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# U.S. Farm Policy as Fraught Populism: Tracing the Scalar Tensions of Nationalist Agricultural Governance

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The scalar tensions of nationalism manifest acutely in agriculture—particularly in the contemporary United States. This is paradoxical because farm policy calls for and enacts nativist governance that undermines the conditions of farming: from labor to water, topsoil, and pollinators, to export markets. At the heart of these scalar contradictions is the fraught, shifting terrain of agrarian populism. The intertwined origin of the U.S. Farm Bill, the American Farm Bureau Federation, and Cooperative Agricultural Extension shows how early twentieth-century fraught agrarian populism drove farm policy but how it also carried a pivotal consensus of recognition about the ecological and economic dangers of overproduction. Drawing on archival research at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Library Special Collections, discourse and policy analysis of U.S. Farm Bills, and qualitative research with farmer organizations, this article traces how racialized xenophobia accentuates the hypocrisy of U.S. agriculture's extreme dependency on migrant labor, as heightened borders also reveal their ecological farce in the face of intrinsically transnational climate change, soil erosion, and water constraints. The America First trade agenda decries imports while sidelining the crisis of commodity crop glut and the spatial fix of subsidizing exports as surplus disposal. Yet, even amidst the scalar contradictions of nativist agricultural governance and the fraught farm populism driving it, there existed a kernel of agrarian populism grounded in a collective honest recognition of the ecological, economic, rural, and social crises of overproduction—and that organized against it. This kernel catalyzed the origin of both the Farm Bill and the Farm Bureau but has been subsumed in and through both since. *Key Words: agrarian crisis, Farm Bill, Farm Bureau, surplus, U.S. agricultural history.*

国族主义的尺度争议，尖锐地展现在农业上——特别是在当代的美国。其矛盾之处在于，农田政策召唤并执行有损农业环境的本土治理：从劳动、水、表土、受花粉器到出口市场。位于这些尺度冲突核心的，便是令人担忧且不断转变的农业民粹主义领域。美国农田法案、美国农业事务联合会，以及农业合作推广的纠缠起源，显示二十世纪早期令人担忧的农业民粹主义如何驱动农田政策，但同时传达承认生产过剩的生态与经济危险之关键共识。本文运用美国农业部（USDA）国家农业图书馆特别收藏的档案研究，针对美国农田法案的论述与政策分析，以及对农民组织的质性研究，追溯种族化的仇外心理如何处于美国农业对移工的极度依赖之虚伪核心，而强化的边境亦揭露其面对本质上是跨国的气候变迁、土壤侵蚀与水资源限制时的生态闹剧。"美国优先"的贸易议程，在责难进口的同时，却旁观商品作物的过度供应危机，以及补贴出口作为处置生产过剩的空间修补。但即便在本土农业治理的尺度冲突和驱动该治理的令人担忧的农田民粹主义中，仍存在根植于对过度生产的生态、经济、农村与社会危机的诚实集体认识——以及组织进行反对的农业民粹主义核心。此一核心催生了农田法案与农业事务联合会，却也从此被纳入其中。 *关键词: 农业危机, 农田法案, 农业会, 生产过剩, 美国农业史.*

Las tensiones escalares del nacionalismo—en particular, en los Estados Unidos contemporáneos—se manifiestan agudamente en la agricultura. Tal situación es paradójica por cuanto la política del campo requiere y promulga una gobernanza vernácula que socava las condiciones de la agricultura: desde el trabajo, al agua, el mantillo del suelo y los polinizadores, hasta los mercados de exportación. En la médula de estas contradicciones escalares está el tenso y cambiante terreno del populismo agrario. El entrelazado origen del proyecto de la Ley Agrícola de los EE.UU., la Agencia de la Federación Agraria Americana y la Cooperativa de la Extensión Agrícola, muestra el modo como el inquieto populismo agrario de principios del siglo XX manejó la política agrícola, así como también adelantó un consenso crucial de reconocimiento de los peligros ecológicos y económicos de la superproducción. Con base en investigación de archivos en las Colecciones Especiales de la Biblioteca Agrícola Nacional del Departamento de Agricultura (USDA), en el discurso y análisis político de los proyectos de Leyes Agrarias de los EE.UU., e investigación cualitativa con las

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organizaciones de agricultores, este artículo rastrea el modo como la xenofobia racializada acentúa la hipocresía acerca de la dependencia extrema de la agricultura americana en el trabajo migratorio, en la medida en que fronteras de sensibilidad exacerbada revelan también su farsa ecológica frente a un cambio climático intrínsecamente transnacional, la erosión del suelo y los limitantes hídricos. La agenda comercial de América Primero condena las importaciones mientras deja de lado la crisis de superabundancia en las mercaderías de cosechas y el amaño espacial de subsidiar las exportaciones para disponer de los excedentes. Con todo, incluso en medio de las contradicciones escalares de la gobernanza agrícola vernácula y el tenso populismo agrario que la orienta, se dio una simiente de populismo agrario fundamentado en el reconocimiento colectivo honesto de las crisis ecológica, económica, rural y social generadas por la superproducción—el que organizaron como respuesta al problema. Esta simiente catalizó el origen tanto del proyecto de Ley Agrícola como de la Agencia Agraria, aunque ha sido subsumida por las dos desde entonces.
*Palabras clave: Agencia Agraria, crisis agraria, excedentes, historia agrícola de los EE.UU., proyecto de Ley Agrícola.*

"Our continent was tamed by farmers. So true," President Trump spoke at the American Farm Bureau Federation's ninety-ninth annual meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, in January 2018: "Our armies have been fed by farmers and made of farmers." After four years of farm income decline in the United States, debt, bankruptcy, and foreclosures have risen (Weber 2017), alongside farmer suicide rates (McIntosh et al. 2016). As of August 2018, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) admitted a decline in net farm income to its lowest level since 2002 (adjusting for inflation) and forecasted that median farm income earned by farm households would decline to $1,691 in 2018 (USDA ERS 2018). Low farmgate prices, labor shortages, and climate change–related natural disasters wreak havoc on U.S. agriculture. Yet, Trump's Farm Bureau remarks lambasted environmental regulation, vilified migration, and overstated the tax reform's benefits for farmers. He lauded Immigration and Customs Enforcement policing, the national anthem, the Second Amendment, and Andrew Jackson—all to applause.

The nationalism of contemporary U.S. policy and political rhetoric leverages the nation as a discrete, bordered political entity; concurrently, it asserts and wields the nation as the dominant and dominating scale of reference, allegiance, and identity. As such, nationalism carries a number of internal contradictions regarding who and what are included within the scale of reference of the nation—and how, where, when, and why exclusions occur. The engine of capitalism has long run on the generativity of contradictions and crisis (Mansfield 2004; Harvey 2005). Building on Gough's (2004) argument that shifting assertions of scale are "underpinned by a number of fundamental contradictions of capitalist reproduction and the state" (185), this article traces how surges in nationalism—deployments of the nation-state as the dominating scale of reference—accentuate these contradictions.

Environmental governance, as a dynamic and evolving process, employs various scales of reference to evade the ecological crises of capitalism. Under neoliberalism, it becomes entangled in the scalar contradictions of environmental regulations (Heynen and Perkins 2005; Carr and Affolderbach 2014). Yet, much of what environmental governance aims to safeguard falls under what could be called agricultural governance, such as land and freshwater use. Accordingly, understanding how environmental governance unfolds—or folds—during a surge of aggressive nationalism requires tracing the scalar contradictions of nationalist agricultural governance.

Scalar contradictions of nationalism become acute in agriculture, where exclusionary assertions of a national scale of reference undermine the very conditions of farming. That the scalar contradictions of nationalism become glaring in agriculture is itself a paradox, given the nativist tendencies of agricultural governance in the United States. This article focuses on the role of agrarian populism in this paradox and how the tensions comprising the contested, shifting terrain of farm populism drive the contested, shifting terrain of convoluted farm policy. U.S. agricultural policy currently answers to and amplifies a farm populism advocating for bordered, ethnonationalist exceptionalism—although

to its own detriment. Such political deployments of farm populism are not new, although they differ from previous iterations. This article contextualizes contemporary farm populism and policy within its historical antecedents. It focuses on one unique, although foundational, historical time period: from World War I through the start of World War II, the founding years of both the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) and the U.S. Farm Bill. The intertwined origin of the AFBF and the Farm Bill exemplifies how the contested terrain of agrarian populism relates to the tensions of nationalism, as demonstrated by a content and discourse analysis of the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Library Special Collections archives regarding farmer organizations in and between the world wars as well as of contemporary AFBF and state Farm Bureau policy agendas.[1] This historical analysis sheds light on how current fraught agrarian populism causes and emerges from acute scalar contradictions of nationalist agricultural governance.

## Current Fraught Agrarian Populism

The term *populism* remains slippery, with its increasingly divergent array of political valences. It animates all ends of political spectrums, either promoting or derailing democracy, decentralizing or centralizing power. The very vagueness of the term contributes to its potency, from authoritatianism (Scoones et al. 2018) to emancipatory potential (Laclau 2005). Amidst this wide, bumpy terrain stands agrarian populism, with its turn-of-the-twentieth century origins farmer uprisings against agro-capitalism—a democratic counter (Gilbert 2015) to liberalism, finance capitalism, and communism (Goodwyn 1978). I describe the term and realm of agrarian populism as *fraught*, both in the sense of being overloaded by the weight of projections and associations—many ominous—and in the sense of causing or being affected by tensions and anxiety.

At the heart of these tensions and anxiety I argue is agrarian inviability—the inability to secure a dignified livelihood and life from agriculture on a community level. The article traces this inability to the overlooked role of surplus, which has long served as a mechanism of agricultural exploitation and accumulation, a driver of scalar fixes and thus contradictions. Amidst the layers of coloniality, classism, racism, and gender hierarchies at play in U.S. farm policy, there has been a long-standing, although now muffled, conscientious recognition of the crises of commodity crop surpluses. This recognition served as a catalyst for a kernel of what could be called grounded agrarian populism at work in the Farm Bill: a grassroots, agrarian justice–oriented populism, grounded in community viability in land-based life.

That the contradictions of nationalism manifest in agriculture so acutely is itself a paradox, as the rural electorate led the nationalist push leading up to and during the 2016 presidential election (Scala and Johnson 2017). Many factors account for this situation, from enflamed racism and sexism, to the searing frustrations of rural "landscapes of despair" (Monnat and Brown 2017). This article focuses on the agricultural roots of the countryside's economic despair: the overlooked crisis of overproduction and secular price decline amidst rising input costs. Although rural does not necessarily equate to agricultural, the very fact that so much of rural economics has become nonagricultural points to the financial crisis of small and midsize farms and thus the economic limits of such farming. The intertwined early twentieth-century origin of both the AFBF and the Farm Bill hinged on escaping the disasters of commodity crop glut. A century later, the dangers of surplus have been hidden through neoliberal scalar fixes—as has the subsequent agrarian crisis itself. The domestic scalar fixes of "getting big or getting out" of agriculture work alongside the geopolitical scalar fixes of exporting surplus "away." In this one-eyed trade vision, a myopic celebration of exports obscures analysis of the downward price pressure of imports. Farmland and agribusiness consolidation result from this unchecked crisis of surplus even as they exacerbate it (Ray et al. 2003). Attending to the scalar contradictions that hide the problem of overproduction helps elucidate the further scalar contradictions that emerge from it. As such, it helps shed light on the fraught populism driving nativist U.S. agricultural governance and its deleterious social, economic, and political–ecological impacts.

The omnibus U.S. Farm Bill stands as a powerful yet nebulous nexus of issues, actors, alliances, and tensions. Highly complex and contentious, it has long driven land use governance, both explicitly through Conservation Title provisions and implicitly through monocultural production incentives. Under the Trump administration, USDA Secretary Perdue, and contemporary congressional agricultural committees, the farm policy goal of environmental

deregulation has gained robust traction, evidenced in the July 2018 House Bill markup. A major source of this deregulatory urgency has been the AFBF, the century-old farmer lobby and insurance organization. Representing 6 million people across fifty states, plus Puerto Rico, the AFBF wields noted political authority under Democratic as well as Republican parties, although particularly under the latter—all in the name of the "The Unified National Voice of Agriculture" (AFBF 2018a, 2018c, 2018d).

The AFBF maintains nonprofit, tax-exempt status but commands a multi-billion-dollar revenue-generating enterprise of insurance companies and for-profit farmer cooperatives and a stock portfolio that includes the major agribusiness companies Archer Daniels Midland, ConAgra, Monsanto (now Bayer), Phillip-Morris, and Dow-Dupont. Yet, over two thirds of its 6 million members necessarily include nonfarmer insurance purchasers, as the United States has fewer than 2 million farmers total. A long line of critics has assailed the elitism of AFBF (Berger 1971): Writing in the 1950s, McConnell (1953) chronicled how its lobbying prowess resulted in "on the one hand, a vast increase in the strength and influence of the Farm Bureau and, on the other hand, a great financial boon to the type of farmers who were the natural clientele of the Farm Bureau" (77). The organization did not originate explicitly to divide classes. In addition to complex, county-level mobilizations, called "grassroots" by some historians (Berlage 2016), the AFBF began with multiclass consensus around an original kernel of what could be called grounded agrarian populism (in the sense that it was grassroots, grounded in land-based life and land justice): political resistance to economic pressures to overproduce. Nevertheless, "the conflict between large and small farmers is in no slight degree the product of the Farm Bureau's rise to power" (McConnell 1953, 162)—and continues to be so. Yet, the AFBF is not monolithic, although it operates at the federal level as if it were. More research is needed to document and understand the internal class dynamics, tensions, cooptations, and contradictions within the AFBF itself—particularly because such demographic information remains publicly unavailable.

Questions of representation become all the more problematic amidst defiantly reactionary social exclusions. The 2017 AFBF Policy Book upholds marriage as the union between one man and one woman and opposes "granting special privileges to those that participate in alternative lifestyles." It demands English-only "Star-Spangled Banner" and Pledge of Allegiance and decries desecration of the U.S. flag or "purging of United States history by the removal of symbols that represent historic events and/or persons from our nation's past" (AFBF 2017a). The 2017 Policy Book updates AFBF's long history of racialized ethnonationalism, opposing "any program which tends to separate, isolate, segregate or divide the people of our country under the guise of emphasizing ethnic diversity." The militarized, racialized, patriarchal overtones unfold into a prosperity theology of individualized accumulation: "We believe in the American capitalistic, private, competitive enterprise system in which property is privately owned, privately managed and operated for profit and individual satisfaction. Any erosion of that right weakens all other rights guaranteed to individuals by the Constitution," the Policy Book asserts, articulating the contours of contemporary U.S. nationalism. "America's unparalleled progress is based on freedom and dignity of the individual, sustained by our founding principles rooted in Judeo/Christian values, commandments and the sanctity of life" (AFBF 2017a). Here, the original coloniality of U.S. agricultural policy (Graddy-Lovelace 2017) tears into the twenty-first century amidst layers of convoluted populism.

A cursory look at current AFBF policy agendas divulges social biases such as racism and xenophobia as well as political–economic tendencies toward labor exploitation and aversion to antitrust protections. Like the Farm Bill, it does not contest—and arguably enables—monocultural production and agribusiness concentration. Yet, a longer durée analysis of both discloses a more complicated story. Both the Farm Bill and the major farm lobby organization driving it were both originally grounded in a shared kernel of grounded agrarian populism: a consensus-by-necessity on the honest recognition of—and resistance to—the ecological and economic destructiveness of overproduction.

The fraught terrain and divergent meanings of agrarian populism have changed over the course of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries, shifting spatially and temporally as the scalar contradictions of nativist agricultural governance experienced cycles of being heightened, staved off with various scalar fixes, and heightened again. Nevertheless, on some fronts, the contradictions of nationalism have persisted: The

coloniality of indigenous erasure and white supremacy marked early twentieth-century AFBF policies as they do today. The 2017 AFBF Policy Book still opposes tribal sovereignty over native-held lands. On the other hand, amidst the Dust Bowl disaster, early AFBF advocacy for the 1938 Soil Conservation & Domestic Allotment Act acknowledged and foregrounded the ecological disaster of soil erosion. After nitrogen fertilizer obscured and deferred the impacts of topsoil erosion on soil fertility, AFBF policy sidelined conservation goals and has since come to defend chemical inputs and decry environmental regulations, impact statements, and even research. Meanwhile, amplifying and calling for increased policing of national borders accentuates the ecological farce of "building walls" in the face of climate change, water constraints, and pollinator loss—all sidelined by AFBF. It also accentuates their hypocrisy in terms of labor: America First policies posit an allegiance to the nation-state scale of reference alongside an extreme dependency on migrant farm work.

Accordingly, the vast ecological, economic, social, and geopolitical ramifications of the Farm Bill, and the AFBF's marked influence therein, demand geographic analysis. Critical geographic and historic research is needed to trace how a tangled early twentieth-century set of meanings for agrarian populism relates to a twenty-first-century set of divergent connotations—which range from AFBF lobbyists to transnational agrarian mobilizations for food sovereignty and agroecology (Desmarais 2007). The former now prefer the identities of producers and agribusiness to the old-fashioned adjective *agrarian*; the latter, although associated with peasant groups across the world, also exist in the United States in such organizations as the Rural Coalition/*Coalición Rural*, the National Family Farm Coalition, and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, National Farmers Union (NFU), National Young Farmers Coalition, and others. This article focuses on the organization that has consistently wielded the most political power and influence over the past century—the AFBF—but whose proximity to agrarian populism remains the most tenuous.

## Fraught Populist Origins of the Farm Bill and Farm Bureau

World War I catalyzed both the U.S. Farm Bill and the Farm AFBF. Agricultural production served internal nation-building and geopolitical nation-flexing but required local, county-by-county incentivization. With European farmers in the trenches, the U.S. government aggressively encouraged farmers to expand wheat production for export to Europe. A few years of unusually high rainfall in the otherwise arid Midwest—along with advances in machinery—led to a boom in farmland expansion. Growers tilled up the deep-rooted native prairie grass to plant wheat in what would come to be known as "The Great Plow-Up." As prices increased, farmers expanded their fields and new farmers moved westward to join the boom. By the late 1910s, however, European wheat production had rebounded, causing the world market to glut and prices to fall. Prices collapsed by 1920. For a decade, farmers responded by further expanding production, desperate to recoup investments. The U.S. stock market crashed, the Great Depression began, and the real aridity of the southern Midwest returned—but in extreme form. A devastating drought swept the region with prices still nearing nothing, hurling farmers into destitution and desperate migration.

The "farm problem"—the treadmill of surplus, plummeting prices, debt, further overproduction, topsoil loss, further expansion, and more overproduction—was a governance problem on two fronts: It resulted from geopolitical militarized nation-building, and it resulted in demands for domestic government intervention. Regarding the former, AFBF President Edward O'Neal (1939) lauded the "aggressive leadership of extension service in developing county farm bureaus" (3) before and during the war. The government made matching grants, via the 1914 Smith-Lever Act, to support county agents in augmenting commodity crop yields. These county agents served as AFBF representatives, thereby blurring the lines between public and private sectors. The Federal Office of Extension issued a 1917 Farm Bureau Organization Plan that described—and proscribed—AFBF recruitment strategies in fifty-three-page detail. In the "Food Will Win the War" campaign, a federated network of county farm bureaus became crux to the "national defense program to promote food production" (O'Neal 1939, 6). In 1919, the county-level farm bureaus merged into a national federation to secure federal clout. Impact, however, continued to move in both directions, with the USDA exerting influence on rural communities through cooperative extension (Ball 1936).

Although the county-level bureaus were "regarded as instrumentalities by means of which the USDA is brought into friendly, familiar, and collaborative contracts with [white, male, landed] farm operators," Wubnig (1935) noted, AFBF "attitude reflects the mentality of the substantially well-to-do, somewhat 'conservative' farmers who comprise the great bulk of its membership" (10–11). AFBF membership expanded sixfold between 1933 and 1945.

The sheer number of members, however, proves that they were not all elite. The organization as a whole, though, arose as a counterweight to the previous generation's "interludes of agrarian fury" (McConnell 1953, 5): Although the radical anticapitalist agrarian populist movement of the late nineteenth century had dissipated somewhat due to political losses, and then during the throes and farm-gate prices of World War I, "the memory of it was still vivid in the minds of members of grain exchanges, heads of farm equipment trusts, and directors of banks. It is even likely that some of these glimpsed the possibility of enlisting organized agriculture or, rather, re-organized agriculture on the side of capitalism" (McConnell 1953, 20). USDA Secretary Houston famously called on farmers to join or form farm bureaus to "stop Bolshevism," and AFBF President Howard asserted, "I stand as a rock against radicalism" (McConnell 1953, 48). As the product of prosperity rather than plight, the AFBF included nonelite farmers but under the broader guise of lifting them into higher echelons of class and political influence. It strove not to include the masses; hence its widespread requirements of high dues. Even in the throes of the Depression, farmers largely opted for government engagement rather than revolution: "In a large sense, the conduct of the Farm Bureau through the great depression can be regarded as a substantial return on the investment in concern for agricultural welfare which business groups had made in the proceeding period" (McConnell 1953, 56).

Nevertheless, the complexity of farm and home bureaus—their procapitalist populism—merits attention. The Farm Bureau Community Handbooks strategically included women and children, thereby expanding the protagonists of the family farm. This also worked to emphasize, reinforce, and define the role of family, home, and family farm following colonial settler gender roles and hierarchies. People joined for political power at the federal level but also to take advantage of AFBF's scientific, educational, and social projects of professionalization, moralism, and functional specialization. Club culture arose (Berlage 2016) around rural connection and empowerment. Scientization of domestic and farm economies and ecologies countered the inferiority felt in relation to industrialization, urbanization, and international markets—an inferiority exemplified in the AFBF speech "Shall American Farmers Become Peasants?" (Dodd 1938). The AFBF had become a "chamber of agriculture," mirroring city chambers of commerce (O'Neal 1936, 6). It fit farming into nationalistic discourses of modernization and progress to legitimize the agricultural economies and ecologies as technical. Farmers were able to interface with government agencies as "experts" in their own fields (Porter 2000) and as a united front against encroaching powers of railroads, cities, and industry (Kile 1948).

County-level farm bureaus had emerged as mechanisms of government pressure to produce but then became means by which farmers countered the ills of surplus. It was after World War I when the AFBF congealed, as other farmer organizations reckoned with the implications of (over)production. Amidst war:

> the government urged as a patriotic duty that farmers increase their production in every possible way. The result was that a large area of marginal and submarginal land was brought into production. Due to the fact that agriculture cannot readily adjust supply to demand, these marginal acres have been producing surpluses that have demoralized the prices of farm products and brought great economic distress. It has been recognized that inasmuch as the government was largely responsible in bringing into production these marginal acres, there is a direct responsibility to assist in bringing about a readjustment. (National Cooperative Council 1936, 5)

The collapse of agricultural prices in 1920, even as nonagricultural prices and wages remained rigid, aggravated disparity between farm income and costs. Facing plummeting prices, farmers organized out of necessity. A wide array of farmer groups emerged and diverged over how to survive the crisis.

A USDA internal memo surveyed what became known as the "Farm Bloc," from the National Grange to the United Farmers League ("the extreme left wing of the farmers' movement, sought to organize small farmers against rich farmers, land bankers, and New Dealers"; USDA n.d., 20), to the Farmers

Holiday Association ("a full-blown representative of traditional agrarian radicalism"; USDA n.d., 20). The latter called on farmers to stage general strikes in the face of Depression farm foreclosures. As "the only organization which speaks for the 'Class interests' of American farmers," NFU "carries its radicalism a good long way … [and] maintains further that most of the 'orthodox and respectable' farmers organizations are in effect 'company unions'" (USDA n.d., 15–16). This final chide at the AFBF articulated an allegation and tension that has persisted for a century. Despite internal oppositions, the dire situation forced dialogue among this wide array of farmer organizations. The Farm Bloc ultimately converged on the central demand of "equality for agriculture" through *parity*, a term that originally referred to ratio prices matching pre–World War I farmer viability but then came to refer to equity between agricultural and industrial sector purchasing power. To secure parity, farmer advocate George Peek declared that he would "strip to the waist to fight for remedial legislation which will provide for the disposal of the surplus" (as cited in Porter 2000, 385). Although idiosyncratic as a technical term, parity persisted as a rallying cry, anchoring farmer mobilizations for farm justice even through the early 1980s farm crisis (Naylor 2017).

The AFBF emerged as part of broader phenomenon of necessitated horizontal collaboration among farmers across the national scale of reference—and as unique in its intimacy with the federal government. A 1929 USDA press release chronicling the "Government's Policy towards the Cooperative Movement" surveyed the tenuous situation: "Agriculture has inherent difficulties which cannot be overcome by the individual producer. It is a far-flung industry characterized by small producing units" (Hyde 1929, 1). The inherent difficulties of capitalist agriculture hinged on intrinsic competition, which would only be solved by organization, even as, left to its own allegedly self-regulating devices, it results in consolidation and lack of competition: "We cannot merge six million farms into one gigantic producing corporation." As surpluses mounted, farm prices dropped further: "Circumstances were forcing agriculture toward a unified front" (Gregory 1935, 154)—with each other and with government. With statutory minimum wages and maximum hours achieved by and for labor groups and government aid and price controls for industry, agriculture deserved *parity*: the "most sacred text in the Bureau scriptures" (Saloutos 1947, 315).

Having set up Washington, DC, headquarters and lobbying hard to secure bipartisan leverage, the AFBF led the fight for legislative farm relief with the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). As the "magna charta of American agriculture" (Gregory 1935, 156), the AAA instituted supply management techniques such as acreage controls and domestic allotments. The 1933 AFBF annual conference address basked in their legislative success: "We rightfully feel that we not only should claim the victory, but … that we have a primary responsibility and great opportunity in its successful administration" (AFBF 1933). Two years later, President Roosevelt spoke to the 20,000 men and women gathered at the annual AFBF meeting in Chicago, marveling at their size, political power, and political success: "There was more than mere braggadocio in this statement that 'the Farm Bureau and the A.A.A. are inseparable'" (McConnell 1953, 75).

When the Supreme Court overturned the AAA due to an unconstitutional funding mechanism, within days hundreds of farm organization leaders convened on Washington, where they completed recommendations in two days. USDA Secretary Henry Wallace lauded them over national radio: "The most important thing that has been accomplished is the demonstration that farmers do not need to sit helpless while the ruthless forces of unrestrained individualism grind them down" (Wallace 1937, 2). By the 1938 AAA, AFBF had become a fixture in both the seat of federal government and in small-town county seats across the nation. AAA Administrator Evans (1939, speech; author's notes) noted, "I believe that when a farmer joins a farm organization he is joining an insurance society to see that his interests are properly represented in any case where collective action is effective." Indeed, by 1939, AFBF literally expanded to the insurance sector, ultimately selling life, fire, farm, automobile, and health plans, solidifying its centrality in underserved rural realms. As a political powerhouse and expanding insurance empire—with corresponding growth in membership and congressional influence, the AFBF would shape agricultural politics in the decades to come, eventually becoming the primary voice of agriculture on the national political stage.

A century after their intertwined origin, the relationship of the AFBF to the Farm Bill continues to constitute the contested terrain of farm populism, as the widely divergent and convoluted notions of

agrarian populism make their way into convoluted farm policy that now drives nationalism. Driving the tensions of this fraught terrain are a set of scalar contradictions: exclusionary assertions of a national scale of reference that undermine the very conditions of farming.

## Ecological Scalar Contradictions

The 1930s brought—arguably forced—a pivotal moment of ecologically oriented farm policy: Suddenly, the nation-state scale of reference invoked by U.S. farm policy and populism hinged on topsoil. "Conservation of soil is the last line of defense against national suicide," USDA Secretary of Agriculture Wallace warned (Wallace 1936, 10), as ominous dust settled on President Franklin D. Roosevelt's White House desk. The Dust Bowl brought stark reckoning for bringing 50 million new acres under wartime production and rendered it impossible to "ignore the crime of perpetuating an exploitative agriculture which already is bringing to the front a physical crisis in land—land, which is the heritage of all people" (Wilson 1936, 3). Foregrounding soil allowed the Farm Bloc to rescue the 1933 AAA: "Cooperative conservation is better than competitive destruction" (Tolley 1936, 13). "Under the present Triple A program, restraint upon production of surplus commodities is a by-product of soil conservation" (Tolley 1936, 14). In a 1936 radio program, Wallace admonished "shipping our soil fertility at bargain prices to foreign countries … merely to satisfy certain special interests which profit by volume" (Wallace 1936a, 7). From the 1938 Soil Conservation & Domestic Allotment Act onward, the Conservation Title has dutifully followed the primary Commodities Title in all subsequent Farm Bills. It has remained a nominal governance priority, although its programs are voluntary and its funding was negligible until the working lands programs in the 1980s, and more recently is minimal and erratic.[2]

By the late twentieth century, soil conservation ranked low in AFBF priorities and thus Farm Bill policies. Nitrogen fertilizer staved off the "accelerating biophysical contradictions" (Weis 2010) of nutrient-extractive crop production. This has allowed a deeper settler-coloniality, original to the AFBF and the Farm Bill, to resume, long after the Dust (Bowl) settled. The ecological short-sightedness of vastly extractive agricultural production can be understood as a scalar contradiction of nationalism: The biophysical processes so crucial to agriculture—topsoil fertility, fresh water, and pollinators, among others—are themselves undermined. Here, the scale of reference of one's homeland excludes the well-being of the land itself; patriotic allegiance to one's "country" leaves the actual countryside degraded. Land is valued as property but not as the processes that comprise and regenerate the (ecological) services, benefits, and resources that make such property valuable. In the process of rendering land territorial gain, land is rematerialized from its composite ecologies and reduced to a means of production and accumulation.

No issue galvanized AFBF members and Trump supporters more effectively than the alleged overreach of the "Waters of the U.S." (WOTUS) Rule, which defines the jurisdiction of the Clean Water Act over waters that have a "significant nexus" with navigable waters. AFBF erroneously claimed that this meant puddles and ditches, catalyzing a successful "Ditch the Rule" action alert and lobbying campaign (AFBF 2015). In reality, the rule posits a case-by-case determination of water pollution and does not exempt nonpoint source pollution and emissions. Meanwhile, agricultural input runoff contributes to unprecedented levels of hypoxia, eutrophication, and dead zones in U.S. riversheds, deltas, and bays—with decades and centuries of legacy pollutants from upstream agriculture. AFBF has also opposed organic research funding, the Endangered Species Act, mandatory environmental impact statements, and expansions to the conservation reserve working lands programs, despite record farmer demand for them. Arguably, soil conservation does not necessarily contradict with environmental deregulation, as the former can merely allow for more accumulation. In the aggregate, however, the ecological scalar contradictions of the Farm Bill become glaring in current Conservation Title cuts, advocated heartily by AFBF lobbying.

The ecological aspects of the nationalist scalar contradictions reach new heights with climate change. Despite leading 1990s advocacy for cap-and-trade plans, the AFBF now downplays global warming, inviting prominent climate critics to their conventions. At the 2010 annual AFBF meeting, then-President Bob Stallman warned of cap-and-trade proponents: "The days of their elitist power grabs are over" (Abbott

2010). Without denying anthropogenic climate change, the AFBF posits technological, market-based fixes, from genomic editing to agrofuel crops. In an interview, their executive policy director told me that it would be "unfair" to hold U.S. farmers responsible for a global issue. In a slippery deployment of nationalism, the AFBF policy agenda states: "In the absence of an international agreement to which all nations are committed, we do not believe the United States should saddle the U.S. economy with costs and regulations that will not result in a meaningful impact on the climate" (AFBF 2017a); meanwhile, they assert explicit support for "the U.S. coal industry and coal-fired electrical generating plants to help achieve energy independence." As climate change weather events, from droughts to storms to fires, aggravate agricultural vulnerability, questions of climate risk management proliferate.

## Scalar Contradictions of Labor, Borders, and Trade

The ecological oversights of nationalist farm policy work alongside even more glaring scalar contradictions of labor. The Farm Bill does not cover farmworker policies directly but, like the AFBF, it emerged from the racialized throes of early twentieth-century farm labor politics. For a century, the AFBF has lobbied effectively to secure an ample reserve of low-wage, nonunion farm labor unhindered by labor protection regulations. It began by working, in the 1910s, alongside other farm organizations, such as the Associated Farmers of California, and citrus and sugar farm organizations that embarked on a "strike breaking and 'union busting' campaign of extraordinary rigor and virulence" (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1920, 22). Characterized by racism and white supremacy, citrus and sugar leagues met regularly "off the record" to ensure that white planters and farm operators would keep wages for black workers extremely low, and they persuaded New Deal agencies to "purge" their rural relief roles of able-bodied black men to keep them desperate for work and thus brutally exploited in "big gangs which toil under the supervision of overseers" (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1920, 30). These tactics continued post-Reconstruction Southern "Black Codes and Labor Control" legislation that sought to keep the valuable labor of freed African Americans "available to the agricultural interests" (Royce 1993, 63). These schemes festered on in the Farm Bureau's attack on the Farm Security Administration (FSA) for encouraging production among low- and medium-income farmers and "subsidized people who had been failures as farmers" (Saloutos 1947, 331). This classism was racialized and racist: The FSA program bravely aimed to support black farmers, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers, and the AFBF successfully shuttered it (McConnell 1953). All the while, the AAA excluded tenant—and black—farmers from its allegedly populist beneficence.

As farm labor organized in the 1960s, the AFBF counterorganized, denouncing minimum wage and maximum hour demands as "class legislation" (Saloutos 1947, 325). County farm bureaus' positions remained "of course, that of the farm employer seeking a large supply of low wage labor" (Wubnig 1935, 12). The AFBF fought for and gained agricultural exemptions from the National Labor Relations Act. By the 1930s, nearly half a million tenant and sharecropper families had been displaced—"tractored out"—in the South alone. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) gained improbable traction resisting exploitative tenant and labor policies (Grubbs 2000), even as key leaders suffered arrest and imprisonment without charges or legal records: "All indications point to an open and shut case of 'Peonage' (holding a man in slavery)" (Mitchell 1940, 12). STFU members countering voter suppression suffered mob attacks by local, prominent landowners as well as eviction. Labor battles expanded in the 1940s, as World War II labor shortages and food demands hamstrung farm production. The Bracero Program leveraged the scalar fix—and contradiction—of ethnonationalism; long-standing labor exploitations gained new ground with racialized hierarchies of citizenship. In their online history, the AFBF (2017b) vilifies Cesar Chavez as instigating "radical solutions to their concerns over perceived farm labor problems," remembers the grape boycott as troublesome for farmers, and positions AFBF as the victim: United Farm Workers "chose Farm Bureau as a direct target of their … pickets and protests" (AFBF 2018c). In a scalar contradiction of racist, classist nationalism, alleged farm populism belies elite accumulation as it goes to extreme lengths to secure a surplus of exploited labor.

Currently, anti-immigrant farm politics stoke a white ethnonationalism that belies the reality of the estimated 2.5 to 3.0 million, largely immigrant, men,

women, and children who toil in U.S. farms, ranches, and animal feeding operations. According to the 2014 Department of Labor's National Agricultural Workers Survey, nearly half lack formal work authorization, although other experts estimate the number at closer to 70 percent. Anti-immigrant policies increase deportation, raids, and border policing, leading to agricultural labor shortages; geographers, however, track the ways in which this legal liminality serves the interests of an agricultural sector dependent on subjugated labor (Clark 2017). Farm operators, needing workers, have turned increasingly to the H-2A Visa Program (which replaced the Bracero Program in 1964) for temporary, foreign agricultural workers. The Department of Labor certified 200,000 H-2A visas in 2017, doubling 2013 rates. At their 2018 annual meeting, AFBF President Zippy Duvall foregrounded the farm labor crisis: "Everywhere I go, no matter which region or state, farmers tell me this is the No.1 problem they face—not enough ag workers to get their crops out of the field. … We hear from livestock producers and dairy farmers that lose all their workers whenever ICE comes looking for one bad guy" (Duvall 2018, 9). AFBF now lobbies for the H-2C Visa Agricultural Guestworker Act to replace H-2A visas to override the latter's minimum wages, basic worker protections from toxic pesticides, and obligations for housing and transportation of workers to and from fields: "increasing immigration enforcement without also reforming our worker visa program will cost America $60 billion in agricultural production" (AFBF 2018d). H-2C visas exemplify the scalar contradictions of nationalist agriculture: "Agriculture needs a program that functions as efficiently as the current free market movement of migrant farm workers." They force workers into short-term, low-wage contracts in farming, forestry, aquaculture, and meat processing facilities, and prohibit family members from joining them. "There are certain farm jobs, like tending livestock and pruning or picking fresh produce, which require a human touch" (AFBF 2018d). Deploying searing double moves, AFBF admits the skills of farmworkers—and even their humanness (to stave off suggestions of mechanization)—even as they advocate inhumane work conditions and policing: "Farmers must be able to keep their experienced workers—their trustworthy, right-hand men and women who have worked with them for years and can get the work of the farm done. Our proposal offers a tough but fair solution for these workers and their employers. Enforcement is an important part of the solution, but not the whole solution" (AFBF 2018a, 2018c, 2018d). A scalar contradiction erupts: The people doing the work of farming, who increasingly live in and make up U.S. rural communities, become dehumanized, in a searing scalar double move that includes to exploit even as it excludes to evict. The AFBF supports rampant raids for appropriation-by-criminalization even as the hypocrisy of deportations leaves harvests rotting in the field.

The AFBF remains avowedly opposed to labor organizations, supporting laws that would "mandate specific penalties for unions, union members and public employees who engage in illegal strikes, and prohibit the use of amnesty in such situations" (AFBF 2017a,). They call for exemption of foodservice-sector employees from minimum wage, and they support retention of agricultural exemption from the overtime requirements of Fair Labor Standards Act and oppose earned sick leave. They oppose worker protection standards regarding field-entrance pesticide signage and demand that the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration "repeal its farm labor housing regulations, since such housing is not a workplace" (AFBF 2017a). Following a century of conflating unions to monopolies, the 2017 AFBF Policy Book calls for legislation to amend antitrust laws "to further limit the anti-trust immunity of labor unions" (AFBF 2017a). Trump's 2017 Executive Order on Promoting Agriculture and Rural Prosperity in America systematically divorces the people who own and administer the farms from those who physically upkeep their daily operations, the latter of whom remain racialized, dehumanized, and severed from the rural communities they live and work in—and keep afloat.

The racism of this scalar contradiction seeps beyond xenophobic labor hypocrisies. Anti-indigenous settler coloniality stands firm with opposition to the very term indigenous "sovereign nations," the federal designation of reservations as sovereign states, or "any effort of any federally recognized Native American Tribe to extend their reservation status or sovereignty to non-tribal lands" (AFBF 2017a). In yet another scalar contradiction of white supremacy, nativist agricultural governance aims to subjugate Native agriculture and self-governance.

Ethnonationalism also unfolds in trade, the other major AFBF policy agenda. U.S. agricultural policy

posits a scalar contradiction of world trade, wherein U.S. farmers outcompete their global counterparts with dumped exports, feed them with aid, but remain immune to the reciprocal risks of imports. In this one-eyed vision of trade, imports remain invisible, and food security discourses wield geopolitical prowess of future market dependence. The original AAA emerged as a Polanyian attempt to protect farmers from post–World War I swings in global commodity prices. "Prior to the AAA, nearly half the farmers' income was subject to the vicissitudes of the world market. The AAA has largely freed American farmers from this price dependence on world markets" (Ezekial 1934, 1). The glut of surpluses needed outlets, however, thereby reviving a scalar tension that has only become starker (Goldstein 1989). The AFBF lobbied effectively to establish the Undersecretary for Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs. Yet, by 2018 Farm Bill markups and neo-mercantilist nationalist renegotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the scalar contradictions of nationalist agricultural policy crashed into public view, instigating global backlash, retaliatory tariffs against U.S. farm products—and even AFBF concern.

## Hidden Agrarian Crisis of Surplus

If the scalar contradictions of nationalism manifest so acutely in agriculture, what accounts for widespread farmer support for nativist policy? Analysts have documented the xenophobia and racism of resurgent rural nationalism, but a historical analysis of agricultural policy unearths an important cause of the social and economic vulnerabilities that, when left to fester, become vulnerable to enflamed othering: that secret old crisis of surplus.

In 1933, a North Carolina Cotton Growers Cooperative Association farmer testified before Congress: "We taught the American farmer how to operate in high gear but have not taught him how to get back into low gear in production, or even in intermediate." As landlords defaulted on mortgages, tenants "have been reduced to mere serfs," and farm laborers "cannot provide even the bare necessities of life for themselves and families" (Blalock 1933, 2–3). The USDA National Archives retains this history, chronicling the hazards of even "the possibility of an enormous crop, with the threat of resulting price wreckage," as warned by AAA administrator Tolley (1936, 6):

> In the depression years, farmers were pushed—or if you please, coerced—by sheer competition into ruthless exploitation of soil fertility. Destruction of the remaining [g]ood lands of the country appeared to be the goal of rugged individualism. Did this "riot" of free competition help the farmer? No, it did not. Production ran wild and surpluses piled higher and higher. But the farmer got no pay from producing the excess, and farm income fell lower and lower. (11)

The entwined origin of both the AFBF and the Farm Bill hinged on the then-glaring problem of overproduction. Why, then, a century later do the Farm Bill and AFBF evade the word *overproduction* altogether and in fact call for increased yield?

Over the course of the twentieth century, farmland consolidated as farms grew larger, midsize farms declined, and those still farming turned increasingly to off-farm household income (Cochrane 1993). The late 1970s ushered in a wave of foreclosures. Amidst farmer suicide hotlines, the American Agricultural Movement gained ground, eventually attracting 2.5 million participants. This grassroots network of growers aligned with rural banks and local food processors and distributors to call national attention to the struggles of rural economies and communities. It culminated in the late 1970s "tractorcades," wherein tens of thousands of farmers and allies traveled to Washington, DC, a few on 900 tractors, to gather publicly for their cause: agricultural policies that would support viable and equitable prices for family farms. Such "parity," it was argued, would ensure that the ratio of production cost to farmgate price afforded a livelihood. Nevertheless, U.S. agricultural policy moved in the opposite direction, and by the 1996 Freedom to Farm Bill, any vestige of supply management had been eliminated in the name of liberalization (Graddy-Lovelace and Diamond 2017). It permitted, and "even encourage[d], a free fall in domestic farm prices while simultaneously promoting rapid liberal trade measures to open new markets for US products" (Ray et al. 2003, 1).

The obscuring of the crisis of surplus works alongside the obscuring of the agrarian crisis itself (Gardner 2009). Each year, more than half of the roughly 2 million farm households in the United States report a financial loss from their farming operations (Prager, Tulman, and Durst 2018); for the past five years, most farm households have had

negative farm income (USDA Economic Research Service [ERS] 2018). Farming household income has increased—but this is a subtle indicator of losses amidst a veneer of success. For a generation, it has been off-farm income and the capital gains from land appreciation that keep farmers (who stay afloat) afloat—not farming (Lobao and Meyer 2001). Farm production has shifted to million-dollar farms (those with gross cash farm income of $1 million or more), which account for half of all U.S. farm production, up from a third in 1991 (ERS 2016). From the 1980s onward, average farm size remained steady, but this "seeming stability" hides major, continuing shifts of consolidation (McFadden and Hoppe 2017). The midpoint acreage of this average increases each year, with midsize farmers declining precipitously (Lyson and Welsh 2005). In the price–cost squeeze, particularly acute in livestock and dairy sectors, farms seek lower per unit costs by expanding the size of their operation, prompting even the Congressional Research Service to ask, "As large farms produce an increasing share of U.S. agricultural production, some critics have questioned whether current farm policy is reinforcing or accelerating this process" (Shields 2009, 2). In attempts to help, federal supports have arguably enabled consolidation. Such demographic and structural shifts in agriculture toward increased disparity have changed the distribution of income support, which increasingly goes to higher income farm households. Consolidation, unfettered, begets more consolidation.[3]

Land consolidation parallels agro-industry consolidation and the industrialization of farming itself (Fitzgerald 2010), with stark consequences "across an array of indicators measuring socioeconomic conditions, community social fabric, and environmental conditions. Few positive effects of industrialized farming were found across studies" (Lobao and Stofferahn 2008, 219). The ideal of the family farm has turned into the myth of the family farm (Vogeler 1981; Dixon and Hapke 2003), with agribusiness benefiting off of this myth (Appleby 1982; Clapp and Fuchs 2009).

The AFBF sits uncomfortably atop this myth. As we walked out of the penthouse corner office of the Washington, DC, headquarters, the chief communications director asked whether I had seen the recent *Wall Street Journal* article "Supersize Farms Are Gobbling Up American Agriculture." Leaving the plush carpet and elegant reclaimed barnwood interior, he admitted that much of his public relations work is countering the allegation of corporate agriculture: "Ninety-seven percent of our members are family farmers," he argued, as if by rote. Indeed, the AFBF Web site reiterates the statistic that 88 percent of all farms are small, family farms, against a backdrop of smiling white nuclear families in amber-colored grain fields. Rebuffing assertions that it disproportionately serves rich farmers, AFBF has nevertheless supported policies that do. Even when the AFBF lobbied for protected prices in the 1930s, it denounced the FSA's efforts to help small farmers as merely "experimentation in collective farming and other socialistic policies" (Robertson 1942). Currently, AFBF explicitly opposes income means testing, payment limitations, and "targeting of benefits being applied to farm program payment eligibility" in commodity supports, crop insurance, and conservation title supports (AFBF 2018b). It led the fight to permanently repeal estate taxes. At federal and state levels, the AFBF garners robust income: State-level farm bureaus are themselves nonprofits but with multi-million-dollar assets: The Iowa Farm Bureau had $1 billion of assets as of 2010 (Rodriguez 2018).

The question of what constitutes grounded agrarian populism begs the question of what constitutes the agricultural sector at large. The broad political category of farmers gets wielded as a potent oversimplification, in Farm Bill lobbying efforts, by the AFBF, in journalism, and even in scholarship. This vast generalization subsumes the stark class antagonisms within the category of those classified as farmers, and even family farmers. As such, it does a disservice to the diversity of farmers in the United States—and thus to agricultural policy. The AFBF claims to represent the identity of farmers but ends up representing elite farmers' interests and undermining political needs of small, midsize, urban, and diverse farming communities and farmworkers. This fraught representation persists in part because many farmers feel otherwise excluded and belittled (Berry 2017). More geographic research is needed to address the class heterogeneity, tensions, alliances, and cooptations within the broad category of U.S. farmers and especially AFBF members.

The AFBF began in the ashes of a radical agrarian populism to counter the financialized means of wealth concentration; it carried on a kernel of a

vision for agrarian equity in the form of parity, but political and economic dominance quickly subsumed it. The AFBF supported the Commodity Exchange Bill to regulate commodity future exchanges and prevent speculation: "Why should a farm crop be placed practically on the level of a horse race?" O'Neal (1936, 6) demanded. Lobbying to "regulate grain gambling" on the Boards of Trade, its 1939 annual meeting launched an antitrust resolution: "Opportunity has been too much curtailed in America by the insidious growth of special privilege, which has been used by speculators and by monopolistic industry" (O'Neal 1939, 1). Other than sustained opposition to railroad monopolies, however, the AFBF has swung away from such antitrust origins (Ogg 1936). My interviews with the AFBF policy director, communications director, and policy directors at five state farm bureaus belied a party line wary of "fear mongering by certain specialty groups" regarding price fixing by horizontally consolidated seed industries and the vertically consolidated meat sector: "There's enough checks and balances out there," I was told.

This scalar contradiction of nationalism blurs the lines between dominating and feeling dominated by federal government—between reviling federal official bureaucrats and thrilling at presidential presence and influence. The tension is not new. Working with and as the USDA agricultural cooperative extension service, the AFBF adopted a quasi-governmental role (Bliss 1920) amidst and through a tangled set of public–private decentralized networks. A 1921 memorandum of agreement finally extricated the AFBF from Federal Extension Service. Continuing the scalar contradictions of antigovernment nationalism, the AFBF 2017 Policy Book begs Congress to "Allow farmers to take maximum advantage of market opportunities at home and abroad without government interference" (AFBF 2017a), even as AFBF President Duvall joins the White House's Advisory Committee for Trade Policy and Negotiations. The fact that farm policy needs appropriations, negotiating, haggling, and lobbying at every step has solidified AFBF influence: "not the least element of the structure of power traced here is the unusual confidence in the art of lobbying possessed by the Washington office of the Farm Bureau" (McConnell 1953, 179)—an ongoing art.

Although reacting to the failures of neoliberalism, the current, authoritative strand of nationalism aggravates neoliberal evisceration of national public safety nets and services for farming and rural communities and it enables enrichment and consolidation of transnational private sector agro-industries. Executive proposals in 2018 eliminate funding for a rural single-family housing direct loan program, small-town wastewater treatment facilities, and rural business and cooperative programs, among others. After dissolving the cabinet post of Undersecretary of Rural Development, Trump launched an interagency Rural Prosperity Task Force; it met once in 2017, to decry governmental regulatory overreach. Meanwhile, USDA agricultural economists calculate that only the top 10 percent of farm households will accrue between 50 and 70 percent of the tax cuts made under the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (Bawa and Williamson 2017).

The USDA's ten-year forecast predicts continuation of low commodity crop prices, below costs of production. As farmgate prices dip further below their reference prices, the AFBF has responded with "Winning the Game" marketing workshops for enterprising farmer producers to brand and sell their products more strategically. I asked a Western state farm bureau policy director if there were internal farm bureau debates about the risks of imports to domestic farmgate prices. Such worries are subsumed, he explained, within the need to export: "We are too good at doing what we do. Making cheaply. Surplus. Need to get it out of this country … we do a brilliant job of making and growing"—hence the need to dump it abroad. In this scalar contradiction of America First nationalism, the nation-state chronically encourages overproduction. A range of fixes emerge to convert the crises of surplus into avenues for further accumulation: turning gluts of commodity crops into "flex" agrofuel and feed crops and surplus disposals via food trade and aid.

At the heart of nationalism's scalar contradictions regarding coloniality, ecology, labor, and geopolitics of trade is the systemic erasure of the farm problem of glut. The self-defeating aspect of overproduction is staved off with growth and consolidation, with the winners left to tell the tale. The results of overproduction have been absorbed by grain dealers, processors, and Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, who wield enormous power and influence in policy, often in conjunction with AFBF. Despite the productivist Malthusian rhetoric, a myopic focus on quantity ignores the deleterious impact of glut on prices, and thus on rural economies, ecologies, communities, and politics.

## Conclusion

The original context and kernel of grounded agrarian populism—rooted in grassroots movements for dignity, agrarian justice, and land-based life—are worth excavating from the layers of settler coloniality and agrocapitalism at work in nationalist farm policy and lobbying: "The Farm Act is agriculture's charter of economic equality. It offers promise of economic security to every man and woman who will join with their neighbors in straightening out the mess we have gotten into with blind, heedless and unplanned individual production," the AFBF (1933) wrote: "They want to cut down their production. They realize their enormous, accumulated surpluses are destroying them" (2). A century later, the AFBF and Farm Bill have lost this collective realization and have come to champion individualism.

Geographers have chronicled the far-reaching impacts of overproduction (Guthman 2011) and how they relate to the productivist myopia of dominant food security paradigms and policies (Lang and Barling 2012; Sage 2013), the treadmill of inputs and debt and corresponding cycles of human and ecological exploitations (Marsden 1998), and the resulting rural problems (D. Woods 2014). Amidst the scalar fixes of dumping surpluses abroad (Winders 2012), surplus grain enriches industrial animal feeding operations. Yet, the AFBF aggressively opposes and seeks to prevent discussion of supply management: "Every educational means available should be used to educate farmers and ranchers on the principles of a market-oriented agriculture" (AFBF 2017a). My interviews with state-level farm bureau policy leaders discussed the AFBF Policy Book as "Farm Bureau bible," but long-standing methodological questions remain regarding how the diversity of farmer needs makes its way to federal consensus: "Even more significant is the fact that the success is not that of 'agriculture' as an entity but of one segment of those who speak in its name. And here the measure, indeed the means, of this success is failure and defeat for those who have been excluded" (McConnell 1953, 2). Generations later, the AFBF's disproportionate influence in Farm Bill policies continues to crowd out other grassroots farmer organizations that are upholding, adapting, and expanding agrarian populism grounded in agrarian justice for land-based life. Importantly, such organizations are increasingly returning to the fundamental crises of surplus: the National Family Farm Coalition (2018) centered its 2018 Farm Bill policy proposal around strategic reserves as a foundation for renewed supply management (National Family Farm Coalition 2018), NFU proposes an inventory management system, and member groups defend existing production controls for viable dairy, sugar beet, and cranberry prices.

Environmental governance shifts and strives to counter the harmful impacts of industrial agriculture, even as the latter pushes back and erodes environmental regulations; accordingly, the question of environmental governance necessitates analysis of agricultural governance, particularly in authoritarian populist eras. U.S. farm policy emerged as an attempt to stave off the crisis of surplus but has been subsumed by the scalar contradictions of ethnonationalism and its origins in coloniality. In the contemporary nationalist United States, these contradictions become acute. This article surveyed the entwined origins of the AFBF and Farm Bill, which epitomize the fraught agrarian populism that has come to drive ethnonationalist policy—to its own detriment. More research is needed to trace the kernel of agrarian populism grounded in honest concern for the economic, ecological, social, and political problems of overproduction. This catalyzed the intertwined origin of the Farm Bill and the AFBF: public consciousness of and populist resistance to the crisis of surplus. As the AFBF changed swiftly thereafter and the Farm Bill changed drastically by the late twentieth century, this kernel stays buried in U.S. farm policy and lobbying. As the long-obscured agrarian crisis erupts anew, however, this dormant kernel might take root and grow.

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## Notes

1. Using NVivo coding software, my research assistant Veronica Limeberry and I analyzed eighteen state-level Farm Bureau policy agendas, twenty-two federal AFBF policy agenda items and meeting transcripts, four 2017 USDA Farm Bill Field Hearing video

transcripts, USDA Farm Bill social media campaigns, and 2017 Farm Bill Congressional hearings. Additionally, in the fall and winter of 2017, I conducted seven key informant interviews (by phone and in person) with executive policy directors of the AFBF and four states, as well as with the AFBF communications director and membership executive.
2. The AAA soil conservation programs invoked the national security of strong federal government, but they were multiscalar efforts that had a strong regional dimension (Gilbert 2015).
3. Between 1991 and 2015, commodity program payments to farms with at least $1 million in gross cash farm income (GCFI) jumped from 11 percent to 34 percent, whereas payments to small operations (with less than $350,000 in GCFI) fell from 61.3 percent to 30.2 percent (McFadden and Hoppe 2017, 24). Working land conservation program payments such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program shifted from smaller operations in 2006 to 2015 toward midsize and now larger operations.

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