (Estermann 2014) to investigate how hierarchies and subsequent injustices become naturalized and internalized in and beyond policy. In this way, *colonialidad de ser* (coloniality of being) addresses the lived experience of colonialist inheritance, and its impact on self, self-identification and ontology. Here, gender, alongside race and class, functions as a key site for coloniality's hegemonic hold on what it means to be human (Lugones 2010; Wynter 2003).

US agricultural policy has served as a vector for coloniality, a means through which political economies of labor and exploitation continue – through racialized hierarchies of class and gender. Such policies emerge from and perpetuate hyper-modernist agri-food systems that hierarchize both agricultural and culinary expertise, enclosing a privileged 'locus of enunciation' (Mignolo 2007) along classist, racist and patriarchal lines. This operates spatially through constructions and militarizations of borders (Anzaldúa 1987) and territory as well as temporally through constructions and erasures of history. Concurrently, the lens of coloniality interrogates who controls and reproduces these agricultural narratives in US policy, who defines agricultural expertise, who determines a dominant agricultural agenda.

The need to decolonize agricultural policy has arisen as a salient theme in US grassroots agrarian movements. Within and beyond RC and NFFC coalitions, indigenous and civil rights leaders are bringing this framework to the table.<sup>7</sup> Food justice scholars are challenged to 'relocate our goals and practices within a decolonizing and feminist theory framework' to avoid reproducing white and patriarchal agri-food systems and paradigms (Bradley and Herrera 2015, 1; Morales 2011). Food sovereignty, in practice

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<sup>7</sup>At a 2015 Union of Concerned Scientists' Food Equity meeting the NFFC executive director and I participated in, Ihanktonwan Dakota tribal elder Faith Spotted Eagle presented a four-fold framework of life and agriculture in the US: pre-colonial, colonial (when the 'government said we were doing it all wrong'), post-colonial (the 'aftermath of devastation') and neo-colonial (with people 'doing exactly what the colonizers did'). Decolonizing means 'deconstructing what we've been domesticated to think'. AfroEco founder Sam Grant presented on the urgency of decolonizing food, consciousness and community: 'colonialism destroys the autonomy of communities for self-determination around food, health, economy, public policy, livelihood. Decolonizing is a necessary aspect of the food sovereignty approach'.

and scholarship, is the ‘continuation of anti-colonial struggles in ostensible post-colonial contexts’ (Grey and Patel 2015, 3). In this way, activists have been ‘ahead of scholars ... because they experience these tensions in their everyday work’ (Kepkiewicz et al. 2015). Though the movement actors with whom I work and LVC generally do not (yet) draw explicitly on ‘coloniality’, this body of theory is not unduly inaccessible; I argue that it could complement and deepen existing, grassroots decolonial frameworks of analysis and action which have already become powerful means of education, dialogue, healing, alliance building and mobilization.

### 1.3. *Interna(tiona)l colonialism*

US agricultural policy has been emblematically colonialist, in multiple, well-documented ways, from the genocidal displacement of indigenous Americans to the staggering, far-reaching horror of the trans-Atlantic slave trade – both of which were deeply agricultural in context and content, cause and effect. According to Quijano, colonialism’s driving tendency and goal to classify created the biologized constructions of ‘race’ that remain dominant: ‘race became the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society’s structure of power’ (2008, 183). Racialization was used to justify extreme violence and oppression in the name of agricultural expansion and productivity. Driving these entrenched hegemonies have been the epistemic devaluations of indigenous, African diaspora, women-led and immigrant agrarian knowledges, which were capitalized upon while being formally disregarded and demeaned. Subjectivities of inferiority were leveraged against other subjected communities in colonialist ‘divide and conquer’ strategies. The expansionist project of ‘removing’ native people was underwritten by US agricultural agendas and policies of wheat and livestock, as Gates (1936) chronicles in his history of the Homestead Act and McNickle demonstrates in his analysis of the 1887 Dawes Act – ‘the unkindest cut’ (1957) – and its assimilationist coercions via general allotments which led to the loss of 90 million acres, or nearly two-thirds of native lands, between 1887 and 1930, to white homesteaders.<sup>8</sup>

US agricultural policy has remained neocolonialist in subtle and overt ways. It festers in unjust work conditions all along the food chain. These injustices depend on and deepen constructed hierarchizations of ethnicity, gender, language and nationality/citizenship. Coloniality focuses on the primary historical role of racialization in constructing laboring classes in a globalizing economy, and in justifying their egregious work conditions. Farm labor historians chronicle this dynamic in California, which produced the starkest race-based classism, among Native Californians, Filipinos, Indian Hindus and Sikhs, Mexicans, Koreans, Chilean, Japanese and Chinese. Even ‘white’ farmworkers were ostracized: Italian, Portuguese, Irish, Armenian, German, and Greek ethnic immigrants, if not displaced sharecroppers reviled as

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<sup>8</sup>One of the few tribal communities to survive the Dawes Act and keep undivided, tribally held original lands was the Menominee. Yet, after the 1954 federal legislation terminating treaty obligations to the tribe, Wisconsin ‘treated the reservation like a *colony* ... to be developed in the larger state interest’ (Lurie 1972, 260, emphasis in original), namely extractive timber, taxes and tourism. ‘All the elements of classic colonialism ... are clearly discernible in the Menominee situation’ (268).

‘Okies’ during the Great Depression. Ethnic segregation paved the way for class differentiations.

By 1913, farmworkers comprised the largest, most pivotal subclasses of Californian labor. Class difference – and disparity – resulted from

one group, farmworkers, [being] locked into a permanent wage-earning position and sharing experience – gang labor, uncertain employment, travel, domination, blisters, bad backs, camp life, fieldwork – under an exploitative labor system, in an industry whose interests were different and often opposed to them. (Street 2004, xix)

Class, therefore, gives ‘unifying meaning to the disparate experiences of the many races and nationalities who toiled in California’s fertile valleys’ (xix) – and still do.

The machinations of racism and classism necessarily work in close tandem in the world-system of capitalist expansion. Postcolonial theorist Stuart Hall argues that analyses of racialized and gendered labor help elucidate how class disparity itself happens:

The ethnic and racial structuration of the labour force, like its gendered composition, may provide an inhibition to the rationalistically conceived ‘global’ tendencies of capitalist development. And yet, these distinctions have been maintained, and indeed developed and refined, in the global expansion of the capitalist mode . . . . We would get much further along the road to understanding how the regime of capital can function through differentiation and difference, rather than through similarity and identity, if we took more seriously this question of the cultural, social, national, ethnic, and gendered composition of historically different and specific forms of labour. (1986, 437)

Focusing solely on class obscures how racialized and gendered differences fuel accumulation and disparity. That said, race and gender differentiations lead to hierarchizations that result in disparate and exploited social classes – a process exemplified in US agriculture. Demonstrating the central argument of coloniality, agricultural capitalization brought intensification of racism throughout and beyond the US: ‘This intensification represented in large part the prominence of farmers who responded to commercialization and the increased mobility of farm laborers by elaborating a labor and racial repressive framework’ (Montejano [1987] 1999, 316). Moreover, that labor has never been in the US Farm Bill speaks to colonialities of power and knowledge. Redressing farmworker exploitation requires changing immigration policies; agricultural policy is considered tangential, presumably innocent.<sup>9</sup>

Internationally, US agricultural policy has long served neocolonialist geopolitical agendas, chiefly the territorializing creation of new markets for US agricultural goods through ‘free’ aid and trade. The devastating impacts of US agricultural commodity dumping on agrarian systems around the world have been well documented (Murphy, Lilliston, and Lake 2005; Wise 2009; McMichael 2013). In 1998, US agricultural policy-makers told their constituencies that they were successfully using the World Trade Organization (WTO) ‘as a tool to break down agricultural trade barriers’ such that ‘the mere threat of US action in the WTO has helped to open markets for American agriculture’ (Congressional testimony, as quoted in Weis 2007, 139). Some scholars (and farmers and activists) have characterized these market expansions afforded by US export subsidies as ‘recolonization’ (Raghavan 1990; Friedmann 2005; LVC

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<sup>9</sup>Rural Coalition member groups – Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, Farmworker Association of Florida, La Mujer Obrera, Sin Fronteras and Food Chain Worker Alliance, among others – work diligently for immigration reform as agricultural reform.

2008; Walsh 2011).<sup>10</sup> ‘Cheap food imports were also seen to allow increasing agro-export production, typically in the rut carved by colonialism’ (Weis 2007, 101).

US agricultural policies have long had deleterious effects on small-scale farmers, ranchers and fishers around the world, but surely they benefit US growers themselves? Rather, since 1900, the number of family farms fell by 63 percent, while the average farm size rose 67 percent (Dimitri, Effland, and Conklin 2005). Under liberalization’s upward swing – but continuing a longer trend, small commercial farms (from \$10,000–\$24,999 in gross cash farm income sales) dropped from 51.2% of US farms in 1991 to 36.5% in 2007 (Hoppe 2010). Farm size increased during this time; acreage in production remained the same. One of the most dramatic US transformations in the twentieth century was the ‘national abandonment of farming as a livelihood strategy’ (Lobao and Meyer 2001, 103).

At this point it is worth focusing the coloniality framework on the domestic impacts of US agricultural policy. These proceed concurrently with international contexts and consequences, but the foreign policy dimension is so vast it deserves another – multiple – venue altogether. The internal coloniality of US farm policy merits attention because it destabilizes the dichotomizing fallacy driving neoliberalized trade: that US growers have benefited from the harm their exports have done to global farmer competition. In reality, there have been very few winners, and most winners do not farm.

What is the use of calling out the coloniality of the US’ domestic, chronic agrarian crisis? It pales in comparison to the explicit coloniality of the Indian Removal Acts, but these phenomena are related – precisely through the self-perpetuating mechanisms of internal colonialist power dynamics (Berry 1978) which plague all small-scale farmers and farmworkers in the US, but which fall disproportionately on communities of color: US rural crises have been aggravated all along, as coloniality of power would assert, by entrenched racism.

## **2. Racism and corporate capitalism: twin vectors for coloniality**

### **2.1. *Agrarian crisis, compounded by structural racism***

Though farm policy racism has seethed throughout the multi-ethnic diversity of American agriculture, the plight of African-American growers exemplifies the depth of the problem. In the early twentieth century, a ‘Great Migration’ of African-Americans left the rural south for the urban north to escape the violent bigotry of Jim Crow laws and to gain more economic, social, political and cultural autonomy: 90 percent of African-Americans lived in the rural south in the 1910s, but just a decade later, less than half did. Those who remained used their considerable agricultural expertise and experience to farm their own lands. Yet federal farm policy systematically undermined their endeavors. The importance of African-American land control gained public attention with the 1965 US Commission on Civil Rights report *Equal opportunity in farm programs: an appraisal of services rendered by agencies of the USDA*. Calling attention to structural racism, however, did not solve the issue. The USDA adopted civil rights laws even as its racism intensified in practice: ‘Indeed, after the *Brown v Board of Education* decision in 1954, southern USDA offices twisted programs to punish black farmers who were active in civil rights, and administrators in Washington acquiesced’ (Daniel 2013, xii–xiii).

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<sup>10</sup> From Columbus to today, the discoverers have not changed/ ... The only thing they understand/Is how to make money/Out of their discoveries/ ... The history has been known for a long time, but it keeps being/pushed back even when, one should say, especially when, it/ manages to free itself from the shackles of the dominant mind-set ... (LVC 2008, 21–22)

The 1982 USDA Civil Rights Commission further chronicled the ‘Decline of Black Farming in America’, warning that ‘unless government policies of neglect and discrimination are changed there may be no Black farmers by the year 2000’.<sup>11</sup> Discrimination permeated loan approvals, servicing and extension. In 1984–1985, at the height of the US farm crisis, USDA lent \$1.3 billion to 16,000 farmers – only 209 were African-American (Jones and Alston 2009). Reagan closed the USDA Office of Civil Rights in 1981, precluding formal avenues for oversight or recourse.

RC member group leaders and allies pursued more aggressive strategies for change, such as the Minority Farmers Rights Act of 1990. Introduced, but not enacted, it set the stage for legal and political successes thereafter. The 1997 USDA Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) report included 12 ‘listening sessions’ across 11 states wherein minority farmers gave testimonials of ‘years of bias, hostility, greed, ruthlessness, rudeness, and indifference not only by USDA employees, but also by the local county committees that provide access to USDA’s Farm Service Agency programs’ (CRAT 1997, 3). The searing findings laid the groundwork for *Pigford v. Glickman*. Secretary of Agriculture Glickman suspended government farm foreclosures pending the investigation’s outcome. Two years later, Consent Decree settled the case: the largest class action lawsuit and civil rights settlement in history.<sup>12</sup> In 1997, Native American growers filed a comparable *Keepseagle v. Vilsack*; in 2000, female growers filed *Love v. Vilsack* and Latino growers, *Garcia v. Vilsack* (Feder and Cowan 2013). The latter two were consolidated after being denied class status, but in June 2015, they received alarming news that 86 percent of the 22,163 timely, successfully filed complaints were denied, mostly on vague grounds of alleged fraud (USDA 2015).<sup>13</sup>

The *Pigford* cases succeeded in bringing the systemic racism of US agricultural programs to public attention (somewhat), and even more remarkably, succeeded in recovering modest reparation. But claimants suffered extreme bureaucracy, and the inadequacy of payouts in comparison to centuries of stolen labor, trauma and discrimination, as well as backlash and retaliatory – though ultimately unfounded – accusations of fraud.<sup>14</sup> Here, the persistent coloniality of alleged and racialized untrustworthiness persisted. Despite the CRAT report’s candor, the 2002 establishment of a USDA Assistant Secretary of Civil Rights (ASCR), and *Pigford*, USDA structural racism remained unchecked (GAO 2008). Institutional attempts to redress historical exploitation seek closure and absolvment, but US settler

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<sup>11</sup>The 1990 House Committee on Government Operations agreed: ‘Little has changed since 1982 ... providing assistance to minority farmers based on their representation in the total farm population serves to further exacerbate the demise of minority farmers ... [who received] less than 8% of all loan funds available’ (FSC 1992, 18).

<sup>12</sup>Black farmers recuperated over a billion lost dollars in the form of cash and tax payments and debt releases. Nearly 90,000 growers filed grievance claims; however, most missed the rapid six-months-later deadline. After a decade, 86 percent of farmers who filed discrimination complaints were unsuccessful. Obama opened a new opportunity for late claims, through the 2008 Farm Bill and the 2010 Settlement Agreement and Claims Resolution Act (*Pigford II*), which required Congressional allocation of an additional \$1.25 billion for valid claimants.

<sup>13</sup>The 706 Hispanic farmers and 3210 women farmers whose claims were accepted (only 6 percent of all who filed in total) received forgiveness of farm loan debt and tax relief totaling \$200 million – only 15 percent of the \$1.3 billion pledged by Congress for the program (Love 2015). Many Hispanic and female claimants, according to RC leaders, feel they were discriminated against twice – upon having both their initial loan applications and their USDA settlement claims rejected. Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC) and RC requested a meeting with Vilsack, who declined.

<sup>14</sup>Shirley Sherrod, a USDA Rural Development director and *Pigford* leader, was fired by Vilsack, after edited video was released insinuating reverse racism. The full video transcript exonerated her. She declined the USDA offer to re-hire her, and continues to be a community leader in FSC.

colonialism persists as ‘a logic of possession ... inevitability predicated on the disavowal of its own violent displacements and denial of their ongoing contestation’ (Goldstein 2014b, 43).

## 2.2. (Agri)cultural transformation

The Food and Farm Policy Diversity Initiative (DI) formed in the face of *Pigford* limitations, to ‘weave together’ the diverse, under-represented grower groups, under the banner of ‘socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers’. Led largely by RC member leaders, the DI informed and drafted more than 30 sections in the 2008 Farm Bill, securing nearly USD 1.5 billion for small farmers and ranchers of color, and establishing the USDA Office of Advocacy and Outreach. They also drafted *A seat at the table: diversity in the 2008 Farm Bill* (2009), alleging that the ASCR:

continues to be derelict in its duties and thus has become an accomplice to those individuals and agencies within the USDA that continue to discriminate. [Recent successes have not] led to any structural changes within the USDA that would cause a cultural change within the department – a change that would eliminate all vestiges of discrimination. (DI 2010, 2)

Facing 11,000 unprocessed civil rights complaints and multiple class-action lawsuits (Daniel 2013, 261), USDA leaders launched a ‘Cultural Transformation’ to create a ‘workplace where all employees and customers are treated with dignity and respect and provided the opportunity for success’ (USDA 2011). An independent assessment lauded its achievements in institutional diversity, work-life balance, and Market Penetration Analysis for ‘under-served populations’. Though it quoted RC in highlighting shortcomings, it complimented the USDA in ‘de-emphasizing the somewhat negative connotation of the historical term “Civil Rights”’, by replacing it with the aspirational goals of “diversity, inclusion, and accessibility” (conveniently acronymized as “DIA”) (USDA 2011b, vi). But what does it mean to orient DIA training for the USDA ‘workplace and marketplace’ (vii)?

The institutional attempt at self-reflexivity constituted an important step, mostly in showing how un-self-reflexive it had been.<sup>15</sup> Yet downplaying the Civil Rights legacy erases and de-politicizes history and social justice struggle. Relegating farmer constituents as program ‘customers’ seeking ‘market penetration’ aggressively assumes a neoliberalizing subjectivity and relationship – a point not lost on the community leaders themselves. Rudy Arredondo, Founder and President of the National Latino Farmer and Rancher Association and RC leader, resists this classification in interviews, public panels and before the Secretary of Agriculture himself: ‘I am not your customer’. He explains that ascribing ‘customer’ identity to growers disempowers them, limiting their agency to demand change; public service is not a business. Nevertheless, the USDA Civil Rights Policy Statement proudly aims to be a ‘model employer, but also a premier service provider to our millions of customers’ (Vilsack 2014), projecting a problematically passive and consumeristic *coloniality of being* on growers.

## 2.3. Small victories – with grant gaps

The crux of RC and NFFC mobilization has been to: advocate for USDA programs that help small-scale, minority farmers, agricultural cooperatives and rural communities; help

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<sup>15</sup> The vast majority of USDA employees interviewed (in some Agencies, 80–90%) disclaimed knowledge of discriminatory practices or unequal treatment .... *The very fact that so many USDA employees did not recognize the real problems of inequitable program delivery is a very serious concern, but may explain, in part, why previous efforts to address USDA discrimination problems have been less than fully successful.* (USDA 2011b, viii, italics in original)

implement these programs; and assess their efficacy. Chief among their successes is ‘2501: Outreach & Advocacy to Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers’.<sup>16</sup> It allocated \$10 million annually, though less than \$6 million was awarded in 1994 and 1995, and then only \$3 million a year in 1998–2000, with funding falling under discretionary, not line-item, congressional budgeting (Hargrove and Jones 2004). Though hindered by erratic funding, 2501 achieved unprecedented success, from stemming minority land loss to increasing awareness and capacity of minority growers about USDA programs.

The 2008 Farm Bill appropriated a record \$20 million for 2501. Yet, despite its popularity and documented efficacy, the 2014 Farm Bill both halved the funding and added veteran farmers and ranchers (a growing population, in the colonial present of Middle East wars; Gregory 2004) as target, eligible recipients. Speaking directly to USDA officials at the 2014 meeting, RC leaders called this cut a ‘tragedy. We took on the responsibility to work with veterans with half the funding available?’ FSC co-founder and RC leader John Zippert explained the multi-layered calamity of this cut in an oral history of 2501 at the 2015 annual GOAT meeting (see Zippert and Watson 2001): 2501 stands as a lone ‘keystone, exactly because it is a capacity-building formula’. USDA racism contributes to younger generations not wanting to struggle to keep farms afloat (Ellis 2008). The 2501 program intervened in this cycle of land-loss, serving as a gateway for historically marginalized growers to receive initial support from the USDA and thereafter gain training to make more use of its opportunities.<sup>17</sup> RC and NFFC leaders have been instrumental in forging this trust – through 2501 grants, but even in their absence. The USDA has ‘technical assistance providers’, but they often suggest secured/guaranteed loans, rather than direct loans, though the former have higher interest rates and cannot be restructured. Yet growers need technical assistance to learn about and navigate USDA programs, applications and project implementation. During the 2014 meeting, RC member group the National Hmong American Farmers reiterated their goal registering Hmong farmers ‘in USDA programs and getting true and real representation for our farmers so they will have a voice in this movement’ (Participant Observation 2014a).

An array of other programs – successes in their very existence – still does not adequately reach minority farmers: from StrikeForce to Agricultural Marketing Service to Beginner Farmer Rancher to Community Food System programs. Most programs still do not serve mixed-farming, small-scale production systems – the farming methods of RC and NFFC growers. Many require matching grants, prohibitively expensive for low-resource farmers, though since the *Pigford* case, the usual program cost share of 50/50 can be reduced to 90/10, if growers prove socially disadvantaged status. RC and NFFC leaders and allies fought hard for the Non-Insured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP), the insurance policy designed for non-commodity specialty crops not covered under standard crop insurance. On paper, the program is a victory for agriculturally diverse farming, but according to RC leaders in meetings with the NAP director, the program ‘isn’t reaching our members in the way it should. The goal is for groups to apply for and receive a loan as a cooperative, not individual’ (Participant Observation 2014b). Since many of the immigrant, indigenous and African-American growers farm through cooperatives (if not on communal lands), the individualized eligibility remains

<sup>16</sup>Decades of diligent advocacy – led by RC – secured the program in the 1990 Farm Bill’s Section 2501.

<sup>17</sup>The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF) and the Land Loss Prevention Project, among other RC and NFFC groups, work to halt and reverse minority land loss.

prohibitive. RC leaders informed the NAP director at the 2014 meeting that ‘risk management needs to be more inclusive’, and that ‘small, minority farmers have thrown up their hands at its challenges’ (Participant Observation 2014b).

These struggles to overcome chronic agrarian crises – which have fallen disproportionately upon communities of color – demonstrate (even as they strive to counter) a *coloniality of power* at work in US agricultural policies. This theoretical lens adds to existing analyses of African-American dispossession by revealing how ongoing processes of racialization and subsequent racism work to drive exploitative political economies of agriculture – and vice versa.

#### **2.4. *Neo-empire***

Calling out the coloniality of US agricultural policy expressly links structural racism (and its affiliated classism and patriarchy) to corporate consolidation in agribusiness sectors (Hauter 2013) – the elephant in the agricultural policy room. At RC, NFFC and GOAT meetings, massive food mergers took center stage. The issue arose in every breakout session, from agrobiodiversity to fisheries to the USDA Grain Inspection & Packers & Stockyard Act (GIPSA) director’s presentation. With the help of NFFC and RC pressures, GIPSA rules for antitrust were achieved in the 2008 Farm Bill, but the meat industry has effectively stripped away key regulations in the appropriation process, ‘with a thousand cuts’ (Participant Observation 2015a), according to an NFFC leader.

Agri-food concentration leads to chronic agrarian crises – in the US (Ray, De la Torre Ugarte, and Tiller 2003) and beyond (Heffernan and Hendrickson 2002; McMichael 2013). Early neoliberalism has ‘not drastically altered the main axes of this international hierarchy ... the central defining element behind this new configuration of new capital accumulation spaces is transnational corporation’ (Bonanno et al. 1994, 2); it has largely re-inscribed earlier power dynamics while augmenting disparity on into the twenty-first century. Extreme vertical integration of agricultural sectors creates an internal system of pricing and operation decisions that precludes market competition, policy oversight or regulation, investigative independent scholarship or journalism, or public awareness, leaving a global market ruled by a handful of remaining corporations. Such oligopolistic, monopolistic agribusiness conglomerates have proven to be not just trade-distorting, but trade-swallowing. The language of coloniality awakens consciousness of the neo-imperialist nature of these mammoth corporations, their economic fortunes that dwarf even colonial and imperial treasuries of the past, and their corresponding enormous political, structural and discursive powers (Clapp and Fuchs 2009) in deciding agricultural policy.

### **3. What is the use of calling out the coloniality of US agricultural policy?**

Why use the framework of coloniality, and not other, comparable ones? What does the analysis afforded by this discourse – and its public assertion – do? What are its risks and gains, and for whom?

#### **3.1. *Recalling history***

Firstly, the term recalls the multiple ways US agricultural policy has been colonialist. It demands remembering history – histories not (yet) etched in marble monuments. Colonial agriculture not only depended upon human bondage, but instigated and justified it. ‘We the People’ declared independence and proclaimed emancipation; so what explains recent

human trafficking in Florida tomato fields? The heavy baggage of this discourse throws its weight into an analysis that would otherwise be blinded by the banality of exclusion and subjectification, by selective national memory and state-sanctioned forgetting. La Via Campesina includes Haiti's revolution in agricultural policy briefs, because one can 'never stress enough that unless the enormity of what happened is eventually understood, it will be impossible to do anything with regard to the current challenges faced by humanity' (2008, 25).

In refuting claims that the 'post-colonial' asserted closure to colonialism, Hall eloquently explained the productive tension at work in the term (Hall 1996). Coloniality theories draw upon this tension, while evading any notion of linear temporality. It conveys how the mentalities/*mentalidades* of colonialism persist across time and space. As such it encompasses analytical terrain of its counterparts – imperialism, racism, patriarchy, and capitalism – by helping explain their interconnection.

Imperialism and colonialism, for instance, are worth differentiating: the former describes the sovereignty of an empire over a captured territory; the latter embodies the former's domination, and grounds it through occupation, settlement and the lived practice of control. The Latin etymology of *colonus* ('tenant farmer, settler in new land [as in: newly conquered by Roman Empire]') (OED 2015) belies its concurrent agricultural, imperial connotations – present centuries later amidst US western expansion: 'Colonization is an agricultural act' (Knobloch 1996, 1).

Coloniality carves out space to reckon with historical trauma. Recalling injustices leads to calls for justice, and contextualizes current agricultural policy activism within civil rights lineage and longstanding anti-colonial legacies of *la lucha*: hence the repeated refrain at RC, NFFC and GOAT meetings: 'All organizing is re-organizing'. At the 2013 meeting, Zippert read from King's 1967 speech 'Where do we go from here?' At the 2015 GOAT meeting, he read King's 1967 speech on the primary role of cooperative development in civil rights struggle, before reflecting on Selma and having attended the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Bloody Sunday. The 2014 meeting began with a rousing talk by community organizer Reverend Wendell Paris. He had already planned to open the meeting with the historical and contemporary importance of voting rights and personal memories of Fannie Lou Hamer, who, he quipped, had a 'PhD in organizing' and at whose feet he had learned the art of civil rights mobilization in the Deep South, against enormous odds.<sup>18</sup> That particular December morning brought news of the grand jury decision not to indict the police who had killed Eric Garner. The Reverend's exhortations to remember the tortuous history of racism in the US and to struggle onward in the long, fight for racial justice were particularly vivid and visceral.

Throughout the three-day 2014 meeting, farmers recounted to USDA leaders personal accounts of being denied loans and credit by racist local officers. Meanwhile, the same discriminatory officials have been there for generations, and some even promoted.<sup>19</sup> In the face of such obstacles, RC leaders advocated for a 'receipt of service' mechanism to document each case and interaction with USDA local offices. This novel means of accountability was

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<sup>18</sup>In 1969, Hamer spoke at the second annual meeting of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FCS 1992).

<sup>19</sup>Customers and potential customers stated that USDA policies and practices, often unintentionally, and sometimes purposely by "bad actors", result in the unfair treatment and denial of program access which have had a broad and longstanding negative impact' (USDA 2011b, ix). When pressed on this issue by RC leaders at the 2014 meeting, the FSA director admitted to 'some bad apples' in county offices, though at the federal level, such discrimination would not stand. This begged the question as to why bad apples would be left to rot and not removed immediately – since one bad apple spoils the whole bushel eventually.

finally implemented in the 2014 Farm Bill. According to the FSA director at the meeting, receipts of service are ‘good for both parties’, in that they counter discrimination, call attention to where and how bias is occurring, discipline local officials, improve public relations and build trust. Leaning over the USDA headquarters conference table, the FSA leader spoke directly to RC leaders who had traveled across the country to articulate this struggle: ‘We need a way to keep FSA accountable. Change will be slow, like turning a battleship’ (Participant Observation 2014b). But with the news of the Garner case so raw, the promise of mere transparency seemed weak against the power of entrenched racism: body cameras on local officials may shed light but do not leverage justice. What good would public attention do if there were no subsequent legal or institutional recourse?

The discourse of coloniality calls out (loud) the explicit and implicit sexism, racism, and classism of modernist agri-food systems, and the policies driving them: the micro-aggressions and environmental macro-aggressions lingering inadvertently even in positive steps. ‘While not discriminatory on their face, the application of statutes, regulations, and handbook provisions which permit the exercise of discretion or inject subjectivity into the decision-making process could result in discrimination and create barriers to participation’, admitted the USDA’s own assessment (USDA 2011b, 470). Civil rights cases like *Pigford* won reparations but also ‘aimed at the psycho-cultural legacy of slavery’ (Sanders 2013, 370). This perspective helps explain the aggregate effect of systemic marginalization of diverse agricultures on peoples’ minds and bodies. RC and NFFC member groups have actively foregrounded the nutritious benefits of native, traditional cuisines. Here, ‘traditional’ does not mean static, but grounded in ancient, living foodways.<sup>20</sup> Reclaiming historically devalued foods helps decolonize agricultural and culinary paradigms – transforming the *colonialities of knowledge* and being that dictate what constitutes ‘gourmet’ food (Janer 2010; Esquibel and Calvo 2013) and expert agriculture.

Coloniality theorists suggest delinking modernity and rationality from neo-colonialist clutches: extricating from imperialist notions of – in this case agricultural – modernity that seek to impose one limited yet totalizing rationality. This process ‘begins at the moment that languages and subjectivities that have denied the possibility of participating in the production, distribution, and organization of knowledge’ are able to do so (Mignolo 2007, 492). At USDA meetings, RC and NFFC leaders asserted the ‘need to diversify people at the decision-making table at USDA’ (Participant Observation 2014a, 2015b) – from review boards to directors – to allow for multiple, alternative, and diversified food systems, growers, economies, markets, crops, visions, and futures. In short: to transform the long-institutionalized and self-perpetuating coloniality of knowledge at work in US agricultural policy and research institutions.

### 3.2. Risks

Deploying a coloniality framework can risk miscommunication. Firstly, it faces the obstacle of a pastoral idyll of eighteenth-century farming, replete with founding fathers, yeoman agrarianism and stately architecture. US national identity has been constructed around valorizing colonial-era leadership – ironically within the revolutionary context of casting off British colonialism. Likewise, colonial agriculture remains celebrated (and historically

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<sup>20</sup>RC members La Mujer Obrera grow native foods at their El Paso Café Mayapan while Michael Kotutwa Johnson grows native corn varieties in Arizona Hopi lands (see videos on both at Farm Bill Fairness 2016).

re-enacted) for its allegedly democratizing influence and Jeffersonian-led agrobiodiversity. Upon conveying the term's more indicting connotations, another risk emerges: how one specifies the object of the critique. The vastness of US agricultural policy includes all Farm Bills, crop programs, land tenure systems, labor laws, USDA administration, judicial precedent, and the general paradigms governing and driving these and other realms. Who and what are to blame exactly?

Coloniality exists throughout US agricultural policy, well beyond its chief department. Participatory research with RC and NFFC demonstrates the complexity of their relationships with the federal government in general and the USDA in particular. US agricultural policies and programs are sites of debate, consensus and contestation. An array of stakeholders join the conversation, with concurrent commitment to sustainable agriculture, and divergent opinions on what comprises – let alone fosters – it. RC and NFFC have worked hard for over a generation to forge relationships of trust with USDA officials and Congress members, some of whom have become allies. This happens through and allows for exchange of information, negotiation, pressure and gratitude. House Committee on Agriculture member Baca lauded the RC-led DI

for their consistent hard work and commitment during the long and often difficult [2008] farm bill process. Thanks in no small part to the Initiative's efforts and advocacy, Congress crafted the first ever farm bill that takes significant steps in creating greater equity and diversity in American agriculture. (DI 2010, 1)

In the 2014 meeting at USDA headquarters, Foreign Agricultural Service directors thanked RC leaders for their extensive, effective and unpaid community outreach, which they acknowledged eluded their institutional capacity: 'We need different ways to do outreach. USDA had nothing for your grandfather or father, so you aren't going to come to us. How do we reach out to you and get in your communities?' (Participant Observation 2014b).

Even notable inroads get mired in the deep-seated nature of existing problems at USDA – one of the last federal agencies to racially integrate or include women and minorities in leadership roles and one still called 'the last plantation' (USDA 2011a). The agricultural census reflects this interplay of contestation and collaboration. RC and NFFC have worked closely with the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) to expand and improve their demographic questions to better represent the increasing diversity of growers. NASS keeps questions from 1840 to upkeep longitudinal data analysis, but want to stay 'responsive to new data needs', according to their 2014 meeting presentation. NASS began collecting data on race in 1900, and on women in 1978. Until 2002, a farm's 'principal operator' comprised the data profile. After pressure from RC and NFFC members and allies, thereafter, farms could list three 'primary operators', thus letting more female farmers identify as operators. Since then, NASS leaders request help from RC and NFFC members in devising new questions to match diversifying farmer realities: from urban agriculture to aquaponics. Despite substantial obstacles facing small-scale, minority and female growers, the USDA 2008 census chronicled a net increase of 28,000 farmers up from the previous census, and the 2012 census reported an increase in the number of farms operated by all categories of minorities since 2007: Hispanic farm operators increased by 21 percent; and African-American farmers by 12 percent (NASS 2013). This latter trend is remarkable considering the overall context of extreme land loss: nearly a million Black farm operators owned 16 million acres in the 1920s, whereas 19,000 owned 2 million acres in 1997 (Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin 2002). RC leaders are acutely aware of the power of statistics in quantifying their growth and

needs: ‘minority farmers want to be seen as a *rising force* in agriculture, despite 2501 being halved’, they explained to USDA officials at the 2014 meeting. Another meeting attendee leveraged these statistics in the broader context of USDA policy. ‘We are making accomplishments and want to be supported ... [despite] the big undercount of what is working on the ground’ (Participant Observation 2014b).

Another contestation–collaboration has been the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)’s Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative, which RC leaders proposed and advocated for in the 2000s until EQIP agreed to implement it in the 2012 Farm Bill. Controversial at first at USDA’s Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), high tunnels have become a remarkable and far-reaching success, assisted by initial comprehensive outreach on the part of RC leaders to their member group networks. By 2014, Seasonal High Tunnels were the most recognized NRCS program for a wide range of growers who had little other USDA engagement. After sharing four prominent success stories of tribal and rural communities and new growers increasing out-of-season production of nutritious produce, USDA officials admitted in their 2014 meeting with RC: ‘this kind of thing wouldn’t have happened at NRCS ten years ago. But now we are excited about it’ (Participant Observation 2014b).

Coloniality frameworks need to attend to the complex, fraught, yet fertile interplay of grassroots actors and policy-makers: in this case, USDA officials working within the ‘bat-leship’ to change its discriminatory legacies. A high-level USDA official told RC leaders in the 2014 meeting:

The needle you have moved down the road is actually astounding [since 1970s Farm Bills]. There are a lot of people in the [USDA] building who share your goals: social justice. You can’t let up. Keep your nose to the grindstone. There have been huge changes. It used to be if you don’t have row crops and lots of acres, you aren’t on the radar. Now you are on the radar. (Participant Observation 2014b)

This ongoing dialogue is part frustrating contestation, part fertile collaboration, part hegemonic co-optation and part headway in the long struggle of supporting, expanding and diversifying small- and medium-scale farming in the US – and abroad. US Congress sets the parameters of agricultural policy, while the USDA implements it; both need to hear the coloniality critique, but without jeopardizing hard-fought-for trust and relationships. RC’s and NFFC’s shared goal is to maintain effective avenues of pressure, through – not despite – assertions of discrimination and exploitation. Food sovereignty scholars are calling for analytic ‘deconstruction of the state – an entity all too often homogenised’ (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015, 443). RC and NFFC members have been working to disaggregate ‘government’ – in this case, the USDA – so as to discern its dynamic heterogeneity: the relationships, avenues of influence, pressure points, and obstacles to and opportunities for dialogue.

Here, a third risk arises: potential hypocrisy. The framework of coloniality allows for assertive, constructive critiques, by acknowledging that institutions and people can be both colonizer and colonized. In this way, the charge demands self-reflexivity all around, particularly on the part of academics launching the assertion; they are also implicated in a broadly neocolonial structure, which is also not monolithic and also a site of fraught yet fertile contestation and collaboration. How does one deeply entrenched in academic institutions, disciplines, epistemologies and research methodologies rife with coloniality point fingers?

### **3.3. *Discursive impacts: ascribing peasantry***

Foregrounding colonialities of power, knowledge and being necessitates scholarly self-reflexivity, which necessitates attending to the broader impacts of key discourses. Due to

the global rise of LVC and aided by the depth of analysis afforded by peasant studies scholarship, the term ‘peasant’ has reached a surprising level of political empowerment, embodied in the recent UN declaration on peasants’ rights. LVC began formal advocacy for a Declaration in 2004, aiming ultimately for a binding Peasants’ Rights Convention. LVC drafted a Declaration in 2008, thereby pressuring the UN to follow suit (Gopay 2015). Though the Declaration begins with a definition of peasants nearly verbatim to LVC’s, itself born of direct farmer input, the meaning remains murky. Is it a Chayanovian household-scale economic logic or a class of labor relations (Bernstein and Byres 2001)? Alonso-Frajedas et al. call for nuanced scholarship to ‘correct the homogenized – if not idealised – view of the ‘peasant’ ... the grey zone between market and peasant economy in which many rural people reside’ (2015, 444). “‘Peasantness’ has always been better conceived as a political claim than as an analytical category’ (Edelman and James 2011, 102). Yet, even if peasantry did serve as a technical term, what of its broader discursive impact?

Indeed, its definition has long relied upon its discursive impact. A calculated, exploitative political economy has driven the construction of peasantry (as lazy, backward and en route to the historical dustbin) as a means for displacement and exploitation. The associations of poverty assisted the *fact* of impoverishment – further fueling the association of poverty. Can this cycle be broken *without* recovering the term itself, particularly with half the world’s people falling into the category? The vast, collective decision to convert an insult into a rallying cry, to reclaim it with pride, despite – or perhaps because of – its heavy historical baggage, is an ‘act of immense courage’ (Handy 2009, 343). Van der Ploeg views this ‘re-peasantization’ – both in terms of demographics and discourse – as relational resistance: the way out of Empire-driven global agrarian crisis: ‘The rediscovery of the peasant as a theoretically meaningful concept reflects the socio-material re-emergence of the peasantry, and helps to explain the particular features of this process’ (2010, 1). Yet, theoretically meaningful for whom?

At the Declaration’s first consultation in 2014, the European Union proposed removing ‘peasants’ from the title, arguing that the English term is ‘disrespectful and discriminatory’. An LVC representative countered that when people suffer discrimination on the basis of their identity, their identity should be all the more protected – not removed (Chappell 2013).<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the Spanish translation has become a collectively self-described cultural identity allowing rural communities to maintain political and social solidarity for collective action. Yet, like ‘peasant’, *campesino* works ‘as a sort of shorthand that allows outsiders to talk about rural people without making meaningful distinctions among them, simply lumping them into an undifferentiated social group of the nonurban poor’ (Boyer 2003, 240).

Within the RC context, ‘*campesina*’ identity shares this function, but is also used in meetings and interviews to articulate abiding connection to ‘land-based life’ (*el campo*) and values, and, within tribal communities, to sacred lands and landscapes. In French, *paysanne* carries *paysage*, like *campesino* contains *el campo*; but ‘cognate terms in different languages are hardly ever completely coterminous’ (Edelman 2013, 2). The peasant economy framework facilitates important political-economic analysis of how ‘family farms provide a legitimation function that presents the illusion that large capital does not colonize farming’ (Loboa and Meyer 2001). Yet a myopically materialist political-economy explanation of

<sup>21</sup>LVC has successfully elevated the global profile of peasants, endowing the term with ‘a new and contemporary resonance’; at a 2014 Expert Meeting, participants agreed that despite its denigrating connotation in English, the term is used across the world in other languages without disrespect, and widely used and so deserves to be kept as the Declaration title (Gopay 2015).

agrarian crises can echo neoclassical explanations by overemphasizing macro structures that ignore household- and community-level dynamics, agency, principles and diversity. As colonialism utilized political, economic *and* cultural tools (Harris 2004), the coloniality lens helps overcome the disconnect between the political-economic and socio-cultural (Grosfoguel 2011). It could help overcome the discursive disconnect incurred in ascribing peasantry, within English-speaking US contexts. In the US as elsewhere, a new generation of growers is needed to learn the intricate art and science of agriculture. Even those who opt for more agro-ecological, cooperative production – who have ‘re-peasantized’ toward land-based life: would they identify as such? This seems unlikely among RC and NFFC whose growers cringe at the projections and assumptions encoded in the USDA official category of ‘socially disadvantaged populations’. They debate alternatives at all meetings: ‘minority’, ‘traditionally underserved’, ‘historically discriminated against’, ‘short-changed’, ‘limited resource’. *Socially disadvantaged* carries legal weight, but defines by deficiency, further obscuring a wealth of social, cultural and agricultural assets. Could it be re-inscribing a coloniality of being, even as it works to redress coloniality of power? These are subtle struggles – beyond mere semantics – with salient consequences for community organizing, youth empowerment, and food and agricultural dignity, which are all pivotal for engaging a new generation in agriculture – against steep odds. Celebrations of ‘re-peasantization’ – though intended to revalue historically devalued agrarian skills and heritage, risk ‘invoking an agrarian imaginary ... [that] homogenizes the thicket of social, economic, and cultural complexities afflicting the rural communities of the South’ (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015, 434) – and, I would argue, the North.

Peasant movements have achieved extraordinary successes across the globe despite great odds, but the very term ‘peasant’ may be a stumbling block for further mobilization across dichotomized US agricultural communities. Stronger alignment is needed between a vast array of domestic and international food and farm justice movements so as to leverage large-scale changes to the US’s domestic and foreign agricultural policy. From a participatory action research perspective, the rich body of peasant studies scholarship has ample potential to come into even deeper conversation with ‘in situ’ political theorization in the US. The discursive impact of coloniality picks up where the discursive impact of peasantry leaves off. Peasants have been labeled an ‘awkward class’ (Shanin 1972) and an ‘awkward science’ (Van der Ploeg 2012), and now risk being an awkward discourse in the work of bridging academic research on agricultural policy with community organization.

Attending to discursive impact begs the question: what is the use of scholarly theory to community action? Hall draws on Gramsci’s ‘concern with the structures of *popular thought*’ (1986, emphasis in original), in offering the metaphor of theory as collective struggle, the wrestling to find and make meaning, and as a process of interruption. Theory responds to and must stay oriented towards political articulations in the street – or, in this case, on the farm. Accordingly, attending to discursive impact – limitations and potential – of key analytic terms, from peasantry to decolonization, could help strengthen scholar–community research and relations.

### 3.4. *Beyond coloniality: conquering division*

By helping contextualize and connect race- and gender-based biases with the unprecedented power of agro-industry neo-empires, the framework of coloniality facilitates the process of decolonization. It sheds light on the colonial technique of dividing and conquering – and the necessity of discerning and overcoming these divisions. As farming declines, class polarization increases (Loboa and Meyer 2001; Winders 2009). US agricultural policy

debates resort to trope dichotomies of rivalry: American growers compete with global counterparts; urban and rural poor fight for slices of the zero-sum Farm Bill spending pie (Brent, Schiavoni, and Alonso-Fradejas 2015). Meanwhile, ‘subsidy-tarring’<sup>22</sup> ignores US rural crises, thereby hindering dialogue across rural–urban, as well as domestic–international, axes.

Additionally, the limited pots of funding afforded by aforementioned small victories remain chronically underfunded, in limbo or cut. Thousands of groups invest scant time, energy and internet bandwidth to fill out Kafka-esque applications with the hopes of beating out their neighbors for meager funds. A recurring theme at RC, NFFC and GOAT meetings concerns the competitive grant model that dominates philanthropic as well as federal awards, a dynamic FSC (1992) analyzed a generation ago: ‘Many of us in the cooperative movement feel that the funding sources, for their own reasons and interests, conspired to drive a wedge into the growing unity and development of the cooperative movement in the South’ (10). Despite – and because of – the competitive grants paradigm, these coalitions prioritize honest dialogue so as to forge durable alliances that can be leveraged to transform agricultural policy. This entails educating each other on respective agricultural policy histories, struggles and goals, as well as the ongoing task of articulating shared values (Holt-Giménez 2010).<sup>23</sup>

RC and NFFC members challenge neocolonialist inequities externally through lawsuits and protests, and internally through strategic engagement. This essay chronicles the analytical frameworks guiding this work – and braids in coloniality theory, which helps explain the ‘long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations ... as modern subjects we breath[e] coloniality all the time and everyday’ (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243). Yet, though pervasive, it is not a catch-all for all wrongs. To use it in a totalizing manner would muddle its clarifying potential and weaken its analytic force. Specifically, this realm of theory traces the mutually reinforcing axes of *colonialidad*: racialization and labor extraction for a globalizing political economy – and the gendered dimensions of both. The specific analyses of how *coloniality of power* happens through *coloniality of knowledge*, leading to a self-reproducing *coloniality of being*, helps articulate how these reinforcing axes self-perpetuate across time and space.

Resisting coloniality necessitates collaboration. ‘One does one resist the coloniality of gender alone’, Lugones writes:

The logic of coalition is defiant of the logic of dichotomies ... multiplicity is never reduced ... How do we learn from each other? How do we do it without harming each other but with the courage to take up a weaving of the everyday that may reveal deep betrayals? ... The theoretical here is immediately practical ... How do we practice with each other engaging in dialogue at the colonial difference? How do we know when we are doing it? (2010, 755)

The concept of coloniality draws attention to the indomitable diversity of US growers, and how this (agri)cultural diversity has been marginalized and undervalued by policy and political economy, but also how it has survived and is now converging in political mobilization. This recognition does important work within the US, and internationally, with regards to the transnational movement for peasants’ rights.

<sup>22</sup>Darryl Ray at a 2015 NFFC annual meeting presentation, echoing a recurring point by NFFC member Brad Wilson.

<sup>23</sup>The 2015 GOAT meeting workshoped a ‘New Bill of Rights’ to find common principles to ground Farm Bill advocacy.

RC and NFFC groups do not fall neatly into LVC bullet points, though they share foundational commitments to agrarian justice: many members know little of LVC's international presence or agenda. Scholars have a role in overcoming these disconnects, though as reiterated in GOAT's 'Stepping Up, Stepping Back' motto, there is already a precedent and risk of academics appropriating and simplifying a disenfranchised community's story – even as they try to uplift it. From a methodological perspective, relationships are crux, and words matter insofar as they impact relations of trust, dialogue and decolonial learning. There are multiple layers of usefulness in proclaiming and examining the entrenched coloniality at work in and through US agricultural policy: it connects critical race and feminist theories of colonialism to political-economic analyses in peasant studies scholarship, while helping overcome dialogic blocks of the term 'peasant'. As such, it builds upon, expands – and connects – analyses already underway in US-based and international agrarian movements.

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