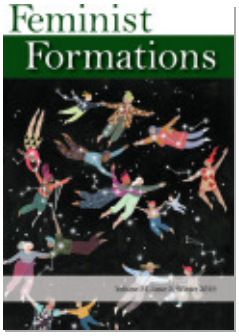
# Rebranding the Farmer: Formula Story Revision and Masculine Symbolic Boundaries in US Agriculture




Angie Carter, Andres Lazaro Lopez

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# Rebranding the Farmer: Formula Story Revision and Masculine Symbolic Boundaries in US Agriculture

**Angie Carter and Andres Lazaro Lopez**

*This study identifies the gendered discourses used to construct symbolic masculinities embedded within a specific context, that of contemporary US agriculture. These gendered discourses rebrand the cultural narratives of the farmer in an effort to increase dependence upon and dominance of productivist agricultural resources. Three central questions guide our study: (1) How are masculinities discursively embedded throughout the formula story of the farmer in contemporary US agriculture? (2) What discursive mechanisms construct and maintain masculinities within these narratives? And (3) to what extent do these discourses contribute to the maintenance of social inequalities? Using a grounded theory analysis of popular farm magazines, we identify a central discursive mechanism—myth management—used to maintain idealized or nostalgic symbolic representations of farming while simultaneously promoting symbolic boundaries about how to be a successful contemporary man farmer. Through myth management, agribusiness revises the formula story to prioritize improved and advanced technology adoption, expert knowledge acquisition, and the increased on-farm consumption of both. Our study provides insight into the critical role myth management plays in the (re)production of inequitable cultural processes embedded within the US agricultural system. A case is made for examining rebranding projects more generally as industry-specific discursive strategies that bolster intersectional inequalities.*

**Keywords**: agriculture / farmer / formula story / gender / masculinities / symbolic boundaries

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> God said, I need somebody willing to get up before dawn,
> milk cows, work all day in the fields, milk cows again,
> eat supper and then go to town and stay past midnight at a
> meeting of the school board. So God made a farmer.
>
> I need somebody with arms strong enough to rustle a calf and
> yet gentle enough to deliver his own grandchild. Somebody to
> call hogs, tame cantankerous machinery, come home hungry,
> have to wait for lunch until his wife's done feeding visiting
> ladies and tell the ladies to be sure and come back real soon—
> and mean it. So God made a farmer.
>
> —Paul Harvey 1978

The farmer has long served as an iconic example of what it means to be a man in the United States. In 1978, radio broadcaster Paul Harvey delivered his speech, "So God Made a Farmer," to the Future Farmers of America convention, intending to inspire and rally a new generation of farmers (Franke-Ruta 2013). On February 3, 2013, an estimated 108.41 million Super Bowl viewers watched a commercial for Dodge Ram (Ram Trucks 2013) trucks featuring an original recording of Paul Harvey's speech while pastoral scenes of farmers engaged in agricultural chores and rural life alternated on the television screen (Baker 2013). Many post-Super Bowl reviews awarded this advertisement the best commercial award for 2013. The Dodge Ram commercial quickly went viral, and while its illustration of romanticized, idealized images of farm life moved many, others were furious. Shortly after the commercial aired, subsequent spoofs and remakes featured images showing those left out of Harvey's original narrative and the Dodge Ram commercial's images: women farmers, Latinx farmers, farm laborers, and factory farm workers, to name a few (Engler 2013).

The Dodge Ram advertisement's purpose is to sell a truck, but it also invites men to engage in and with certain kinds of performances, objects, and knowledge outlined in cultural narratives about farmers. In an era when very few people in the United States know the sources of their food, much less a farmer, Dodge chose this iconic image of the American farmer as a representation of individualism, freedom, and tradition to sell their trucks during the most expensive ad time on television. This commercial, and the subsequent reactions it inspired, are a testament to the power of dominant cultural narratives. The critiques of the commercial rightly pointed out that dominant narratives about the farmer exclude many who play an integral part of the agricultural system, but missed that the commercial's portrayal of agriculture today is misleading not only because of its exclusions but also because of its contradictions. Today's farmer cannot afford to be unique, is not free to choose how to farm, and cannot rely upon tradition alone to be successful. Moreover, the success of US conventional agriculture relies upon the ushering of a new generation of farmers

who conform to revised and, we argue, rebranded masculinities that align with increasingly capitalist practices.

To better understand this process, we analyzed the discursive mechanisms implemented in the construction of idealized masculinities and their pairing with dominant agricultural narratives as presented through a selection of popular US conventional farm magazines. Farm magazines target agricultural communities and industry; these media need to appeal successfully to those who do know where food comes from and do know, or are actively, farmers. Though their audiences may differ, the Paul Harvey speech, Dodge Ram commercial, and farm magazines each rely upon dominant cultural narratives about farmers and agriculture to appeal to their audiences. Through analysis of the farm magazines, we identify processes used to navigate the contradictions in these dominant narratives and to construct new versions of who is a farmer.

## Cultural Narratives and the Formula Story of the Farmer

Rob J. F. Burton's (2004, 195) study of farmers in the United Kingdom found that the production-oriented expectations of the post–WWII era came to symbolize "good farming" to both the farmers and the public. In her study of women farmers in Minnesota, Amy Trauger (2001) outlines gendered expectations of the post–WWII production-oriented agriculture, which focus upon the intensification and expansion of capital. Following Burton (2004) and Trauger (2001), we use the term "productivist agriculture" to describe contemporary, conventional, capitalist agriculture that is (1) production oriented and characterized by intensification by an increased dependence upon mechanization, inputs, technology, and expansion; (2) characterized by an increased concentration in size of farms and decrease in number of farms (fewer landowners own more land); and (3) specialized as a monoculture (e.g., growing only row crops, such as corn) rather than diversified (e.g., growing multiple crops and raising livestock) (Trauger 2001, 54). Burton (2014, 211) theorizes that as agriculture evolves, farmers will need to embed new practices with new symbolic meanings and calls for greater investigation of the symbolic value of "productivist" approaches toward agricultural production. Here, we explore how productivist expectations are maintained even as farmers' social environments shift.

Cultural narratives about how land should be used—by whom and for what purpose—are defined by those sociocultural groups in power through the use of cultural symbols and reified through interactional processes (Greider and Garkovich 1994, 6). Power is "the capacity to impose a specific definition of the physical environment, one that reflects the symbols and meanings of a particular group of people" (17). These relationships involved in defining and controlling landscape experiences are critical to understanding "how physical 'nature' is managed and altered according to the dominant set of social values within the culture" (Joubert and Davidson 2010, 9). Control of the landscape's

symbolic power is a result of capitalist patriarchal control of production (Hartmann 1976) in which men, implicitly and explicitly, marginalize women. As Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987, 126) explain, gender is emergent as both "an outcome of and a rationale for various arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions in society." Gendered definitions of land use take shape slowly, over time, eventually becoming expectations for behavior (Saugeres 2002, 375). As evident in Harvey's speech and the Dodge Ram commercial, Burton (2014, 209) theorized that the power of these expectations runs deep in larger cultural narratives about "Judeo-Christian beliefs concerning the relationship with God, people and nature, and the divine substance behind the right to stewardship."

Donileen Loseke's (2007) theory of narrative construction, rooted in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1966) theory of social construction, explains that it is through formula stories that cultural narratives are created, maintained, and changed. Formula stories are responsible for circulating the symbolic codes portraying rights, expectations, responsibilities, and norms within cultural narratives (Loseke 2007). Individuals may or may not participate in all the symbolic codes of the formula story, but these codes are recognizable as social norms and expectations. In agriculture, formula stories include a host of symbolic images, beliefs, and values about both who is a farmer and how one should farm.

Today's agricultural formula stories emerge from settler colonialism; legacies of slavery, native genocide, and patriarchal land tenure laws persist through the concentration of agricultural land among white men (Chang 2010; Neth 1995; Rosengarten 2000). Historically, women and people of color were excluded from farmland ownership, as only white men could own land (Faragher 1988; Sachs 1983). Racialized and gendered categories of the formula story continue to represent the reality of the majority of farmers in the United States. Of the 3,399,834 people identifying as farm producers in the most recent (2017) United States Department of Agriculture's census, 3,399,834 total farm producers—or 96—percent identified as white, and 798,500 of 2,740,453—or 29 percent—principle farm producers (meaning they are the sole operator on the farm) identified as female (USDA NASS 2019a, 2019b). The marginalization of nonwhite farmers and women farmers continues through formal and informal practices. In the past two decades, the USDA has settled or created claims processes for cases brought forward by Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and women farmers alleging historic and ongoing discrimination (Feder and Cowan 2013). Recent research studying gender and land ownership has found that despite women owning or co-owning half of farmland in the United States, men continue to be decision-makers and power holders of most farms (Carter 2017; Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011; Pilgeram and Amos 2015; Wells and Eells 2011).

The iconic, nostalgic portrayal of the farmer, then, is one that is rooted in a system of racialized and gendered power, and it is also heternormative. As depicted in Grant Wood's iconic depiction of agriculture in the painting *The*

*Farmer and His Wife*, children's songs such as "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," or the popularization of Paul Harvey's speech in the Dodge Ram commercial, farmers have wives and families. Hegemonic rural masculinity is heterosexual (Little 2002). Iowan farmer Chris Soules embodied an updated version of the farmer in his roles on reality television shows *The Bachelorette* (season 10, 2014) and *The Bachelor* (season 19, 2015). As noted by Isaac Sohn Leslie, Jaclyn Wypler, and Michael Meyerfeld Bell (2019), gendered and sexualized relationships in agriculture have long gone unquestioned. This does not mean that gay rural masculinities or gay rural farmers do not exist, but their identities are not those elevated and celebrated in the cultural narrative.

The formula story about who is a farmer and how he farms is one that marginalizes people of all genders. Men maintain their power upon the agricultural landscape and over women through their seemingly inherent skill or right to be farmers (Sachs 1983, 109). These skills or rights are communicated through symbolic codes within cultural narratives of agriculture and specifically cultural narratives about who is a farmer. Conventional systems of agriculture in the United States are defined by competitive, dominant masculinities that prioritize productivity, yield, and profit above, and often at the expense of, community and ecological well-being (Eells 2009; Fink 1986; Sachs 1996; Trauger 2001). Symbolic codes embedded within cultural narratives are often depicted as binary, or opposites (Loseke 2007, 666). It is not surprising, then, that alternative agriculture prioritizing smaller-scale farms, community relationships, or biodiversity is often feminized and portrayed as "other" (Carolan 2011; Trauger 2004, Trauger et al. 2008, 2010; Wells and Eells 2011). Relatedly, men engaging in sustainable or alternative agriculture may also both be viewed as "other" or "feminine" by their mainstream agricultural counterparts (Peter, Bell, and Jarnagin 2000), and those identifying as queer who engage in sustainable agriculture movements face the perpetuation of heteronormative expectations, such as marriage and monogamy (Leslie 2017). Despite the centrality of women's work to agricultural production, the farmer is constructed as a "he" whose hard work and competitive individualism contribute to the invisibility of women (Campbell and Bell 2000, 540).

The formula story of the farmer emerges from these histories to categorize characteristics of race (white), sex and gender (men/masculinity, cisgender), sexuality (compulsory heterosexual), class (capacity to invest in high-capital technology), and familial status (married with kids, or planning to be). Embedded within the formula story are specific mythologies portraying the farmer as steward and the farming lifestyle as one of freedom, as described in the Paul Harvey speech and illustrated in the Dodge Ram commercial: for example, a farmer can increase productivity without sacrificing connection to the land, a farmer can feed the world even as he drives his commodities to the biofuel plant, or a farmer can remain independent even as he obtains all of his information from corporate seed dealers. The realities of agriculture contradict these stories.

Today, even as farmers have more advanced technologies at their disposal, topsoil literally is washing away across the Corn Belt and waterways are increasingly polluted (Cox, Hug, and Bruzelius 2011; Naidenko, Cox, and Bruzelius 2012), small-scale, localized farmers rather than large-scale commodity producers feed the majority of the world (Wolfenson 2013), increasing concentration in the food system limits farmers' choices (Howard 2016), and global trade wars limit farmers' autonomy (Gibbs 2018).

Changes in agricultural technology and structure challenge symbolic ideals of men and masculinities, inspiring redefinitions of masculine power and control (Brandth and Haugen 2000). In her study of tractor advertisements, Berit Brandth (1995) argues that agricultural machinery is an example of a masculine arena that has had to be redefined as technology changes. Brandth's example of the role of technology in tractor production illustrates an example of revising formula stories to fit cultural changes in agriculture: as technology has advanced, the amount of labor required to operate a tractor has changed. This is crucial to Brandth's analysis because technology and masculinity are mutually and simultaneously constructed. Therefore, Brandth argues, as new types of tractors emerge, so do new scripts of manhood, because masculinity means the consumption of new technology and products. We see this in the Dodge Ram commercial, too, through the depiction of new types of animal production, such as hog confinements, being partnered with classic images of manhood and trucks and Harvey's narration. Developing the relationship between masculinities and agricultural narratives is critical to an understanding of how the farmer remains successful even as the material and structural conditions of agriculture have changed.

This adoption of increased technology has led to a deskilling of the farmer; as the farmer adopts more "expert" technology, the farmer is less dependent upon generational and local knowledge. Shannon E. Bell, Alicia Hullinger, and Lilian Brislen's (2015) study of US Corn Belt farmers identified how agribusiness is transforming the masculine identity of the farmer from that of the rugged individual (like that portrayed in Paul Harvey's speech and the Dodge Ram ad) to the agribusinessman. This new portrayal of farming masculinity emphasizes continued reliance upon chemical inputs and the expertise of agribusiness to further entrench farmers in the productivist paradigm (Bell, Hullinger, and Brislen 2015). We build upon Bell, Hullinger, and Brislen's (2015) study of agribusiness and the deskilling of agriculture to analyze how this redefinition of the farmer formula story maintains its power by veiling contradictions as it sells and continues to perpetuate dependence upon industry.

This redefinition of the US farmer's masculinity is central to the development and continuance of dominant agricultural narratives. The idealized masculinity of the Harvey speech and the Dodge Ram commercial portray what Peter et al. (2000) argue is a "conventional masculinity," foundational to many farmers' identities, that presents barriers to the adoption of more sustainable

agricultural practices. In this paper, we analyze how discursive mechanisms revise masculinities to re-enforce the cultural narrative of productivist agriculture, presenting barriers both to changes in agricultural practices and to more healthy masculinities while maintaining the dominance of productivism.

## Masculine Resources, Symbolic Boundaries, and Branding

We identify how the symbolic codes of the farmer formula story influence the construction of gender and the promotion of symbolic resources in the context of contemporary agricultural discourse in the United States. Masculinity refers most commonly to socially constructed expectations of appropriate behaviors, beliefs, expressions, and styles of social interaction for men in a culture or subculture at a given time (Bird 2008, 5). Masculinities vary as configurations of practice and are situated within hegemony, a symbolic representation of power (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The hegemonic patterns of this power are embedded in specific social environments, such as formal organizations, and are often seen as masculine resources, contextually available practices, that men and boys draw upon to communicate to each other their alignment with masculine norms (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 839; Messerschmidt 2000).

In studying how symbols and codes are discursively embedded through the farmer formula story in US agriculture, we contribute to an understanding of how hegemonic narratives are gendered and maintained through the formula story's circulation of symbolic boundaries. We do not assume that all farmers participate in this formula story similarly; instead, we analyze how the discursive representations of the farmer inform symbolic boundaries around the right kind of men to participate in the right kind of agriculture. Symbolic boundaries are cultural categorizations that provide tools within a given context for individuals and groups to demonstrate insider/outsider knowledge that is meant to reinscribe cultural boundaries of power (Lamont and Fournier 1992; Pachucki, Pendergrass, and Lamont 2007; Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015). Here, durable symbolic boundaries integrate a reflexive relationship between productivist agriculture and occupational, gendered identities. The symbolic codes and scripts of the farmer formula story communicate and construct a more durable cultural ideal of farmers and recognition of their "appropriate" masculinities. These not only exclude women, but also exclude any who do not seek these resources as portrayed in the formula story: whiteness, heterosexuality, nuclear family, and the capacity to invest in technology such as chemical inputs and machinery. In this way, the farmer is redefined through occupational branding to reflect the structural changes of agriculture and masculinities. Ashcroft et al. (2012, 475) define occupational branding as the strategic occupational identity work aimed at brand and value creation in response to situated dilemmas of inclusivity-exclusivity. While the lived realities of farmers may no longer reflect Paul Harvey's iconic story, the farmer formula

story can be revised and rebranded to include new and different symbolic boundaries to remain recognizable and compelling. Understanding how the formula story circulates and maintains consistency of symbolic boundaries is imperative if there is to be an intervention, shift, or challenge to dominant masculinities and agricultural practices.

By participating in the formula story, farmers build and demonstrate their use of masculine resources. This may not be explicit or intentional because masculinities are often covert to outsiders and not necessarily understood by the social agents who seek them (Messerschmidt 2000, 13). Framing the successful accumulation and deployment of resources as the development of symbolic boundaries helps us to understand how the farmer formula story further embeds these masculinities within the cultural narrative. How are gendered symbols and meanings used to convey symbolic boundaries that bolster masculine resources within productivist agriculture? How farmers do or do not play "the farmer" is related, in part, to how successful farmers are at performing their gender through the use of cultural tools specific to the new branding of the formula story.

We identify how dominant farming masculinities allow for and reinforce the expectation of gender performance that may become hegemonic; however, *consumers* of popular journals, or *viewers* of the Dodge Ram advertisement, may not delineate these points, much less be aware of the power of this discourse in their expectations or conceptions of agricultural narratives. Our analysis offers one example of how the formula story can perpetuate specific masculinities for the promotion of hegemony whether or not it fits the real-life situation of those it purports to describe. Beyond the context of agriculture, our study contributes to an understanding of how the discursive construction of masculinities through narratives sustains gender inequality and cisheteropatriarchy while simultaneously reinforcing the hegemony of existing systems of power that propel them.

Three central questions guide our analysis of three popular, conventional farm journals to understand how discursive mechanisms work to construct specific masculinities within a formula story, and in doing so, maintain the dominant agricultural narrative. First, how are masculinities discursively embedded throughout the formula story of contemporary US agriculture? Second, what discursive mechanisms construct and maintain masculinities within these narratives? And third, to what extent do these discourses contribute to the maintenance of social inequality? From this study, we offer the concept of rebranding masculinities, and rebranding projects more generally, as a theoretical contribution to further an understanding of the often-veiled roles of symbolic boundaries—e.g. race, gender, class—that connect industry-specific goals to systems of power and domination.

## Methods

Our study focuses on three popular farm magazines intended for farming audiences. We were interested to see what, if any, similarities there were between the formula story portrayed in media intended for agricultural consumption and Dodge Ram's use of Paul Harvey's idealized farmer in the popular Super Bowl commercial. Like Berit Brandth's (1995) study of rural masculinity in tractor advertisements, our data included advertisements as visual representations. Additionally, we analyzed the written content of these magazines, including letters to the editor, special section content, and articles. Bell, Hullinger, and Brislen's (2015) study focused on participant observation at an agricultural trade show and analysis of a year's worth of advertisements from three farm magazines: *Farm Journal*, *Successful Farmer*, and *Wallace's Farmer*. Our studies share analysis of *Farm Journal* as an example of a national farm trade journal and *Wallace's Farmer*, another agricultural trade magazine based in Iowa chosen because of its focus upon state-level production, though we chose the Iowa Farm Bureau's *Spokesman* for our third source because of its more local attention to community events and local leaders. From these three examples, we analyzed the symbolic codes circulated by the farmer formula story at national, state, and local levels. Unlike Bell, Hullinger, and Brislen's (2015) study, we analyzed articles and editorials in addition to advertisements to learn how agribusiness works to redefine the farmer formula story through both written and visual discourse.

Our data collection consisted of a two-part discursive analysis using grounded theory to guide our work. In our first phase of analysis, we analyzed articles, advertisements/pictures, and the composition of editorial boards and writers in eleven random issues of the weekly Iowa Farm Bureau's *Spokesman*, the monthly *Wallace's Farmer*, and the monthly *Farm Journal* published between February 2012 and October 2012. We chose these months because they are when production-oriented commodity farmers are most actively occupied with their farming operation, planning to plant in early spring through finishing the harvest in late fall. We chose these journals because of their representation of popular discourse of productivist agriculture, as well as their popularity and spatial distribution.

We used a three-step grounded theory process for coding in our analysis and incorporated memoing in our individual and group coding process (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Four coders participated in the first phase. After our individual work, we came together and discussed our codes, creating categories of similar and different emergent codes, developing a shared coding paradigm as we identified the context and intervening conditions, and exploring causal conditions in the data. At the end of the first phase of coding, we had collectively agreed upon the critical discursive mechanism of myth management and began to identify analytical categories describing its strategies.

For the second phase of our analysis, the authors analyzed all editions of our chosen three journals spanning February 2012–November 2012 (n=65). Together, we identified the systematic connections of the three strategies of myth management and validated their relationships to develop a framework that would lead to a substantive theory that described their meanings. This process was critical for us to make a case for data saturation. We wanted to make sure we interpreted the dialectical as well as the reflexive relationships between our categories to limit the infusion of our values and subjectivities and offer a richer sociological analysis of discourse (Ruiz Ruiz 2009).

The lack of diversity (of multiple forms of discourse) in the data remains a weakness in our study. The strength of the analysis, however, lies is the seamlessness of the mechanism of myth management and its strategies of invitation represented throughout all three journals.

**Myth Management and the Rebranding of the Farmer**

Myths are modes of discourse that are often rebranded to retain value (Lincoln 1989). Specific institutions may promote myths to maintain hegemonic ideologies. When successfully deployed and embedded in cultures, myths become a seemingly natural part of society, or, as Roland Barthes (1972, 3) writes, "Myth is initially political and finally natural." In the context of productivist agriculture, myth management maintains the farmer formula story despite its inherent contradictions. Here, we identify how mechanisms used in the formula story revision manage and maintain the myth of traditional US agrarianism. It is through myth management that the contemporary agribusinessman is associated with Paul Harvey's antiquated depiction of the farmer through its revision in the Dodge Ram commercial. Myth management is the discursive mechanism by which the formula story maintains the veil in a successful rebranding project. It is the brand's most salient value. In what follows, we argue that the revised formula story elicits symbolic formal or informal invitations for interaction, for example, in farmers joining the Iowa Farm Bureau or feeling welcome talking about global agricultural commodity markets at the local coffee counter with fellow farmers. These discursive mechanisms invite men to participate in the formula story and work discursively to tie their interactions to larger, cultural narratives.

We identified two interrelated discursive mechanisms that agribusiness uses to rebrand the farmer formula story and promote increased reliance upon this rebranding through on-farm consumption: (1) improved and advanced technology adoption and (2) expert knowledge acquisition. These mechanisms maintain a mythology that one can be both the independent, man-of-earth type of farmer idealized by the formula story while also depending upon elite, expensive, and advanced technology and knowledge sold by corporations. These strategies rely on masculinities to veil the contradictions of dependence on productivist

agriculture by repackaging what it means to be a modern man who farms with the "freedom" to choose. The repackaging of "freedom" when it is indeed increased dependence depends on how successfully symbolic masculinities promote productivist resources. We describe this process as myth management.

The March 2012 issue of *Wallace's Farmer* illustrates the farmer formula story. The issue profiles four Iowan families who have been awarded the Master Farmer Award, an award begun in 1926 by then-editor of the magazine, Henry Wallace. This vision of Master Farmer is an important illustration of how masculinities are constructed within conventional agriculture. All four Master Farmer families are presented in photos as white husband-wife duos, with one family's photo featuring their two children. While the articles accompanying these photos mention the wives as farm partners, only two of the families profiled worked in side-by-side partnership in the farm management and operations. The women in the other two families worked off-farm. If the families included daughters, these daughters were mentioned in the articles as working off-farm or were not mentioned at all, while sons were always mentioned as farm partners (7–15). Master Farmers embody the revised formula story of the farmer: they are family men engaged in their community while managing a highly productive and economically profitable farm using the most advanced technologies. Through myth management, the farmer is depicted as the ultimate provider through the domination of the land, getting his hands dirty as he tends to his crops and livestock while providing food for both his family and the entire world. This story contains many contradictions, such as increased weed tolerance, soil erosion, use of crops for biofuels rather than food sources, and increased vulnerabilities in global markets that are not mentioned in the accompanying stories.

The farmer formula story engages such pervasive myths to maintain hegemony: anybody can plant seeds and grow food, but the rebranded formula story sells a promise of success through the absorption of the promoted new and improved versions of masculinities. The rebranding of Paul Harvey's idealized farmer to the modern agribusinessman requires the farmer to adopt new technology and knowledge. Men are invited to participate in these new and improved versions of masculinities through the consumption of new technology and expert knowledge. We will now analyze both as examples of subprocesses of myth management, and then discuss the importance of their consumption, before arguing the larger project of rebranding masculinities.

### Improved and Advanced Technology Adoption

The farmer formula story has evolved from the days of Paul Harvey's original speech and now invites men to be men of the land or connected to the earth through the use of improved and advanced technology. Channel Seed advertisements in the September 2012 issue of the *Farm Journal* portray how the farmer can pursue advanced biotechnology in his field while maintaining mud on his

boots. One advertisement shows a Channel Seed dealer walking through a cornfield with a farmer and the text reads: "It's a Sign of Channel [in smaller letters] Seedsmanship [in larger letters]. It's walking your fields, getting your mud on our boots." This exchange portrays the expert, the Channel Seed dealer, sharing input-intensive technology knowledge with the farmer to increase yield and production as they walk through the mud. The realities of fewer farmers and larger farms today may make it hard for most farmers to walk their acres and know the land well; yet, by buying this technology, farmers buy into the image of maintaining this connection to the land while relying upon the advanced genetic technology of Channel Seeds.

Throughout the magazines, companies relied upon nostalgia to promote the farmer as a man who is close to the earth in order to sell advanced technologies. However, much of the technology needed to achieve the dominant image of the farmer popularized in the media, such as GPS systems in combines or extensive use of herbicides, may distance farmers from managing integrated natural systems on their farm and distance them from the earth. For example, an ad for FS (a company selling agricultural inputs, analytics, and finance) honoring farmers and published in the Iowa Farm Bureau's *Spokesman* (March 21, 2012) says the following in support of the farmer:

> The most influential people on earth are the closest to it. The American farmer is in an extraordinary time and place. Just a few decades from now, there will be two billion more people in the world—an all-time high of 9 billion. No doubt scientists, economists, and world leaders alike will work together to support our increasing needs. But among all these world experts, the most influential people remain those closest to the soil—those who will produce the food, fiber, and fuel to sustain us all.

The accompanying advertisement pictures a white man in his sixties wearing a button-down shirt and jeans, leaning on one knee on the ground. The message conveyed is that a farmer feeds the world, is connected to the earth, but also serves and represents his community. To fulfill these obligations and have time for all of these commitments, he should use advanced technologies, tools, and specific machinery.

Even though agribusiness corporations and expensive technology may fill the advertisements and many of the articles throughout these magazines, the discourse continues to emphasize, and prioritize, idealized notions of farmers as independent and family men. A Dow AgroSciences advertisement in an April 2012 issues of *Wallace's Farmer* pairs a dependence upon new technology with continued masculine decision making about land. Dow AgroSciences's advertisement for their new herbicide-tolerant weed control system Enlist shows a man's eye with two men conversing in a field and the words, "You don't just see a farm," implying the importance of a farm's future to the farmer's family. One must enlist in something before becoming a member, and the product's

name—Enlist—is itself a precursor to membership in the revised narrative of chemical and technology-dependent agriculture. With Enlist, the advertisement promises farmers the technology needed to produce higher yields to maintain the future of their farms. In their adoption of this technology, farmers may also have a reinforced relationship with other farmers and experts who use and promote Enlist. Here, technology is much more than just the right seed or tractor, or the pairing of new products with men; a new herbicide is necessary to maintain existing patriarchal expectations about the farmer's decision-making on the land. Similarly, a two-page advertisement for the Enlist herbicide-tolerant trait system in the March 2012 *Wallace's Farmer* shows a man looking into the distance at his field while imagining the future. In his pupil is the image of a young girl whom we assume to be his daughter. This advertisement implies that by minimizing weeds and maximizing yield, he helps to improve not only the future of his farm but also the future of his family. Also, the use of the image of the daughter implies safety and that the farmer can protect both his crop and family through Enlist's use. The patriarchal expectations of men as the pillars of their family and community, as well as the romanticized ideals of the farmer as a man of the earth, remain central to the rebranding of the new farmer as a consumer of technology and role player in global markets.

**Expert Knowledge Acquisition**

At the local farm services office or feed store, agricultural service providers disseminate agricultural knowledge, both defining and protecting symbolic codes central to the formula story of the farmer: performing one's obligation to feed the world through the purchase and adoption of new technology is both maintaining one's identity as a farmer and as a man. The knowledge conveyed and the defense strategies used to maintain that knowledge when the narratives are questioned, challenged, or attacked perpetuate the formula story. Experts in industry or academia develop this knowledge and then sell it to farmers as ways to maximize production. Other sorts of knowledge, such as indigenous, local, or familial knowledge, are implicitly portrayed as antiquated or not portrayed at all.

Through the mechanism of knowledge acquisition, experts redefine the purpose of crops, and farmers learn new markets. An article on the front page of the *Spokesman* quotes Stephen Tanda, a managing board member of Royal DSM (Dutch multinational nutrition company), emphasizing the importance of investing in a cellulosic ethanol plant: "By joining forces with innovative growers and entrepreneurs here in Iowa, we are pioneering new value chains that produce fuel and eventually also chemicals and advanced materials from sustainable, renewable resources" (Block 2012a, 1). Later, the new cellulosic ethanol plant is called a "quest" and "groundbreaking." The ethanol industry, a new industry in agricultural production, engages in rebranding farmer masculinities, implying that a farmer can be innovative and engage in pioneering efforts even as his crops

go to create fuel rather than food. Not only does the farmer dominate his field regarding production methods, he also dominates new arenas of business and innovation. Any doubt or question about this expertise is implicitly portrayed as standing in the way of progress, innovation, and, ultimately, manhood.

Historically, land-grant universities have been essential disseminators of agricultural knowledge and have partnered with farmers in research on-farm through their extension programs. The magazines' articles often cite Iowa State University (ISU) experts and ISU scientific studies, privileging the knowledge from a land grant university known for its agricultural research and technological production. However, the publications present representatives from interest groups and seed or chemical companies as equal sources of expert knowledge. Having a platform beyond the advertisements helps agribusiness representatives come across as objective voices of agricultural information and conceals their commercial motives. In response to discussions of global trade normalization with Russia, Danny Murphy, American Soybean Association president, claims in a *Spokesman* editorial that "what benefits these industries benefits soybean farmers" ("Ag groups push" 2012, 3). The linking of commodity market expansion through international trade negotiations to the welfare of the individual farmer is important to the rebranding project, as it normalizes the influence of transnational corporations and helps maintain the obligation of the farmer to feed the world. In the same issue, Monsanto's Matt Helms shares how to maximize yields on a farm and do it sustainably, appealing to the farmer as both an agribusinessman concerned with maximum profit and a land steward concerned with conservation on the farm (Block 2012b, 5). Similarly, *Farm Journal* profiles Monsanto's Integrated Farming Systems (IFS) platform in the magazine's Technology section as a modern and more precise way to keep track of field data from multiple fields:

> With IFS, we're combining our knowledge of the genetics of the seed with all of the computer technology, the geo-spatial and field analytics to create an opportunity for growers to be more precise and optimize yields every few feet in the field, says Robb Fraley, executive vice president and chief technology officer for Monsanto. (Potter and Finck 2012, 28)

These examples profile a commodity group's viewpoint or a product from private industry rather than knowledge from a farmer or public science generated through a local land-grant university extension staff member or scientist. In doing so, these magazines emphasize that farmers must learn from industry experts, suggesting that today's farmer must be fluent in the most recent agricultural advancements.

If this expert knowledge is to be sold and circulated effectively through the revised formula story, then it must be defended to maintain its consistency. Just as any successful corporation works vigilantly to maintain the reputation of its brand, agribusiness reacts to critique of agricultural production practices to

protect and maintain the farmer as a means to increase their profit. The Iowa Farm Bureau's April 2012 *Spokesman* documents how a misinformed public leads a crusade against "pink slime," also known as Lean Finely Textured Beef (LFTB), or what the consumer would recognize as the ground beef wrapped in plastic tubs and available at the local grocery store. For this purpose, the rebranding project solicits the voices of farmers and, in this example, the voice of a woman farmer. An editorial by Carol Keiser, president of C-Bar Cattle Company, Inc., "Sensationalism Trumps Science in Beef Smear Campaign," claims that television chef Jaimie Oliver led a shameless and scientifically ignorant attack against LFTB (2012, 3). Keiser argues that LFTB is a form of sustainable farming because it is "making the most of the resources we have" (2012, 3). She expresses concern regarding the impact of the negative press on the beef industry and the jobs that have been lost because of LFTB factories closing. Keiser identifies the way to fight back is "with truth" through the campaign "Dude, it's beef" (2012, 3). In this example, a woman farmer defends an industrial method of producing beef products as scientifically superior against consumer criticism by connecting the scientific knowledge of its production to masculinity. The revised formula story must convey and defend that the products of contemporary agricultural production are scientific and safe. Defending modern food production methods, such as LFTB, validates the use of technology and defends farmers, and the industry, from consumer attack. By portraying the questions of consumers or Jaimie Oliver, a celebrity chef, about lean finely textured beef as sensational, scientifically ignorant, or a smear campaign, the editorial privileges specific types of knowledge as too complicated for the everyday consumer to understand, or something better left to scientists and farmers—that is, experts—to explain. This argument is made more effective because it is written by a woman, the person considered responsible for making family meals in gendered agricultural narratives. Challenging this argument thus challenges the gendered narrative of productivist agriculture itself. Throughout these examples, spokespeople for the industry rebrand the farmer as a businessman and the agricultural practices and products created through the contemporary productivist agricultural system as modern and innovative, using cutting-edge technology to maximize yield and profit while retaining elements such as sustainability, safety, and connection to the land.

While privileging masculine knowledge as expert is not new in dominant agricultural narratives, the privileging of corporate knowledge is a new development and one that is paramount to the rebranding of the farmer. Knowledge is no longer something learned and passed down from one generation on the farm to the next, or available for free from the local land-grant university extension field staff or scientist. The modern farmer must seek specialized knowledge attainable only through key gatekeepers in industry or higher education and defend this knowledge with expert science. Agribusiness uses the bodies of men, symbolic masculine scripts, and gender-normative expectations to

convey the simultaneous messages of knowledge exchange and defense. In this way, maintaining the farmer formula story requires protection of industry and specialized knowledge. Here, occupation, gender, and capitalism are linked by the promotion of specific industries and products, ensuring the continuation of capital-intensive modes of production by invalidating critiques or framing alternatives as threats. Through this revision, the farmer formula story better serves the agenda of agribusiness corporations. As the farmer acquires new and needed knowledge, usually through purchase, the farmer participates in protecting existing narratives and structures of power while expanding their scope to include new technologies or innovations.

**Increased On-Farm Consumption**

The revised formula story of the farmer includes the expectation that farmers adopt the newest and advanced technologies and acquire knowledge about these from experts—to do so, the farmer must be someone who can afford to make this purchase. Consumption regulates who can or cannot participate in the farmer formula story, and so as much as the formula story is about gender and race, it is also about class. Manhood is situated as the protector of tradition while being linked with efficiency, competence, competition, expertise, correct knowledge, and capital incentives shared among elites. While farmers in the past may have relied upon the generational knowledge of family or community members, today's farmers rely upon the knowledge of experts through consumption of specific products intended to improve the efficiency of their farm operation. Additionally, this increased reliance upon these off-farm inputs must be normalized within the revised formula story to maintain the mythology of the independent and self-sufficient farmer.

In an advertisement in an April 11, 2012 *Spokesman*, the seed company FS retells the story of four generations of farmers. The advertisement's images center on the farmer's relationship with FS as an essential part of their history by stating, "We've been working with FS on the farm for over 40 years, for everything from seed to fuel to fertilizer." The story is backed up by an image of three smiling white men standing in front of a semitruck. Not only does FS never state what their service is, indicating that one must have insider knowledge to understand the advertisement, but at the same time, it is clear that a relationship with FS is something that is handed down intergenerationally. In this way, myth management relies upon past symbolic codes of whiteness and masculinity—those who could legally own land and pass it on to subsequent generations—while revising these to incorporate the reliance upon purchased FS farm inputs. While the products sold might echo past strategies for sharing knowledge, the seed company replaces the father's or grandfather's generational advice to inform today's farmer about his seed

needs. It is the seed dealer, rather than the grandfather, who is now the gatekeeper to farming success.

A similar revision to the formula story is conveyed through a Mitas agricultural tire advertisement in *Wallace's Farmer* (April 2012), which pictures two white men standing on opposite sides of a tire facing each other. The page is split in a way that one man stands in front of a building with Mitas on it while the other stands on grass. The advertisement promises "Quality is closer than ever" and reinforces that Mitas is the tire of choice for farmers who cannot afford a long wait by showing the close relationship between the tire salesman and the farmer. The advertisement illustrates that a farmer who is concerned with production time needs to have the correct tire—Mitas. An essential component in the rebranding of the farmer formula story is not only being at the cutting edge of the newest technological tools but also maintaining connections to the classic brands.

A Sukup ad in *Wallace's Farmer* (April 2012) again reinforces the relationship between the service provider and the farmer as a familial relationship, with their ad's slogan "From One Family Business to Another." Sukup identifies itself as a particular type of service provider: the family business. This connects them with the idealized family farm in a way that other non-family-owned businesses could not. The imagery in the advertisement does not reinforce the text, in that the images are of farm and agricultural buildings, but the text makes it clear that Sukup is the choice for families: "Sukup is more than just innovative products, though. Sukup Manufacturing Co. is a family-owned business. Our company is made up of people from rural communities who understand farming and the importance of building products that work" (2012, 23).

Just as the earlier analysis of advertisements showed how vital it is to the revision of the formula story that farmers remain connected to the land while increasingly relying upon advanced technology and experts, this advertisement shows the importance of remaining connected to one's community and family. Connection to both one's land and community are essential in the old story of who is a farmer, as highlighted in the Paul Harvey speech from the Dodge ad, but remain in the new story as a way to promote products using traditional cultural norms.

Finally, an ad campaign for Bayer's Stratego YLD fungicide featured throughout *Wallace's Farmer* and *Farm Today* portrays two white men farmers—one of an older generation and the other a younger generation—engaging in a fist bump and the text "Out Here We Call it the Yield Bump." A slogan "Healthy Fields" and "Higher Yields" are included in smaller text. A short paragraph asks farmers to "Put 'er there. Trust your corn and beans with Stratego YLD fungicide and treat yourself to higher yield potential." The text concludes with the suggestion to contact "your Retailer or Bayer CropScience Representative" to learn more. The image echoes the fist bump that men may exchange in other contexts, on an athletic field or with a close friend for example, and acts as a sign

of acceptance and exchange across the generations of the two farmers. Here, the two farmers engage in an interaction (the fist bump) that normalizes and masculinizes the adoption of advanced technologies (the use of the fungicide) and acquisition of expert knowledge (trusting in the science of these seeds sold by a transnational corporation and their dealers). Through purchase of the products sold by Bayer, the farmer ensures the future success of his farm and allegiance to past generations of farmers.

## The Farmer as a Rebranding Project

Myth management maintains the veil in a successful rebranding project. It is through myth management that a farmer might remain good even if his crops are used for ethanol rather than for food, even if he visits his fields only twice a year to plant and to harvest rather than walking them every day, even if he is much more likely to be found in a boardroom than out dirtying himself doing chores in a barn. It is through myth management and the successful use of symbolic boundaries that a farmer has the right products—the Dodge Ram truck, the specialized seeds, and the newest GPS system in the most recent tractor series—to participate in the revised formula story successfully. The revision of the farmer formula story is an example of a successful rebranding project.

Rebranding masculinities is the discursive alignment of culturally embedded idealized notions of manhood with contextually specific masculine arenas that redirect hegemonic pathways to masculine resources and reinforce symbolic boundaries. Discourse is a critical tool for the deployment of rebranding masculinities, especially through advertisements and editorials, because discourse conveys strategic messages through multiple narratives to the public as cultural legitimacy (Schmutz 2009). Rebranding masculinities is not merely about recentering hegemonic heterosexual cisgender white man bodies, even if it ultimately does; most importantly, rebranding masculinities connects brands of masculinities to further advance a specific organizational, occupational, political, economic, industrial, and/or institutional disposition—often controlled by heterosexual white men. The pervasiveness of such rebranding projects depends on its ability to deploy meaningful and overt cultural notions of manhood while its message is simultaneously consumed covertly.

The success of this rebranding project extends beyond agriculture, as seen in the success of the Dodge Ram commercial, connecting wholesome, down-to-earth, familial images with the consumption of new technologies. This project is embedded within a symbolic rebranding of masculinities that evolves through cultural schemas and social structures that perpetuate positions of power, specifically, two interlocking systems: patriarchy and the US capitalist economy (Hartmann 1976). The use of nostalgia veils the contradictions inherent in this rebranding project—that the use of increased technologies means the farmer will be less present on-farm, invest in higher capital technologies that

may increase farm debt and leave the farm's future uncertain, and diminish the importance of farmer-to-farmer sharing of local knowledge. It is purposeful and strategic that the masculinities prioritized in the rebranding project continue to promote domination and production. Here, rebranding projects work in favor of capitalism to make changes to social realities by redefining how we come to do this work through a rebranding of the relationships between gender and work, past and future.

In this way, the rebranding project serves as a bridge not only to connect farmers back with distinct pastoral masculinities, maintaining an occupational gendered standard, but also to (re)produce a deep commitment to productivist agriculture, further indebting farmers to a specific identity if they wish to be viewed as successful. Engaging in the farmer formula story is inextricably linked with doing capitalism. Just as the Dodge Ram commercial invites all of us to participate in connecting to nostalgic or idealized farmer imagery about the land and freedom/independence through driving a new truck, the rebranding of the farmer in the United States uses a classic formula story familiar to the public to normalize the increased corporatization of agriculture.

A successful rebranding of masculinities is so overt that it is unquestioned. It is so much about men and for men that a successful rebranding project reifies the dominant gender order while seeming to present something new. It is hegemonic in that it engages discursive mechanisms within the formula story of cultural narratives to evolve and maintain power even in the face of changing cultural and social norms. As Bruce Lincoln (1989, 3) explains, "Discourse plays a chief means whereby social border, hierarchies, institutional formation, and habituated patterns of behavior are both maintained and modified." This is why the Dodge commercial was so popular and resonated with the public even beyond those engaged in agriculture. The rebranding of masculinities employs an evolving and familiar formula story, one that engages these discursive mechanisms to ensure the maintenance and continuation of symbolic boundaries that better serve capitalism.

The discursive strategies of rebranding projects (re)produce intersecting inequalities. As these data suggest, the formula story of the productivist agriculture perpetuates not only the prioritization of yield and profit, but also the power of men (Eells 2009; Fink 1986; Sachs 1996; Trauger 2001), specifically white heterosexual men. While our analysis emphasizes the importance of masculinities in the rebranding project, it also illustrates the importance of whiteness, heteronormativity, and economic mobility. As critical race theory has contended, constructions of race have been closely tied to the ownership of property, and specifically, land (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Successful rebranding projects allow for the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and the nation-state, maintaining the hegemony of elites through a robust formula story. Myth management invites men to participate in the rebranding of agricultural masculinities by consuming new technology and expert knowledge while

still retaining the heteronormativity and whiteness captured in Paul Harvey's iconic depiction of the farmer. In doing so, any who cannot embody the myths perpetuated through the formula story—women farmers, Black farmers, gay farmers, new or immigrant farmers, farmers engaged in noncommodity crop production—risk being othered, or seen as not "real" farmers.

## Conclusion

Our analysis of the symbolic construction of masculinities as advertised and communicated in popular conventional farm magazines identifies how myth management, as a discursive mechanism of productivist agriculture, maintains a successful rebranding project: the promotion of symbolic boundaries vis-à-vis masculine resources that bolster hegemonic social boundaries in the US agriculture system. Identifying how formula stories are discursively rebranded through dominant cultural narratives helps us to understand the processes that shape masculinities through the promotion of specific symbolic resources and cultural tools. Just as marketers rebrand the meaning of a product to sell it to a new generation of consumers, agribusiness rebrands the formula story of the farmer to fit a new reality of agricultural production while maintaining the symbolic and social boundaries rooted in white, heteronormative masculinities upon which capitalist production depends.

We argue that the same symbols and scripts conveyed by Paul Harvey's "So God Made a Farmer" and within the 2013 Dodge Ram Super Bowl commercial serve to ideologically connect those outside of agriculture and those within it, ensuring the continued circulation of the rebranded discourse. Further, this masculine (re)branding works to both maintain the dominance of the production-oriented agricultural system and the idealization of specific rural masculinities. This was undoubtedly the Dodge commercial's goal, for it ends with a simple one-liner, "to the farmer in all of us." As illustrated in the commercial, and in Harvey's original speech, God did not just make a farmer, but a specific type of farmer. As illustrated in the commercial, and in Harvey's original speech, God did not just make a farmer, but a specific type of farmer linking specific masculinities to the consumption of new and advanced technologies.

While our work does not examine the interactional component of the social construction of masculinities, it offers insight into the significant discursive representations of men and masculinities and dominant agriculture practices, which has not been done previously. Our contribution not only offers a new way of thinking of hegemonic discourses and their embedded discursive mechanisms but also offers a new conceptual tool to examine the connection between the capitalist acquisition of industries through the use of masculine resources and cultural narratives. We have focused on agricultural masculinities, though we

acknowledge that rebranding projects should be examined through gendered, racialized, sexualized, and class-specific contexts. Future research should study how this rebranding project affects the lives and experiences not only of cisgender men, but also women and gender nonconforming farmers as well as how queer and gender nonconforming farmers resist these narratives through the creation of new relationalities (Leslie, Wypler, and Mayerfeld Bell 2019).

While rebranding can be about gender, race, sexuality, ability, or class, it is often about intersections of all of the above. Understanding how masculinities, or whiteness, sexuality, and class are rebranded is paramount to identifying opportunities for shifts in discourse that may challenge or potentially transform how masculinities are constructed within formula stories. The limit of certain studies may not allow us to explore all of these together. However, we suggest that future research should consider intersectional rebranding projects to study how race, class, sexuality, and gender discursively construct dominant cultural narratives through the detailing of how these are ranked and valued through discourse and interaction. Our data speaks to a broader discursive level informing use of symbolic boundaries that bolster masculine resources in the US agricultural system, but are not defined and negotiated by interaction. Future studies should consider how farmers—as well as agricultural educators and service providers—connect, intentionally or unintentionally, symbolic boundaries with the uses of masculine resources, linking discourse and practice in the same framework. To what extent are these resources a part of building and maintaining capital in the context of US agriculture? How do farmers understand their gender as contextually significant in the distribution of cultural status (Bridges 2009)? How do farmers and others involved in agricultural production navigate the contradictions inherent in this rebranding of the farmer? Are the symbolic boundaries and masculine resources outlined in our study describing one field with a set of transferable capital? Future studies should also consider how masculinities are mobilized through an agricultural discourse on a global scale. If the continuation of productivist agriculture requires a rebranding of masculinities in the United States, even if only through the selling of trucks during a football game, how are multinational corporations using narrative rebranding to maintain ideological influence in countries where masculinities and agriculture look very different?

***Angie Carter*** *is a rural sociologist studying agrifood systems and environmental justice. She is an assistant professor of social sciences at Michigan Tech University.*

***Andres Lazaro Lopez*** *is a cultural sociologist who studies the relationship between US social inequalities, men and masculinities, and the everyday production of religion and spiritualities. He recently defended his dissertation in the applied anthropology program at Oregon State University.*

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