Women Farmland Owners in Iowa: Cultivating Agency through Rhetorical Practice

Rachel M. Wolford
Iowa State University

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Women farmland owners in Iowa: Cultivating agency through rhetorical practice

by

Rachel Marie Wolford

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Rhetoric and Professional Communication

Program of Study Committee:
Carl Herndl, Co-major Professor
David Roberts, Co-major Professor
Charles Kostelnick
Linda Shenk
Mark Rectanus

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

2011

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For my daughters: Aubrey, Cordelia, and Melania.

For my mother, Sally, my strongest advocate.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank the original director of this dissertation, Carl Herndl. You first introduced me to Foucault’s concepts of power, which ignited a spark that developed into a research agenda for the foreseeable future. Carl, you have also been a fine teacher, colleague, and mentor during this long dissertation process. I am also grateful to Coach Dave Roberts who served as Co-Chair and has been my good friend for the past five years. I’m also indebted to the research participants who welcomed me into their kitchens, made me coffee, and patiently answered my questions.

I also want to thank my parents for supporting me in so many ways my entire life and particularly during these graduate school years. Thank you to my daughters, Aubrey, Cordelia, and Melania, for always inspiring me to strive to be better and stronger.

Thank you, Ross Hall friends, past and present, for all the laughter, stories, coffee, tears, and wonderful times. I had so much fun in graduate school, and you all made the difference.

Thank you, Greg Wilson, as well, for your support and encouragement in writing this dissertation and in everything else. You truly are the best.
ABSTRACT

While 47 percent of Iowa farmland is owned or co-owned by women, conventional agriculture remains largely a masculine enterprise. This dissertation focuses on the narratives of six women in Iowa who have become farmland owners through inheritance from spouses or other family members. Through ethnographic methods, I analyze the women's decisions and resulting shifts in their identity, which is related to their status as farmland owners in a hegemonic culture where women are often marginalized. Furthermore, I argue that analyzing identity is an important aspect of understanding a purposeful, embodied human rhetorical agency.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO WOMEN FARMLAND OWNERS

What interests me most about rhetorical scholarship is the potential it has to open spaces where power can be contested through rhetorical agency in order for marginalized groups to improve their circumstances. This dissertation focuses on women farmland owners (WFOs) in central and western Iowa. Although forty-seven percent of Iowa farmland is owned or co-owned by women, according to Farmland Ownership a, 2008 Iowa State Extension survey (Duffy), little research has been conducted about the implications of women making decisions on their land as property owners.

Agriculture is traditionally a masculine culture in which men are the farmers, and women serve merely as helpers whose work remains “invisible and uncounted” (Leckie, 309). While women’s roles in farming are becoming increasingly more prominent, Leckie points out that “Since ‘farmer’ represents the most non-traditional role that women in agriculture can have, they continually confront a system which has not been attuned to their talents, needs or viewpoints” (311). The backdrop for this research is exploring the actions and decisions of women as farmland owners as they have stepped into this non-traditional role.

While this research seeks to learn more about a group of WFOs, I hope to add my findings about this particular group of women in agriculture to current rhetoric and feminist scholarship. When I began this research in the summer of 2009, my primary focus was to discover how WFOs made decisions about conservation on their land. A good deal of this focus was inspired by two advocates for women in agriculture who had first introduced me to WFOs as a research site. The first is Jean Eells, a member of the State Soil and Water Conservation Committee and an independent consultant for various agricultural
conservation programs; the second is Leigh Adcock, executive director of the nonprofit organization Women Caring for the Land (WFAN).

In October 2009, Eells and Adcock co-authored a grant through the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program to talk with WFOs in “learning circle” events to develop more effective outreach strategies to communicate with and serve women farmland owners in Iowa, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. Part of the SARE grant included funding for a PhD student in rhetoric who would interview participants and conduct a rhetorical analysis of the language women farmland owners use to talk about their farmland and conservational practices. I took on that research role as the PhD student in rhetoric and thus became familiar with the underlying assumption of the SARE grant, which states: “Women report strong conservation values, but in practice women’s enrollment in conservation programming is low. Some report they feel intimidated or uninformed in speaking to tenant farmers and agency staff” (2).

While my dissertation and the SARE Grant are not synonymous projects, both of them focus on WFOs; thus, I modified the scope of my research to include studying how WFOs make conservational decisions about their property and in doing so, what obstacles they might face. Eells and Adcock had mentioned that family members and tenants who cash-rent the WFOs’ farmland sometimes resist conservation efforts that women as property owners might want to implement. At the beginning of my research, a straightforward focus seemed to be learning what obstacles the WFOs face that would undermine their goals for healthier soil on their farmland.

Research from another women-in-agriculture organization, Women, Land and Legacy (WLL), found through surveys and interviews with over 800 WFOs that these women tend to rate their concerns about the environment higher than concerns about
their farming income; furthermore, many women farmland owners are interested in developing stronger conservational farming practices on their land (2). The WLL data also suggest that gender is a factor regarding agricultural practices:

Women see themselves situated differently or at least differently than the current, dominant, ‘conventional’ paradigm would suggest. For example, women associate independence (often linked to more traditional, paternalistic attitudes) not with individualism but with independent communities. Many therefore reject industrialized agriculture as an appropriate agricultural model, instead articulating strong support for family-owned farming systems that can make greater contributions to the kinds of communities women value (3).

The ways in which WFOs “see themselves situated differently” from men regarding agricultural paradigms as well as their “rejection of industrialized agriculture” were my initial sources of curiosity as I began this research. Furthermore, I accepted the assumption that women tend to be more conservation-minded than men in the decisions they make about their farmland. As a result, my research began with the notion that while WFOs wanted to enact conservational farming practices, they might be thwarted by patriarchal ideologies in the form of resistant male tenants who conduct the farming and/or family members who prefer conventional agriculture practices that capitalize on the highest possible yields via the use of heavy chemicals and machinery. But after talking extensively with my participants, it became clear that the line I had drawn between WFOs focused on conservation and everyone else promoting industrial agriculture was in fact simplistic.

While the WFOs in my research possess the power to make changes to their farming practices because they own the land, I found that examining these women’s opportunities as agents who potentially can make conservation-minded decisions is a complex task. Often the decisions they have reported making have little to do with farming; instead, some of the WFOs are simply trying to survive. Therefore, this research has
enlarged my understanding of the participants’ decision-making environment and the complexity of agency in ways I did not expect.

**Rationale for studying WFOs in Iowa**

I offer three primary reasons for studying WFOs in Iowa: 1) the prominent role women have in agriculture is often unexamined, especially women as property owners; 2) ways in which WFOs connect to their land and its history can offer insight into their sense of identity; and 3) WFOs’ narratives offer rich comparisons and contrasts of farming before and after its industrialization during the twentieth century.

First, in traditional farming women have played a largely invisible role, as agriculture is historically recognized as an institution that privileges masculine hegemony over female perspectives (e.g., Sachs, Shortall). Much research about women and agriculture focuses on women who work on the land and whose efforts go largely unrecognized. For example, Brandth and Haugen discuss the dominance of male voices in agriculture, despite an increase in women taking a more visible position in agriculture as recently as 2010:

Women have assumed new positions and engaged in new practices, but power relations have remained much the same, and women’s work continues to hold low status in accordance with the discourses and ideologies of appropriate gender behavior in family farming. No matter what women do, their discursive placement as the farmer’s wife is dominant and overshadows other definitions of woman. Women may operate machinery, own the land, work off the farm, be entrepreneurs or managers/administrators, and participate in agripolitics but nevertheless be defined according to the hegemonic discourse of family farming (426).

Regardless of women’s roles in farming, even when they own the land, they still hold low status and are defined as the marginalized other within the male-dominated agriculture industry (Brandth and Haugen, 426). In much of the research on women in agriculture, there is very little examination of women’s roles as title holders of farm property and subsequently little examination of their decision-making practices in that role.
Shortall noted that both owning and transferring property are sources of power, particularly economic and decision-making power, that have traditionally been held by men (7). Correspondingly, given that more and more women are gaining title to farms, they are also gaining access to power. Many WFOs rent their farmland to tenant farmers and—in theory at least—have the power to tell their tenants how to conduct the farming, through the lease agreements. Analyzing WFOs within this prominent role of theoretical power will complement existing research on women in agriculture.

The second reason to study WFOs in Iowa is because much of the research on women and agriculture states that women are connected to the land differently than men, and that women tend to have more conservation-minded attitudes. In *Gendered Fields*, Sachs reviewed several ways in which women have historically been linked to nature in a gendered way. For example, the symbolism of “Mother Earth” and “Mother Nature” has indelibly connected women with nature dating all the way back to Greek mythology (30). Mies and Shiva, strong proponents of ecofeminism, have argued that women and nature, more specifically women and agriculture, are connected due to their common ability to reproduce life, and that power has been usurped to some extent by industries that profit by engineering alternative forms of reproduction (25). As a result of their shared ability to reproduce and their marginalization by industry, women and nature are often linked together by ecofeminists and feminist critics of science (e.g., Griffin, Kolodny, Sachs).

While ecofeminist perspectives and symbolic connections between women and nature are helpful ways to understand this association, these connections tend to essentialize women as a universal category from the point of view of biology, rather than from individualized cultural practices. Agarwal has suggested that humans’ connections with nature should be understood through a materialist perspective when examining the
different ways that the genders interact with nature: “Women’s and men’s relationship with nature needs to be understood as rooted in their material reality, in their specific forms of interaction with the environment” (126). In other words, the relationship between women and agricultural land may be different from that of men because women’s work is often different. Men tend to operate the heavy equipment, while women often handle less physically strenuous tasks in and around the land, such as running errands or performing household chores. Yet even describing these different tasks based on gender also seems rather essentializing, and part of the research in this study attempts to analyze how the WFOs articulate their connections to their farms from a materialist perspective. Many of these materialist connections will come to light in the form of the conservational practices and choices the WFOs make regarding their farmland.

The third reason it is useful to research WFOs in Iowa is the opportunity to articulate the stories, experiences, and unique perspectives of women in the general age range of 60 to 80. The majority of women in this study have become property owners and decision makers relatively late in life. While many of them have expressed that they lack knowledge and/or confidence to make sound decisions about how to better operate their farmland, these women also share cultural memories about what farming was like when they were young. The participants’ unique liminal history provides them with valuable first-hand knowledge of the changes in agriculture during their lifetimes. All of the WFOs in this study discussed significant differences between the self-sustaining family farms of their youth and the industrial agriculture production of corn and soybeans that largely defines farming today.

Generations following the one being studied here will have no such first-hand experience regarding the significant changes in farming during the twentieth century. The
stories these women share about how things were “back then” are a part of their identity and ideology as decision-making property owners in the present. Therefore, learning and articulating their stories is also an important part of this research.

**Research questions**

This dissertation is also about power and agency seen in the decisions made and actions taken by WFOs. Because they own the land, WFOs possess the power to make conservational changes to their tenants’ farming practices, but this power remains largely unrecognized. The research here examines the discourse spaces in which WFOs in Iowa articulate their connections to their land, their roles and responsibilities, and their decision-making processes related to their farmland and agricultural practices. The narratives that WFOs relate in interviews provide valuable insights toward understand why these they make decisions to improve conservation on their farmland, or why they do not. In some cases the decision is simply to do nothing and thereby allow others to maintain control over the land’s welfare, which is generally what happened before these women gained title to the property. In other cases, the decisions these women make focus on improving their personal lives rather than their farms. Nonetheless, I would argue that all of the WFOs’ decisions result from their identities and ideological commitments as farm women. Sifting through the narratives of WFOs allows us to articulate the sometimes conflicting ideologies of these women and to identify their opportunities for agency.

This dissertation draws on the theoretical and research traditions of feminist methodology, with its epistemological and action orientation, as well as critical practice in rhetoric, including its commitment to analysis, intervention, and local change (e.g., DeVault and Gross, Stacey). For example, Hesse-Biber and Piatelli state, “Feminist research takes people as active, knowing subjects rather than passive objects of study” (147). I
certainly hope that the presentation of WFO narratives in this study illustrates the lively actions and knowledge of the participants who shared their stories with me.

As a complement to this research, it is important to consider the potential for activism and the possibility of exploring alternative strategies with these women to help strengthen their decision-making power as WFOs. The goal here is to add to the body of professional and technical communication research from the perspective of what Herndl calls “critical practice,” which is “an attempt to move beyond either naïve or overly pessimistic analyses and to generate really useful knowledge that opens possibilities for action however circumscribed or local” (3).

From a feminist methodological perspective, it is critical to approach the interviews carefully and self-reflectively. Stacey reminds feminist researchers that ethnographic studies can contain only moments of feminist interpretation and always only partially represent research participants because of the researcher’s own political and social interests (25). Harding provides a hearty argument for feminist methodology and stresses that research questions and resulting research should produce knowledge by women for women: “One distinctive feature of feminist research is that it generates its problematics from the perspective of women’s experiences” (7).

The framework for the research here is that agriculture is a woman’s issue, and it is indeed in Iowa, given that such a large percentage of farmland is owned by women. This dissertation could be read and compared and contrasted with more traditional forms of knowledge from the hegemonic perspective, yet its primary purpose is what DeVault calls “excavation,” or “shifting the focus of standard practice from men’s concerns in order to reveal the locations and perspectives of (all) women” (30). Presenting agriculture as a woman’s issue in this research, then, is the focus of my research questions, which follow:
1) To what extent does gender influence WFO’s decisions regarding agricultural practices used on their farmland?

2) In viewing WFOs as “sites of contradiction” (Belsey, 168), to what extent do these female property owners use that position for potential agency to conform to and/or “transform” their seemingly black-boxed identity from the marginalized, invisible subject as a farm wife on the family farm to an agent who makes purposeful, conservation-minded decisions about her farmland?

To answer question 1, I examine the extent to which gender influences WFOs’ decisions about their farms by analyzing the WFOs’ narratives. First, through coding the narratives thematically, I find and analyze portions of the narratives where the participants mention directly that being a woman has affected their decisions and actions. Second, I analyze the WFOs’ reports of their relationships with their families and tenants as well as their historical accounts of the farm to uncover more subtle gendered connections to their land. I accomplish this with the assistance of previous research about women in agriculture, which I outline in the next section.

While question 1 is rather straightforward, question 2 requires a much more complicated research process. The main objective of question 2 is to understand the extent to which the identity of these research participants transforms from a somewhat muted, invisible farm wife to a purposeful, decision-making WFO, as a result of becoming a property owner. To analyze the women’s shift in identity formation, I analyze the WFOs’ decision-making practices by listing each WFO’s decisions and actions as reported in her narrative. Highlighting these events provides a helpful summary of each narrative and illustrates that the women exercised agency in their decisions and actions, and this agency helped reconstruct the women’s identity as WFOs. Additionally, I attempt to measure to what extent becoming a property owner also helped begin that reconstruction of the women as purposeful, embodied agents. Analyzing the WFOs’ actions related to their relationships with their tenants, family, and sometimes communities will illustrate that
agency is located within particular local contexts and through the actions of the WFOs as purposeful, embodied agents.

In following Harding’s suggestion that feminist researchers ask and answer research questions from the epistemological standpoint of women as contributors of knowledge (6-7), these research questions are important to more clearly articulating agriculture as a woman’s issue. An important objective of this research is to add to the body of rhetorical knowledge about WFOs, but not as a resource that fits into the dominant hegemonic paradigm of male-centered agriculture. Instead, an important audience for this dissertation is the participants themselves. Each one will be sent a copy of the finished manuscript. The narratives were written to be accessible to the participants and to frame these women as the experts on their own farmland.

In summary, this research is concerned about power within the institutional framework of agriculture and the fairly rare occasions in which that power is transferred and exercised among agents, in this case WFOs. This study focuses on WFOs as they make purposeful decisions and take actions that result from shifts and contradictions in their identity(ies).

**Background of Women in Agriculture**

Historically, farming is a man’s business. Men drive the tractors and combines and make the financial decisions regarding the sale of their crops. Examine advertisements by seed and fertilizer companies, and the actors and the primary target audience are men. The majority of research in agriculture has also assumed the stance that farming belongs to the male gender, and that women in farming are largely silent. In her 1983 ethnographic study of women farmers, Sachs concludes that women are “invisible farmers,” largely constrained by—among other factors—not having the same access as men to land ownership,
financing, agricultural training, or information to be a visible force regarding farming practices (114).

Additionally, Trauger states that women generally do not occupy the role of power on the farm: “The social script for most women in rural communities in public space is typically to be running a farm errand or handling farm business with the bank for her husband, not to be conducting business as a farmer in her own right” (299). Moreover, Brandth and Haugen describe an agrarian ideology that defines women as “the other”; they add that “men have been regarded as the managers of farms, and paternalism as a managerial form has been found to characterize the power relations and daily lives of farming families as well as agricultural organizations” (426). In other words, the researchers conclude that industrial agriculture is primarily a hegemonic, male-gendered institution that has obscured women as ancillary helpers who have little or no decision-making power regarding the farm.

On the other hand, women’s roles related to agriculture are changing, particularly as more women find themselves holding the title to farm property. The WFOs in this research, for example, are for the most part farm wives or widows who have become owners of the family farm through inheritance. Many of the participants in this research, after spending most of their lives as the wife or daughter on the farm, and having little knowledge of the day-to-day farm operations, were rather suddenly thrown into the position of owner and manager of the property. Such an upheaval in these women’s subject position mirrors the pliable and diverse roles that Brandth describes:

The discourse of detraditionalisation and diversity places the genders in a multitude of various subject positions in line with post-modern plurality, instability, and the shifting character of identity formation. Women (and men) identify with subject positions that differ from the positions of ‘farmer’s wife’ and ‘farmer’ in many ways. The individuals are described as actively constructing their own occupational identities,
some, such as manager and entrepreneur being quite distant from traditional farm identities (196).

Brandth’s point is that the “subject” position of a woman involved in agriculture is not necessarily regimented to a marginalized identity. Instead, the subjectivity of these women is shifting, pliable, and open to new constructions of “occupational identities,” as women become property owners and decision makers on their farms.

Outside of the United States, women are still very much excluded from owning land, which Sachs believes prevents them from using land as collateral to get credit for loans, buy machinery, or in any way succeed as modern farmers (64). From a purely global perspective regarding opportunities for land ownership, WFOs in Iowa have tremendous power to participate in the capitalist system, and they receive rent payments from their tenants. Yet despite their power to make decisions about their land, they often shy away from exercising that power.

While scholarship about women and agriculture overwhelmingly portrays women as marginalized, invisible, and “defined according to the hegemonic discourse of family farming,” as suggested above, one object of this dissertation is to research the development of the participants’ identity as they assume the role of WFOs. The potential for transformation does find legitimacy in other research about women and agriculture, including the survey mentioned above from Women, Land, and Legacy, in which women involved in agriculture “see themselves situated differently” from men in agricultural paradigms (3). This is not a new research agenda. If women tend to be more interested in pursuing conservational agricultural practices, it might be because their traditional farming roles have tended to center on domestic tasks.

As far back as 1980, for example, Rosenfeld’s survey of over 2,500 women and 500 men involved in farming found that women spent most of their time taking care of
children and the household, bookkeeping, and running errands, and they were much less likely to physically work on the farm, particularly applying chemicals or driving farming machinery (56). The implication is that the type of work women do on a farm may affect how they view industrialized agriculture. Furthermore, women's work on the farm continues to evolve. Sachs and Alston suggest that women involved in farming are not necessarily mired in their traditional invisible roles:

Although patriarchal family structures and cultural traditions tend to confine rural women, their subordination remains incomplete. Such women are by no means powerless, as revealed by their ability to cope, survive, work together, change their lives, and, as Joan Jensen (1986) puts it, 'loosen the bonds' (7).

WFOs' “incomplete subordination” as marginalized subjects is indeed compelling fodder for research. Women’s roles in agriculture are often tied to conservation and community. For example, in her research about the organization Women, Food, and Agriculture Network (WFAN), Wells reports that its members share concerns for a more sustainable kind of agriculture that helps connect communities:

Food knits closer family and community ties, making community visible again, community as a vital living entity, not an abstract nostalgic concept. Food growing, processing and preparation constitute a day-to-day reality in the lives of most rural women, (377).

This articulated kinship of women, community, food, and land is a prominent theme throughout much of the scholarship regarding women and agriculture and helps illustrate the material connections women have with the land, which is also a focus of my research.

**Expanding opportunities for women in non-traditional agriculture**

Sustainable agriculture is a large, encompassing term for many different types of farming practices. Yet in general it refers to farming without the use of chemicals and other
invasive measures that harm the soil and environment. In what Wells calls “an often
inhospitable terrain in which women in U.S. agriculture are situated,” sustainable
agriculture has become in recent years an arena where women have stepped out of their
marginalized, invisible black box to have active roles as farm owners and operators (377).
Trauger also argues that sustainable agriculture can be a space women can claim to achieve
“legitimate identity” as farmers:

In contrast to most farm women, the women farmers [practicing Sustainable agriculture] in this study regularly have sole responsibility for decisions about buying and renting farm land and equipment, production practices and the marketing of farm products. This active and public decision making behavior is a clear departure from expected behavior of farm women” (299).

According to Trauger, decision-making in sustainable agriculture seems to be much
easier for women farmers than decision-making in traditional industrial agriculture.
Furthermore, Sachs reports that women lead many of the grass-roots organizational efforts
in the sustainable agriculture movement; the women she interviewed reported getting
involved because of their concerns over “toxic effects of pesticides, their desire to take care
of land and preserve ecosystems, and their dissatisfaction with the organization of the food
system” (62). Women in the sustainable agriculture movement seem more outspoken and
visible than women involved in conventional farming, including the participants in my
research. Why might this be the case? According to Trauger, the difference is due to
women’s practical, material relationship with the land:

Work traditionally performed by farm women, particularly the work of
caring for animals and growing food for family consumption, is now
Becoming valuable economically through the sustainable agriculture
community…. The work required to produce such products is labor
intensive, largely unmechanized, and does not involved the application
of non-organic chemicals to crops (292).
In other words, while women in industrial agriculture may be invisible and marginalized because they don’t drive machinery or apply chemicals and instead are responsible for growing food and taking care of the family and animals, these same work characteristics make women excellent candidates for the sustainable agriculture movement.

Women’s more prominent role in sustainable agriculture clarifies the material relationships to the land shared by many of the WFOs in this study. Little of their relationship to the land has anything to do with industrial agriculture practices. For example, almost all of the WFOs in this study have their own gardens and take pride in the quality of food they produce. Understanding and analyzing what factors and decisions the women find important about their land can help clarify how they make decisions about it.

*Theoretical lens for analyzing WFOs*

While sustainable agriculture is a growing farming practice, the larger institution of agriculture—whether in the form of family or industrial farming—traditionally functions as a male-centered, hegemonic ideology in which the productivist model, which focuses on obtaining highest crop yields with the greatest efficiency, is dominant. Therefore, I make cautiously the argument that women’s viewpoints and objectives regarding farming practices are often obscured by the dominant male discourse, and that ideology that favors industrial agriculture tends to play a large role in the reluctance of women farmland owners to take responsibility for making conservational decisions that would positively impact their land. Moreover, exploring the extent to which WFOs in Iowa may resist or circumvent marginalizing ideologies to make autonomous, confident decisions about the conservational practices on their farms is important in this research. The hope is to discover and analyze the extent to which women farmland owners act differently by adopting conservational practices that are outside the dominant productivist discourse. The ability to
“act differently” and take counter-hegemonic action is best understood through theoretical texts in rhetoric and cultural studies that focus on ideology and resistance strategies.

Foucault explains that “truth is a thing of this world” and that “specific effects of power [are] attached to the true” (316-317). Truth is created in discourse, or narratives, and whoever most effectively influences that “regime” or “politics” within a localized context has power to effect change. My goal is to discover the decision-making practices of the WFOs in my research as determined by the particular narratives of truth they articulate.

The larger focus of this research has been to analyze WFOs’ reports of how their gender influences their decisions, particularly as they discussed their history on the land and their relationships to spouses, other family members, and their tenants. I also examined the WFOs’ narratives to better understand the ideologies that help define their identities and determine their decision-making. In my theoretical framework, a discussion of ideology leads directly to agency.

As a researcher, I have always been interested in the underlying ideologies that interpellate subjects into certain almost deterministic courses of action, as described by Althusser (1504). In spite of the long poststructuralist tradition of deconstructing hegemonic ideals, Althusser’s Marxist principle of interpellation through ideology tends to linger. Like it or not, socially constituted subjects are hailed toward some system of belief. To whom or to what does anyone answer the famous query, “Hey, you there!” (1504)? Althusser paints a gloomy picture from the Marxist perspective that escaping ideology is impossible, and that from birth individuals are interpellated as “always already” subjects to abide by the hegemonic ideologies that enable society to function (1505).

While Althusser makes a convincing argument to explain the principles by which humankind abide to regulate themselves correctly in society, many theorists have since
attempted to ameliorate or circumvent this Althusser’s concept of ideology through their own understandings of human action. For example, Giddens argues much more optimistically that social actors do possess a degree of self-consciousness and awareness of the structures that shape their actions. Describing the tendency to reify ideology into “naturalized” social relations and practices, Giddens states:

Even the crudest forms of reified thought, however, leave untouched the fundamental significance of the knowledgeability of human actors. For knowledgeability is founded less upon discursive than practical consciousness (24).

For Giddens, humans develop this tacit knowledge or practical consciousness, which results in purposeful action rather than unconscious, interpellated actions, through their lived experience of daily social relations (3). In other words, experiences gleaned from subjects’ social lives can enable subjects to take conscious actions.

Eagleton also contends that ideology need not function as a negative factor, stating that “ideology is needed to provide them [individuals] with a kind of imaginary ‘map’ of the social totality, so that they can find their way around it” (150). Considering Eagleton’s premise that ideology is inescapable yet navigable, I would argue that human subjects can and often do act with more ideological awareness than Althusser might have allowed. Haraway seems the fiercest in arguing for purposeful actions through ideology, stating that interpellation is “double-edged” in hailing subjects: “Subjects in a discourse can and do refigure its terms, contents, and reach. In the end, it is those who mis/recognize themselves in discourse who thereby acquire the power, and responsibility to shape that discourse” (50). In other words, Haraway argues that subjects can turn the tables on ideology and re-shape it for their own interests by “misrecognizing” the role they are supposed to play in a given situation and enlarge their own interests through purposeful action.
Finally, Grossberg also disagrees heartily with Althusser, stating that interpellation theories "seem to deny the possibility of agency or rather, to locate agency in the processes by which history constantly reproduces its structures" (120). Following the humanist strain of cultural studies rather than the structuralist tradition, Grossberg views history from the perspective of humans, not interpellated subjects, who are involved in “a constant struggle to construct the concrete realities of their lives” (114). “Concrete realities” can be understood as the material results of subjects’ ideologies, whether those interpellations are formed purposely or not. Actions taken in the material world result from the ideologies of actors.

While all the preceding theorists open space for human agency and attempt to reject the seeming inevitability of interpellation in Althusser's theory, none of these writers is able to dismiss the power of ideology, even if it is a set of imaginary social relations, to shape social actors. Individuals are not free, autonomous, or independent of discourse, ideology, and materiality. Cultural-studies theorists decidedly complicate the understanding of ideology through analysis of the possibility of self-critical thought and action; even Haraway would concede that it is a struggle to act differently. Therefore, Althusser's theory of interpellation remains foundational to any understanding of resistance to dominant ideology and rhetorical agency.

It may be Belsey's theory regarding ideology that provides the clearest lens from which to understand the WFOs in this study. Belsey suggests that discourse constructs the subject through ideology (167). Indeed, postmodern reality is found in the de-centered position of language, as Derrida argued: “in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse” (961). Furthermore, following Lacan, Belsey offers an alternative
understanding of ideology that is founded in discourse that “constructs” people as subjects to behave themselves in society:

Ideology obscures the real conditions of existence by presenting partial truths. It is a set of omissions, gaps rather than lies, smoothing over contradictions, appearing to provide answers to questions which in reality it evades, and masquerading as coherence in the interests of the social relations generated by and necessary to the reproduction of the existing mode of production (46).

Discourse ideology, according to Belsey, represents a subject’s adherence to social relations that allows her to get along in society. Yet this ideology is actually a “masquerade” that evades a subject’s more visceral material reality, which lies underneath the cover of societal expectations. For example, according to Belsey, the “existing modes of production” in a patriarchal society could be reflected in women’s “natural” decisions to stay home with children and housework rather than pursue professional careers “(49). Similarly, most of the WFOs in this study have been convinced that they don’t have enough knowledge to make informed decisions about their farming practices, and much of that insecurity seems to stem from the naturalness and ubiquity of the hegemonic narrative that locates women as secondary and dependent in the male world of industrial agriculture. Many, not all, of the WFOs in this research have echoed strains of that dominant ideology in their interviews; however, within those same interviews the WFOs have also told their own counter-narratives of their roles as property owners who have learned to make purposeful decisions. Stepping into this role of primary responsibility for their own welfare and their farmland has helped repositioned the WFOs’ ideology and loosen the bonds of that traditional subject formation to which many of them had been interpellated throughout their lives.
Furthermore, Belsey and others have argued that the subject in ideology is always “in process,” always interpellated by more than one ideological position, and that these conditions make resistance and change possible:

The subject is thus the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a process lies the possibility of transformation (168).

Belsey’s “site of contradiction” becomes the subject position of many WFOs as they suddenly become property owners of their family farms. This “crisis” causes alterations in the way these women use language as land owners rather than as farm wives and daughters. And as Belsey states, it is within this liminal position of new farmland ownership that “transformation,” or rhetorical agency, may present itself, as women may begin to make their own decisions about their farmland. It is this potential for WFOs to exercise what is for them a new form of agency that I am examining in this research.

**Strategies of resistance through agency**

Originally, I approached this research focused on the extent to which WFOs reported making more knowledgeable and confident decisions about conservation practices on their land, such as protecting the soil from erosion. After interviewing the participants multiple times, I realized that some of them have larger concerns than conservation challenges on their farms, and they expend much more energy making decisions to improve the quality of their lives. However, I would argue that whether the women’s decisions as WFOs are related to conservation or not, their actions and decisions generally focus on changing and improving their lives as independent agents, not tied to a dominant spouse or other authority figure. As WFOs, these participants now occupy that authority figure role, and their decisions in that role, still within the context of the family farm, in
some cases can be interpreted as a form of resistance to the dominant, productivist structure of farming.

The primary form of resistance that I am investigating is rhetorical agency. And as my research has unfolded, my understanding of both the WFOs in this study and the concept of agency have broadened. Agency is not a simple concept, and it shifts and reforms, according to its particular contexts, especially in qualitative work with varied research participants. In searching for moments of rhetorical agency in the discourse of WFOs, the challenge is to define this concept somewhere along the continuum between postmodern and humanist understandings of agency.

Agency is a complex theoretical principle that developed out of cultural studies as a stronger and more positive move beyond traditional resistance strategies. In general, “agency refers to doing” (Giddens, 10). However, agency becomes complicated when considering the conditions under which the “doing” takes place. To what extent is agency attached either to agents or to external factors that affect actions and decisions? This postmodern problem of the de-centered subject is what Greene calls a “permanent anxiety” over the meaning of agency that persists in rhetorical studies (188).

Although in classical rhetoric agency is often identified with a charismatic speaker who moves an audience toward action, Leff describes a “humanist rhetoric” in which agency is found in the relationship between the rhetor and audience through the “mediating force” of tradition (135). While Leff views the rhetor as the primary arbiter of agency (145), Greene instead sees agency in the material world, rather than in people; Greene proposes freeing agency from its civic and political action roots and instead offers a “materialist-communicative approach to rhetorical agency, a theory that imagines rhetoric as a life-affirming labor, allowing an escape route from playing the role of moral
entrepreneur” (203). Greene understands rhetorical agency as “communicative labor,” which is more robust and ready to meet the ever-expanding rhetorical situations created by technology and “bio-political production,” a term Greene borrowed from Hardt and Negri (2000), meaning the universally pervasive inroads of capitalism (200). Thus for Greene, agency is the means for subjects to affect discourse within the pervasive influences of technology and capitalism.

At the other extreme in which agency is divorced from a human agent, Lundberg and Gunn passionately endorse a view of agency squarely from the deconstructionist perspective. Citing Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault, Lundberg and Gunn state that postmodern theory “requires that we make a decisive analytical cut between agency, understood as the production of effect or action, and the agent as the presumed origin of effect or action, which can be a subject, language, ideology, perhaps even a spirit” (88). Lundberg and Gunn locate agency within action and believe the important question is where to “locate responsibility when agency is exercised,” rather than how agency should be understood (94). In other words, this poststructuralist view analyzes the effects of agency or action in a particular context, instead of focusing on an agent.

While poststructural theory necessitates the analysis of all contributing forces that lead to action beyond the subject, the passive voice clause “when agency is exercised” can cause skepticism. Indeed, Lundberg and Gunn conclude their essay with a call for “relentless questioning of the conditions of the production of the agent,” in an effort to achieve responsibility (96); yet it seems that agency and its responsibility must ultimately rest with someone or something. Or perhaps agency resides in a place where human action is possible. Herndl and Licona view rhetorical agency not simply as an agent taking action, but rather a space where action may occur; they stated:
Agency is the conjunction of a set of social and subjective relations that constitute the possibility of action. The rhetorical performance that enacts agency is a form of *kairos*, that is, social subjects realizing the possibilities for action presented by the conjuncture of a network of social relations (135).

In other words, agency can potentially take place when the social contexts and timing wherein a subject is found make action possible. Furthermore, Herndl and Licona state that these social relations are located along a continuum of authority and agency with subjects occupying “possibilities to effect change,” depending on their position within the rhetorical context (135). Here, the focus of agency is on the kairotic events that shape circumstances more so than an agent taking action.

Similarly, Miller shifts the axis of agency toward a center of “interaction” between rhetor and audience, stating: “Interaction is necessary for agency because it is what creates the kinetic energy of performance and puts it to rhetorical use. Agency, then, is not only the property of an event, it is the property of a relationship between rhetor and audience” (150). Thus Miller understands agency as a performative event containing an energy created by the “constructed attributions” of rhetor and audience (152). I would add to the argument that that the attributions contributed to the kinetic energy of agency could be described as tools used by agents to take action. Agency seems like the ether that surrounds the opportunities, ideology(ies), and tools available to the agent within a distinct rhetorical situation.

These several postmodern and de-centered understandings of agency as occurring through rhetorical performances or as the result of external forces leave me with a nagging question about who is responsible for decisions made and actions taken from a human perspective. We make decisions every day based on an ideology or conflicting ideologies, as Belsey would suggest. Cooper notes a similar dissatisfaction with the views of agency that
are divorced from an agent, and she encapsulates the conflict succinctly in the following passage:

The decentering or fragmentation of the subject has resulted instead in the birth of new poststructural, postmodern, and posthumanist versions that deny that a subject can ‘have’ agency. The new subjects are assumed to be so fragmented that they are incapable of coherent intentions or actions, and agency is merely a position into which they are interpellated, a role they can perform or a node they can occupy temporarily” (423).

Cooper’s point is that most de-centered views of a subject deny that person any intentionality or cognitive purpose to take action; instead her actions are purely driven by outside forces and conditions into which that subject is interpellated. Cooper adds that this absence of human beings in postmodern conceptions of agency understandably results in a crisis for rhetoric because “it leaves no room for any notion of embodied agency and individual responsibility” (424). Instead, Cooper argues for decision-making humans to be understood as “actors” rather than as “subjects,” by arguing that actors do not possess the unavoidable, dichotomous link that “subjects” do to Platonian “object” or “other” (424). Conversely, agents are identified by their straightforward action rather than by outside elements. Cooper explains her point:

Unlike subjects, agents are defined neither by mastery, nor by determination, nor by fragmentation. They are unique, embodied, and autonomous individuals in that they are self-organizing, but by virtue of that fact, they, as well as the surroundings with which they interact, are always changing” (425).

Agency for Cooper involves an actor who is constantly interacting with and changing her circumstances. She does not cause change to happen on her own, yet she is defined by her activity. From my perspective this is the most hopeful and positive understanding of agency because the human being is an embodied agent who thinks,
speaks, acts, and consciously changes her world. Cooper’s agency seems very Gidden-esque in its reflection of “practical consciousness” (24).

Cooper also notes that the agent’s free will does not mean simply that she chooses between two outcomes; instead, this autonomy builds new and varied connections and relationships:

The freedom in free will is this openness to different meanings, an openness to the ‘flow of fresh constructions within our brains and bodies’ (citing Freeman 139) that arises in our interactions with each other and the surround and that, as Mazis says, creates choices (441).

Cooper’s description of a very human and embodied agency is an effective lens to help me understand the decisions and actions of the WFOs. By inheriting the farmland, these women have also assumed another, possibly contradictory, identity as an agent who is legally responsible for her farm. In short, my goal with this research is to understand what agency looks like as the WFOs make decisions in this role.

The hypothesis in this research, then, is that the WFOs may use whatever tools are available to them, particularly in the form of social relationships within their own unique, local contexts, as they make decisions about the agricultural practices on their farms and about their own lives. In many cases the WFOs in my research are still encumbered with the identity of the “invisible farm wife” with marginal status (Sachs, 114), and these women’s decisions are based more on general survival than concerns with conservation on the farmland they own. Identifying these rhetorical tools, whatever their form, helps construct a stronger understanding of embodied human agency.

In analyzing and interpreting the interview data, I am using contemporary theories of human agency, particularly from Cooper, to formulate a clearer understanding of WFOs’ relationship to dominant discourses and agricultural practices. These theoretical notions shape an understanding of the rhetorical and social situation framing of these women and
their decisions. And this study, in turn, interprets these theoretical concepts in terms of this specific, situated case of rhetoric and action. Thus resistance practices can be understood in the context of these research participants at a kairotic time in their lives to make decisions, as they, for the most part, are suddenly handed the responsibility and power to do so through inheritance of the farmland from a deceased spouse or other family member.

In conclusion, Grossberg, and other cultural theorists encourage subjects to re-shape their ideology, which in turn would potentially transform their material reality. Ideology in the form of action is closely related to agency and power. For example, when Haraway analyzes ideology in technoscience, she is really talking about authority and who wields it. In Modest Witness, Haraway shows how dominant images, identities, and ideologies have power because they are so broadly articulated to other, seemingly unrelated practices. In a similar way that Haraway makes those empowering articulations visible, I also want to help clarify the dominant and non-dominant narratives of the WFOs in this research. Moreover, from a related perspective, Starr describes power as a contestable site based in language, stating: “Power is about whose metaphor brings worlds together, and holds them there” (52). In other words, power is gained and lost through tropes and language. Writing this ethnographic research about WFOs and the decisions they face will hopefully help make more clear how ideology and agency affect and are affected by these participants as they decide whether and/or how to make confident choices about their own farming practices.

This dissertation is organized in five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces to the women farmland owners as a research site, includes a literature review about women in agriculture, and introduces the theoretical framework of agency. Chapter 2 provides the methodology
for this ethnographic research project. Chapter 3 is a long chapter containing a narrative for each of the six main research participants. In Chapter 4 I re-visit the research questions and provide answers and an analysis of gender and agency within the context of the WFO narratives. Chapter 5 offers implications of the research findings, ideas for further research, and a conclusion.
CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

This research is part of what Sachs and Alston describe as the growing body of “contemporary analyses” that focus on unpacking “gendered power relations” to help reveal “the complexity of gender interrelationships and the deeply embedded role women have always played in agriculture and food production” (278).

A major goal of this research is to understand and then communicate the narratives and material practices of WFOs that stem from the “gendered power relations” in which they find themselves. The “deeply embedded role” these WFOs play in their local agricultural sphere will be made clear in following chapters as these women negotiate leases and decision making with their respective tenants and family members regarding conservation practices on their farmland as well as other decisions about their lives. Then I will connect this analysis to the question of embodied human rhetorical agency, explaining how the WFOs as agents are affected by their gendered relations and the possibilities of action in their specific contexts.

A traditional goal for this type of research would be to write an ethnography in the spirit of Creswell’s definition, which states that an ethnography is “a qualitative design in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group” (68). While this dissertation has evolved into an in-depth, qualitative exploration of WFOs’ values, behaviors, beliefs, and language, I have been careful to resist the idea that the research participants here constitute a homogeneous, culture-sharing group. In her seminal excavation of feminist methodology, Harding warns researchers against “universalizing” women as a collective whole; rather, she suggests that the researcher take into consideration “cultural categories” that distinguish women and their perspectives as well as “hyphenated states of many self-
chosen labels of identity,” including Harding’s own examples of “Asian-American feminist” or “lesbian feminist” (8). Categories in this research may include “contented-WFO” or “self-reliant-WFO,” or even “conservation activist-WFO.” Part of the data analysis involves discovering both the variances and common ground that identifies this community of WFOs by the ways in which they talk about their farms and farming practices.

DeVault and Gross discuss a similar form of feminist research with a purposeful focus on women “at the center of analysis” to help the researcher “uncover silenced discourse and generate better knowledge that displaces inadequate theories and false stereotypes about women’s lives” (145). This dissertation could be considered a small beginning to record the usually silent narratives of WFOs who are dealing with the responsibilities of farmland ownership later in life without much experience in making these kinds of decisions.


d\textit{Conducting research from a feminist methodology}

Throughout this research my goal has been to situate my methods and methodology clearly against the backdrop of other research related to women and agriculture. I want to add to the body of rhetorical knowledge about WFOs, but \textit{not} as a resource that fits into the dominant hegemonic paradigm of male-centered agriculture. Rather, my goal is to conduct research for women in the hopes of encouraging my research participants to develop a more independent identity as confident, decision-making WFOs, \textit{if} that is what they wish to do. Harding provides a hearty argument and structure for feminist methodology, which she states is connected to both a feminist epistemology and variety of methods (8). According to Harding, many research questions and the research resulting from them have produced knowledge to support men’s interests: “The questions
about women that men have wanted answered have all too often arisen from desires to pacify, control, exploit, or manipulate women” (8). I agree with Harding that my research as a feminist should contribute knowledge about agricultural practices by women, for women, and in the interests of WFOs specifically.

In addition, Harding does not believe simply in “adding women” to what are considered important issues in our culture, such as including women’s contributions to scientific studies. Such research is still catering to “powerfully androcentric standards” of adding women to the male issues (4). Instead, Harding asked how social phenomena get defined as problems or research questions in the first place, and she suggests that women ask the questions and answer them from the epistemological standpoint of women as contributors of knowledge (p. 6). She added that a variety of methods could be used to form such a methodology of women creating knowledge for women: “One distinctive feature of feminist research is that it generates its problematics from the perspective of women’s experiences. It also uses these experiences as a significant indicator of the ‘reality’ against which hypotheses are tested” (7). In other words, “problematics” in feminist research focuses on issues that are primarily important to women, and in my research, WFOs specifically.

The frame for my dissertation research is to make agriculture a woman’s issue, which it should be, with almost half of Iowa farmland held in title by women. When the research is complete, it could be read and compared and contrasted with more traditional forms of knowledge from the hegemonic perspective, yet its primary purpose is what DeVault calls “excavation,” or “shifting the focus of standard practice from men’s concerns in order to reveal the locations and perspectives of (all) women” (30). The primary
excavating framework for my research is interviewing both WFOs and advocates for women’s participation in agricultural conservation.

The role of feminist and rhetorical activism in research

A key theme that has developed from the participant interviews is how gender clearly “intersects” with agricultural practices. In *Ecofeminism*, Mies and Shiva argue for more activist research, particularly for women in agriculture:

> The change of the status quo becomes the starting point for a scientific quest… If we apply this principle to the study of women, it means that we have to start fighting against women’s exploitation and oppression in order to be able to understand the extent, dimensions, and forms and causes of this patriarchal system” (40).

Considering my conversations with the WFOs in this research, I do not think that they would generally consider themselves to be “exploited” and “oppressed,” as Mies and Shiva state above, and they even might have been offended if those terms had been used during their interviews. However, comparing some of the WFOs’ reports of conflicts in their lives with previous research conducted on women and agriculture, it seems clear that to some extent the women in my research have been exploited and oppressed regarding their contributions to decision-making about their farms. WFOs have told me several stories about conflicts with their tenants or family members. One participant was subtly bullied by her tenant for several years after her husband died. Another WFO was exploited financially by her husband. Still another was told by her mother-in-law back in 1950 that she would never have any part of the family farming business. When this participant inherited the farm in 1994 after everyone else had died, she had no first-hand knowledge and experience of how to make decisions as the property owner. It was a difficult transition for her.
From the participants’ narratives, it is clear that many of them have been oppressed to one extent or another. And to make the WFOs’ narratives visible and accessible to them is one small method of pushing back against that patriarchal system into which the women have been interpellated to live their lives.

Considering professional communication and research through an activist model, many rhetoric scholars (e.g., Herndl and Nahrwold, Porter and Sullivan) ask researchers to consider the political and ethical factors that help formulate their research questions. This approach is proliferating in rhetoric studies. For example, Blythe, Grabill, and Riley examine the communication between “Harbor” citizens and official “experts” regarding the potential placement of a toxic disposal facility in the town (6). In their activist role, these researchers effectively alter how public meetings are conducted and how reports are distributed to the public in order to help Harbor residents participate in policy decisions regarding placement of the waste disposal facility in their town (31).

Another example of rhetoric research that focuses on gender analysis and power is Britt’s interviews with women undergoing fertility treatments in Massachusetts as their condition of infertility becomes “normalized” by the procedures and language of a state statute that requires insurance coverage for this group of women. Additionally, Propen and Schuster examine the “normative structures” and potential power of victim impact statements in court cases by interviewing judges and advocates who help victims (who are mostly women) craft such statements. One of Propen and Schuster’s objectives in collecting and analyzing victim impact statements was to benefit the parties involved in writing these statements: “We also hope that our study will reveal to advocates and victims successfully persuasive strategies and tactics that enhance a VIS [victim impact statement]” (323). Similarly, my hope is that WFOs in this research read the narratives of
how their peers have become more effective agents of their lives and their land since their husbands have died.

Since the beginning of this ethnographic research in the fall of 2009, it has been important for me to keep in mind how I—as the researcher—could be a potential resource for helping the WFOs to make stronger decisions about conservation on their farms. The responsibility and influence of rhetoricians related to the communities with whom they interact can be likened to the “liminal space” that we carve out for ourselves as researchers. Jeyaraj frames liminality as “the transitional state, or space, comprising the boundary between different states of existence or between different communities that allows the temporal ‘hither and thither’ movements between communities” (16). In other words, researchers should look for those particularly rhetorical moments of tension or instability within a given context in order to effect positive changes, or new articulations, with their participants or constituents. Being mindful of the potential for those rhetorical moments in this research was important for me. On the other hand, I was aware that any influence I had in helping the participants effect change would be minimal at best.

Regarding a research’s fieldwork, Foucault reminds us that, “Any description must always be made in accordance with these kinds of virtual fractures which open up the space of freedom understood as a space of concrete freedom, that is, of possible transformation” (94). Navigating that tension of encouraging my participants’ “possible transformation” while being an outsider to their community was a large part of exploring my own role as an interventionist researcher. Originally, when I was formulating my first tentative research questions about gender and decision-making related to conservation practices, I thought that the WFOs simply needed a researcher who could encourage them to overcome obstacles, such a a problematic tenant. If I could just help them through our conversations
to be courageous, fire that tenant, and hire one that followed the women’s conservation goals, then I would have succeeded in helping my participants “transform.”

However, after the first round of interviews, I realized that my activist goal was quite idealistic and that the women’s conflicts ran far deeper than simply needing (from my perspective) to fire their tenant. By the end of my interviews with them, I had abandoned my original Pollyanna-ish goal. Nevertheless, throughout the interview process, I was not merely a dispassionate researcher trying to remain neutral; instead, I always encouraged the women to be more independent and to make stronger decisions about their farms, conservations, their tenants, and their financial and emotional security. In short, I always let them know I was on their side. Maintaining that attitude may be a paltry form of activism for a researcher, but in this small project, such encouragement was my only option.

Therefore, my attitude from the beginning was to encourage the WFOs in this study to make stronger decisions about their farm management, about conservation practices, or about any other obstacles they faced. As an outsider to the women’s regular social relationships and communities, I had no illusions that my research would directly benefit the participants, particularly in such a short-term project. However, my tone and demeanor let each participant know I was not idly asking her questions, but rather that I was actively on her side. Furthermore, as Pillow and Mayo state below, central tenets for a feminist methodology using ethnographic methods are to study the participants within the context of their own experiences and to benefit them with the research:

Key across feminist research and feminist ethnography is a commitment to studying the ‘lived experiences’ of gender and its intersectionalities resulting in theory that is built from these lived experiences. This changed relationship with research in addition to a commitment to doing research responsibly and doing research that will be beneficial for women breaks down
binaries between theory and praxis, the researcher and the researched, and objectivity and subjectivity” (160).

My own research does include a detailed write-up of women’s “lived experiences,” an attempt to add to theory of agency based on that research, and the “commitment” to benefit the research participants through this work. One benefit is the social relationship that developed between the WFOs and me; they seemed to look forward to our conversations when I called them to make an appointment for our next interview. On the other hand, while a rapport developed quickly with each participant, I was mindful of Kirsch’s caution to feminist researchers in her distinction between “the dynamics of friendship and friendliness” (2164). Kirsch notes the close bonds that can form between the researcher and participant through the intimacy of an interview, and her description of some of her own interview experiences markedly resembled many of my own:

The more successful I was at forming close relationships with interviewees, the more likely they were to reveal personal thoughts or feelings. Appreciating the undivided attention, sincere interest, and warmth shown by skillful interviewers (an experience we sometimes miss in the rush of daily life), participants can easily reveal intimate details about their lives that they may later regret having shared (2164).

Kirsch’s warning is that in the heat of the moment in an intimate interview, a participant may reveal more than she had intended. Then the researcher is responsible for that handling that information respectfully and ethically. Because I did form close relationships with most of the WFOs in my study, and they confided personal details about their lives, I was careful to be supportive and respectful of everything they told me.

The main tangible benefit that the WFOs will gain from my research is their own copy of the finished manuscript. I promised to send it to each of them so they can read about themselves and the other participants. It is impossible to measure this benefit, yet they all seemed excited about receiving the manuscript when I spoke with them about it.
during our final interview. Of course, merely reading this document will not strengthen their agential decision-making, but it might offer more information about how other WFOs go about making decisions in the face of sometimes difficult tenants and family members. My goal is that my participants will read at least part of this dissertation to see the similarities and differences among all the WFOs I studied and realize that they can make different, stronger decisions about their farms and their lives.

Learning Circle events with WFOs

I first learned about WFOs in Iowa as a potential research group through Jean Eells, whom I introduced in Chapter 1. Eells is a member of the State Soil and Water Conservation Committee and an independent consultant for various agricultural conservation programs throughout Iowa. Eells received her PhD from Iowa State University in agricultural education in 2008, and in her dissertation she addressed reasons why women do not participate in conservational agriculture practices nearly as much as men do, despite women having almost equal ownership in farmland (xi). As an activist for women in agriculture, and a property owner herself, one of Eells’ goals is to help WFOs understand and—potentially—to enact simple sustainable agriculture practices.

To help implement this objective, Eells and Leigh Adcock, Executive Director of the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) organized “Learning Circle” events, which offer WFOs both a supportive forum for face-to-face discussions related to their farming practices and also ideas to improve conservation on their land. Before attending these Learning Circle events, many of the WFOs are unaware that they could enact conservational agriculture practices that better protect the soil from erosion than simply underground tiling, which directs water and farming chemicals away from the fields but into rivers and other water sources.
These Learning Circle events are led solely by women whose goal is to encourage the WFOs to speak up and voice their own concerns and opinions regarding their farms. Typically, about 20 to 30 WFOs from surrounding counties attend these events. Adcock further explains the supportive nature of the Learning Circle events:

They [the WFOs] know their own farms. So, we want them to be respected for that and to share their challenges, their experiences, the questions that they have. And then our intent is to be able to help them move along a line toward a goal of conservation, whatever it might be. So, if they come in wondering about grassy waterways, we hope we can at least give them the resources to explore that further.

So, it is kind of a combination of, as I mentioned before, the empowerment piece, you know, trying to get them to see themselves as decision-makers about their land, and know that they can accomplish something. And then give them at least the beginnings of tools to move toward that goal.

Eells leads the conservation discussions during many of the Learning Circle events, and empowering WFOs to conservation is her primary goal as a facilitator. She stated, “I am interested in their personal development has seen themselves as being able to manage their farm.” For example, Eells spends a lot of time discussing no-till planting, crop rotation, and various kinds of strategic waterways to reduce top soil run-off. Eells’ soft-sell approach reiterates that conservational practices should be simple in concept as well as make logical sense to the WFOs. Eells described a Learning Circle activity in which a speaker was explaining how other WFOs had begun to transition their farms from traditional, chemically heavy farming to organic farming in which chemicals are not used. Eells stated, “I think it was good for the ladies to hear that they [the other WFOs] started. Then they started with a little bit, and here is how they handled the landlord. Here were the relationships that made that possible.”

After morning workshops and small-group interactions regarding farming conservation principles, the women eat a catered lunch and then take a 90-minute bus tour
of the surrounding farmland where they see examples of both effective and ineffective farming and conservation measures. The afternoon concludes with ice cream back at the meeting location and the women filling out surveys about what they found most and least useful from the meeting.

Eells and Adcock offered me a research site and their contagious enthusiasm—they have worked for several years to educate and empower women in agriculture to make stronger conservational decisions about their land. Listening to these advocates argue so passionately for women to take control of their land and protect it became the genesis of my research questions.

**Finding research participants**

I first met the WFOs who became part of my research at Learning Circle events in Fort Dodge in October 2009 and then later in Harlan in July 2010. Eells and Adcock were both prominent speakers at these two events. The WFOs who attended these meetings had received a letter from the WFAN organization, inviting them to either an all-day or afternoon workshop about farm conservation.

The names and addresses of WFOs invited to the event were originally found by WFAN volunteers, who accessed County Assessor records specifically to find women who were title holders or co-owners of farmland. WFAN sent these women invitations to local Learning Circle events, and the approximately twenty women who attended the meetings in Fort Dodge and Harlan were the groups I first approached. I wanted to find WFOs who might be interested in conservation; therefore, even at this early stage, the participants were largely a self-selected group, given that they had voluntarily attended a meeting that dealt with conservation.
During these Learning Circle events, Eells and Adcock had carved out a few minutes for me to introduce myself to the WFOs and to ask them as a group if they would like to participate in my study. My introduction was very friendly and non-threatening, as I paraphrased the introductory paragraph of my IRB introductory letter (Please see the entire letter in the appendix), which states:

My name is Rachel Wolford, and I am an English PhD student in the Rhetoric and Professional Communication program at Iowa State University. I am beginning to write my dissertation about women who own farmland in Iowa, and I would very much like to talk to you about the history of your farm, how your land is farmed, and what you would like to do with your land in the future while you still own it. My goal is to interview approximately ten women farmland owners, and talking to you would help me greatly as I collect research for my dissertation. What I want most to learn from you is:

- how you as a woman farmland owner think and talk about your roles and responsibilities to your land.
- what changes you would like to make regarding how you farm while you still own the land.
- how women-centered events such as the Learning Circles meetings might affect your attitude and decision-making related to how your land is farmed.

My approach to these WFOs was gentle, friendly, and open-ended. During the afternoon dessert portion of the Learning Circle event, I approached the women individually and asked them if they would help me with my research. At the Fort Dodge meeting, eight of the women agreed to talk with me and signed the IRB form, giving me permission to call them to schedule an interview. At the Harlan meeting, I did not have an opportunity to have the women sign the IRB form, so I called the attendees afterwards, having obtained their names from the event attendance sheet. Based on my initial contact with the WFOs at the learning circle events, I interviewed six women from the Fort Dodge meeting and five women from the Harlan meeting. I had called several additional WFOs from these two meetings without success, as some were out of town, had had surgery or a family emergency, or simply never returned my calls.
Despite being self-selected participants, the WFOs in my research represent a purposive sample, not a random one. Purposive sampling is common in qualitative research to help set boundaries regarding the range of participants (Miles and Huberman, 27). In my research, this boundary was simple at the beginning: I focused on finding women participants who own farmland and who attended one of the Learning Circle events in either Fort Dodge or Harlan. Creswell defines purposeful sampling as the researcher selecting “individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (125). WFOs were my primary research participants in order to inform my understanding of how these women connect to the land, practice (or do not practice) conservation, and exercise agency in their own spheres of influence.

For my study, purposive sampling resulted in finding a small group of six WFOs who become case studies in my research. An important limitation, therefore, may be that this smaller sample does not likely represent the views of every WFO in Iowa. However, that was never my intention. Instead, my goal was to use these cases to record substantive details about several women’s decision-making strategies and conflicts regarding conservation on their farmland, which will hopefully add a unique extension of feminist research about a group that has not been studied that often, particularly from the theoretical lens of rhetorical agency.

My first criterion in finding participants was simply asking which of the WFOs were interested in talking to me. This may seem random, but I already assumed that I had found a self-selected group of WFOs who were interested in conservation, as their attendance at the Learning Circle events illustrated. My second criterion during the first round of interviews was to discover the women who reported conflicts in their roles as
WFOs, either with tenants or family members, as they sought to improve the farming practices on their land.

Thus, I asked ten general questions in the first round of interviews in an effort to uncover obstacles to their decisions that the WFOs might report. For example, I asked them how long they have owned their land, what kinds of conservation measures are in place, and the extent to which they would like to implement more conservational practices on their land. Another important question related to the quality of the relationship my participants had with their tenant farmer(s) and to what extent the tenant(s) was(were) interested in adopting more conservation practices as well. Below is the full list of questions I used to in my first-round interviews with the WFOs:

1. How long have you owned your farmland? Tell me about your history with this property.
2. What kinds of crops do you grow? What have you grown in the past?
3. Who conducts the day-to-day farming operations? What is your relationship like with this person? Can you give me an example?
4. What changes or improvements would you like to make to your land? What factors affect your ability to make these improvements?
5. What sources of information do you use to help you make decisions about your farming? In other words, where do you go for help?
6. To what extent do you make farming decisions based on how farming was done in the past by family members or other predecessors?
7. Ideally, what types of resources would help you to make the changes you envision to your farmland?
8. Are there ever conflicts between how you want to farm your land and how your tenant/family member conducts farming? If so, would you describe the conflict?
9. If you could do anything with your land, what would it be? Why?
10. What does your farm look like five years in the future? Ten? Twenty? What would you like your legacy to be regarding your farm?

Data analysis began during the first interviews and was ongoing as themes and ideas emerged from the process. In the initial interviews, it was critical to find participants who would best help me answer my research questions: (1) how gender affects WFOs’ decisions about their farmland, and (2) what sort of agency manifests itself as WFOs use their position as property owners to make purposeful, conservation-minded decisions about
her farmland. If the women in the initial interviews helped provide answers to those research questions, I requested follow-up interviews. In particular, I examined the women’s answers to interview questions 3, 4, 8, and 9, which focus on the participant’s relationship with her tenant and/or family members and what changes the participant would like to make to her land.

After I interviewed the initial six WFOs in the Fort Dodge area and five WFOs in the Harlan area, I transcribed the interviews using MacSpeech Dictate and analyzed the data to find how interested the women were in pursuing more conservational goals for their farmland. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and each transcript filled 18 to 20 pages.

My analysis of those first interviews focused on whether the participants reported problems or conflicts with their tenants or family members, or whether the participants seemed concerned that industrial agriculture practices were unhealthy for their farmland. I developed six themes that resonated as the most common topics of discussion throughout the interviews. The themes are listed here in descending order of how frequently they were mentioned by WFO participants:

1. WFOs’ history on the farmland
2. Social relations with the tenant and family members
3. Decisions about the farm, conservation, and/or their lives as widows
4. Remarks about being a woman farmland owner
5. Aesthetics on the farm
6. Remarks about financial issues

I categorized these themes in each transcript by assigning each one a color and then marking up each transcript with appropriately colored highlighters, which provided me a visual of each theme’s occurrence in each of the first interviews. My goal in analyzing those first interviews was mainly to separate the WFOs with whom I would follow up with subsequent interviews and those with whom I would not. To place the participants
in these two groups, I searched the transcripts for the following two types of statements from WFOs:

- Reports of specific conservation goals for their farmland.
- Reports of conflicts with their tenant and/or family members related to the WFOs’ goals.

Searching for WFOs who specifically discussed their conservation goals and/or who mentioned conflicts with their tenant or family members related to any subject were the two factors that led me to choose the participants whom I thought would provide me with the richest data for answering my research questions. For example, several WFOs reported being content to allow their tenants make all the farming decisions and did not report wanting to change anything about the use of their farmland. In Chapter 3 I have included more detailed explanations why I did not pursue subsequent interviews with five of the original eleven participants.

The method I used to move from a larger purposive sampling of WFOs to case studies is two-fold. During the first set of open-ended interviews I searched for “maximum variation” in my participants, which helped me “document diverse variations and identify important common patterns” (Miles and Huberman, 28). For example, after transcribing and analyzing the first set of interviews, my goal was to find at least three WFOs from each group (Ft. Dodge/Harlan) who reported they were dissatisfied with traditional industrial agriculture practices and who stated they would like to do something different with their own farmland. Three WFOs from each geographic area I had first attended the Learning Circle events seemed like a small enough group that I could conduct follow-up interviews in a timely manner and yet large enough that I would hear several varied perspectives, narratives, conflicts, and goals regarding the women’s farmland. Finding three women in the Fort Dodge area and three women in the Harlan area with whom to interview a second
time would provide me with both breadth and depth to gain a fuller, thicker understanding of WFOs’ relationship to their property and their opportunities for agency within the network of their farmland.

Moving from larger purposive sampling in first interviews to a smaller subset of WFOs chosen for second interviews involved multiple-case sampling. Miles and Huberman define multiple-case sampling as “Generalizing from one case to the next on the basis of a match to the underlying theory, not to a larger universe. The choice of cases usually is made on conceptual grounds, not on representative grounds” (29). The choices I made to include a smaller number of WFOs for second interviews were based on conceptual grounds, as the above description of multiple-case sampling relates. The underlying theoretical assumption in my research is that my research participants are engaged in a network that offers much more opportunity for rhetorical agency in making conservational decisions regarding their farmland, as opposed to when the WFOs were simply farm wives or daughters without holding title to the land. It is within this network of potential decision making choices that I am sampling multiple cases of WFOs who tell a variety of narratives yet who are all negotiating similar constraints of this network of potential agency.

Case studies and triangulation of data

The WFOs who reported their interest in conservation practices and/or conflicts related to their farms became my case studies for this project. Creswell defines the case study approach to qualitative research as a methodology where the researcher uses cases to describe a larger defined group. He states:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews,
audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case
description and case-based themes (73).

While my primary data collection source was interviews with the WFOs, I also
attended additional Learning Circle events and discussed my themes and preliminary
findings in an hour-long interview with Eells and Adcock, who served as knowledgeable
experts to help me triangulate my research. Whereas I am an outsider conducting research
in the WFO community, both of these women are full-fledged members. As WFOs
themselves, Eells and Adcock have given me a valuable perspective for my data analysis that
helped enrich my research. Both women are activists for educating, encouraging, and
empowering WFOs to make stronger conservational decisions about their farming
practices, and they have many years of being active members of this community of Iowa
women in agriculture. Adcock describes her position as an advocate for women in farming
at the Learning Circle events:

We are there [at Learning Circle events] to basically both inform
them [WFOs] and empower them as decision-makers. A lot of the
women don’t have a history of making decisions about that land.
They are older women who may have inherited it from husbands
or fathers and haven’t been in the day-to-day management role.
So, what they are looking for is a way to reach a conservation goal
that they have in mind, but they don’t really know how to get there….
So, I guess my role as an advocate is to give them the tools they
need, not only to navigate through the programs that might be there
to help them, but also to have a conversation with their tenants that
might be a little hard for them to approach.

Adcock’s description of the WFOs who are new at decision making is an apt
assessment of many of the women in my research. Her keen understanding of the
conflicts many WFOs encounter as decision makers helped me flesh out my participants’
obstacles and opportunities in their agentive roles on their farms.
Eells is also a strong proponent of women in farming and as a State Soil Commissioner attempts to help WFOs find practical solutions to conservational obstacles they report on their farms:

I have been working with WFAN is to try and merge the conservation resources that normally go to men than that normally go to traditional ag, and try and drag some resources our direction, that we can use in other ways. So, that is my role as an advocate. And I think it is a work role, but it is also a volunteer, moral, ethically driven role, and it’s something I spend a lot of time thinking about. So, I kind of feel like it’s incumbent upon me to stay ahead as far as I can to see what the opportunities are in marshel resources.

Eells possesses the practical knowledge and experience to suggest helpful solutions to the WFOs in my research who report problems with enacting conservation practices, and in fact she has done that. However, a discussion of specific solutions related to conservation problems is beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, both Eells and Adcock provided extremely helpful insights in my data analysis.

Additionally, to help triangulate my interview data with WFOs, I attended two additional Learning Circle events with Eells and Adcock. At these day-long meetings, I talked with several of the WFO guests about their farms, their tenants, and their interest in conservation. Attending the Learning Circle events offered another powerful forum for me to gain a wider and deeper understanding of the issues and opportunities facing my research participants and their peers.

*Follow-up interviews with the WFOs*

During the second and third interviews I asked more directed and individual questions of each WFO, based on our discussions in the first interview. The second interviews typically took place four to five months after the initial ones, so I always began by ask the participants to bring me up to date regarding the state of their land (before or after harvest) and how negotiations were going with their tenants and/or family members.
Then I would ask the WFOs why conservation on their land is important to them and how they thought might solve the conflict with their tenant or family member in order to make conservational changes. These basic second-round questions evolved into a different conversation with each research participant, as the narratives in Chapter Three will illustrate.

The third and final interviews with each WFO were briefer than the first two and again included individualized follow-up questions I had developed after transcribing and analyzing the second interview material by organizing it according to the same six that had emerged after the first interviews. These themes that focused on history of the farm, tenants and family, decisions, gender issues, and financial concerns were still relevant even at the conclusion of the third interviews.

**Writing the narratives**

I had to make a decision about how to present the interview data that most clearly represent the unique personalities and local spheres of influence where these WFOs make decisions about their farms and their lives, which subsequently provides a lens through which to view and analyze their various performances of agency. As I analyzed all three interviews with each WFO (which averaged around 45 to 50 pages total), it became clear that that the kind of agency I wanted to identify and explain more fully has a compelling human component similar to Cooper's understanding of “embodied agency” (425). Moreover, agency occurs within a complicated social space that differs for each individual.

I had to choose between organizing the data thematically or by case study, and finally I chose the latter. I threaded together the stories that each participant had related to me in order to be as faithful as possible to representing each WFO's point of view using ethnographic methods. I also believe that organizing the data according to participant
provides a more interesting way to look at the theory of agency and to describe what this theoretical concept looks like in the distinct contexts in which the WFOs make decisions.

**Capturing the data**

To record the interviews and Learning Circle events, I used the iRecorder on my iPhone, which clearly records audio files and sends them to my iTunes account for easy access. I listened to the interviews immediately following the sessions and took detailed notes while the content was fresh in my mind. I transcribed the interviews and used color-coding to organize the six themes as well as to code relevant sections for common and disparate themes, historical narratives, points of conflict with tenants and/or family members, and other opportunities for rhetorical agency. I also mined the data for the participants’ descriptions of what they value about their farms, or what makes their farms important to them. These themes, I hope, will emerge from the data and help me then to draw connections to theoretical questions of ideology, agency, and interventionist research practices.

**Keeping in mind the audience for this research**

I wrote these narratives with multiple audiences in mind, including both the academic community and the WFO participants who generously gave me their time. Furthermore, I promised to send each participant a copy of this research at its completion. Therefore, these women are very much in my mind as I composed their narratives. That said, the following write-ups of each WFO’s experiences in making decisions about her farmland and her life are not always feel-good narratives; some of the subject matter is painful, and my analysis is critical at times. Yet such critiques are unavoidable, given the need to develop answers to my research questions. On the other hand, in following DeVault’s argument to undertake feminist research as excavation in order to provide a more
revealing “location and perspective” of my participants, my hope is that this research somehow will benefit the WFOs who read it (30).
CHAPTER THREE: NARRATIVES OF WOMEN FARMLAND OWNERS

As described in Chapter 2, data collection for this research began when I met the WFOs who would become my participants at two different Learning Circle events, one in Fort Dodge, Iowa, the other in Harlan, Iowa. In the Fort Dodge area I received permission from ten women to call them, but when I did, only six were available to schedule an interview. The other four were either traveling or had medical problems or told me they were too busy to talk to me. As a result, in the Fort Dodge area I conducted interviews with the six women who were available. Their pseudonyms are Beatrice, Cassie, Sylvia, Naomi, June, and Janet.

A similar course of events occurred when I attended the Learning Circle event in Harlan, Iowa, on the west side of the state. I got permission at the meeting to call eight of the women in attendance, but only five of them were available for me to interview. The pseudonyms of the five WFOs I interviewed in western Iowa are Sarah, Annette, Helen, Deirdre, Jillian, and Lacey. The WFOs from both groups with whom I carried out only one interview were Naomi, June, Janet, Deirdre, and Lacey (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did first interviews only</th>
<th>Fort Dodge area</th>
<th>Western Iowa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June</td>
<td>Naomi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did three interviews each</td>
<td>Beatrice</td>
<td>Cassie</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: WFO Research Participants

As described in Chapter 2, if the WFOs in the first interview did not report any conflicts or any desire to make changes to their property or did not discuss conservation practices, I made the decision that those participants would not help me answer my research questions as much as the participants who did report conflicts with tenants or
family members, problems making decisions they thought were important, and opinions about best conservation practices. In the next two sections, I discuss more fully the five women with whom I conducted only first-round interviews.

**Interviews with June, Naomi, and Janet in the Fort Dodge area**

My very first interview for this project was with June in Fort Dodge. She and her husband rent 80 acres; she is not a WFO, so she did not fit the parameters of my research study. The first time I met women at the Learning Circle event in Fort Dodge, I assumed they were all property owners. Most were, but June was an exception.

Naomi currently owns 76 acres near Interstate 35 and Highway 20. She and her brother inherited 152 acres from their parents, and she first rented her 76 acres to Asgrow Seed Company, and the organization used her land as a concept farm to grow various plots of corn and soybeans and hold public events to market the seeds to farmers. Now she rents it to another commercial tenant for a high rent payment. She did not report any conflicts and enjoys the financial benefits of the tenant relationship.

Janet inherited two farms from her husband, who died in 2006. The properties total 200 acres and are located near Webster City. Janet shares ownership of the farms with her four children, plus brother-in-law and sister-in-law. Her son-in-law rents the farmland. Janet got remarried in 2009, and her new husband is also a farmer. During our interview she focused mostly on telling me about her family and did not report any conflicts with her tenant or any interest in undertaking alternative forms of conservation. For example, she stated, “My son-in-law would tell me if we needed to do conservation things.”

**Interviews with Deirdre and Lacey in western Iowa**

Deirdre has lived just west of Harlan since 1953, when she and her husband began buying property. She owns 240 acres at her homestead, and she inherited 200 acres from her parents nearby; plus, she owns another 330 in Pottawattamie County. Deirdre’s son
has been her tenant since her husband died in 1999. She reported that she was happy to have worked beside her husband on the farm during their 49 years together instead of getting her teaching degree; and she laughed that “sorting hogs” with her husband was the closest they ever came to a divorce. While Deirdre works closely with the local conservation office to make the most money she can from her set-aside acres in the CRP program, she spent a lot of time talking about her husband. In addition, she explained in detail how her son was using tiling and herbicides to gain control of their soaked farmland due to the rainy farming season during the summer of 2010. She seemed content with her long heritage as a farm wife and did not report any conflict with her son as tenant or his farming practices.

Lacey owns a 470-acre farm near Avoca. She made me breakfast with coffee, muffins, and fruit. She gave a prayer of thanks for the meal before our interview started. She and her husband bought the land in 1959, and she inherited it after he died of cancer in 1981. She told me she thought that her husband had died because of the chemicals used on the farm back then. Initially, I would have thought Lacey would have been an ideal WFO for my research; however, as the interview proceeded, she became more and more reserved and answered my questions with crisp, abrupt answers. She said her husband believed in terraces and conservation work, and her land has had terraces and tiling since the 1960s. She also made it clear that her tenant is in charge of making the farming decisions, and she is content with his chemical farming practices because she wants him to make the highest yield he can. She was exceptionally polite, yet she was the only WFO with whom I did not make a warm connection. Therefore, I chose not to follow up with a second interview.
Organizing the structure of the six narratives

Now that the women with whom I scheduled only one interview have been identified, I will discuss the organization of the six narratives composed for the main participants in this research. To organize the salient interview data I have collected, I have coded each transcript according to the following six themes that emerged throughout the interviews with each WFO:

1. WFOs’ history on the farmland
2. Social relations with the tenant and family members
3. Decisions about the farm, conservation, and/or their lives as widows
4. Remarks about being a woman farmland owner
5. Aesthetics on the farm
6. Remarks about financial issues

I have included these themes as organizational subheadings in the narrative constructed for each WFO. However, because I am telling stories about people’s lives, which are categorically messy, these themes do vary and are not always clear-cut within each WFO’s narrative. Also, I present the themes in the order of importance, according to the WFO. I included these themes as an organizing trope for the data with the larger objective of analyzing the narratives through the lens of agency in Chapter 4.

It is important to note that these six themes began to emerge during the first interviews as a result of the same interview questions that I asked each participant. At the beginning of my research, I was focused on conservation issues because my research interests had grown out of my conversations with Eells and Adcock, whose primary advocacy focus is encouraging WFOs to make stronger conservation decisions. In fact, during our interview, Eells stated that conservation must be part of a WFO’s identity:

I just am connecting identity with the conservation. And I’m just afraid that if we don’t find some way to bring the conservation conversation into that social identity, we are not going to get there. Because I think it’s a barrier to have conservation be something that is a conversational item because it is not part of that social identity. So that is where I have been
homing in on it.

Eells’ work constantly focuses on conservation and women in farming, so it makes sense that she insists on the essentialism of that connection, which knitted together the identity of WFOs with healthier soil and water agriculture practices. And when I first started this project, I made the same assumption. However, as my interviews progressed and each WFO’s story threaded through its own unique terrain, the narratives in some cases strayed far from issues of making conservation decisions. That is the main reason that I chose to organize the data by research participant rather than by theme; each WFO offers a distinct perspective on her responsibilities as a property owner. I want to reiterate that from the outset of the interview process I have resisted the assumption that the WFOs in this research represent a homogenous group, and that has proven to be the case.

Despite each WFO offering a unique perspective of her farming life and decisions, I found that the six narratives collectively provided a keen snapshot of farming’s radical transition over the past 50 to 60 years. Agriculture has changed from self-sustaining family farms with diverse crops and animals to industrial farms that largely grow only corn and soybeans, which thrive on herbicides and fertilizers. The comparisons and contrasts of these two versions of farming relate closely to the farming myths that Tarla Rai Peterson explores in her own excavation of farming discourse; she stated that farmers’ discourse about their farms can be traced from three myths: “(1) the caretaker image derived from the Jeffersonian concept of the ‘yeoman farmer,’ (2) the vision of farmers as flawed heroes stemming from the frontier myth, and (3) the image of the farmer-as-technician that develops out of the ‘earth as machine’ myth” (290).

In particular, Peterson’s description of the “yeoman farmer,” in which the farmer cares for and nurtures the land, contrasts with the “farmer-as-technician” myth in which
the farmer increasingly subdues the land to obtain higher and higher yields. These two antithetical ideas relate closely to the WFOs’ narratives. Peterson’s myths offer helpful insight into how the WFOs in this study understand the transition from family farming of their youth to industrial agriculture that defines the present-day farming practices on their land. Peterson further describes the chasm between these types of farming in the following excerpt:

This perspective [of farmer-as-technician] is incongruent with the agrarian vision of careful husbandry from which farmers’ caretaker image grows. Rather than demanding that the soil surrender itself completely to the steward, agrarianism views both farmer and land as cut from the same cloth (citing Monmarquet, 1985). When the earth becomes a machine, however, the goal of maximum yield for minimum effort is naturalized. As Wendell Berry (1978) points out, ‘the standards of cheapness and convenience, which are irresistibly simplifying and therefore inevitably exploitive, have been substituted for the standard of health (of both people and land), which would enforce consideration of essential complexities (32). When farmers’ land is primarily a tool for human exploitation, the agrarian concept of stewardship becomes superfluous’ (300).

Peterson’s contrast between these two myths— that of the healthy farm cared for by the careful farmer in the agrarian vision and that of the exploited farm worked unrelentingly for maximum yield production— almost mirrors agriculture’s shift from more organic, self-sustaining farms to industrial farming that began with the application of chemicals in the 1950s.

The conflict between these two farming ideologies resonated in the WFO interviews. Each participant tended to talk about her farmland from the “yeoman” caretaker perspective, while recognizing that her land is actually treated as a production “machine.” This conflict troubled some participants more than others; however it is a prominent contradiction that can make agency necessary, which I will examine in Chapter 4.
Identifying the main six WFO participants

The six participants in this research with whom I conducted multiple interviews include Beatrice, Cassie, and Sylvia from the Fort Dodge area and Sarah, Annette, and Helen from western Iowa. It is important to provide some background on the differences in farming between these two areas.

Farming around Fort Dodge is a relatively straightforward process because the land is relatively flat and easy to access. Conservation in this area often consists of tiling, or running piping systems under the fields in order to more efficiently drain water from the soil, so the dirt doesn’t wash away during rainstorms. The most significant conservation problem associated with the landscape around Fort Dodge is the chemicals from the crops that wash into the tiling systems along with the rainwater and then eventually flow into rivers, streams, and larger bodies of water. For instance, a 2010 report titled “Farm Runoff Must Be Focus of Pollution Policy” states that fertilizers with ingredients such as nitrogen and phosphorus are the largest contributing pollutant to nutrients, or life forms, in Iowa waterways and contributes heavily to the “Dead Zone” in the Gulf of Mexico. Pollutants such as fertilizers and animal waste are carried down the Mississippi River and have caused depletion of oxygen and loss of marine life in an area of the Gulf estimated at 6,000 to 7,000 square miles (Bruckner).

Farming in western Iowa presents a greater challenge because the terrain there includes the Loess Hills and is much more hilly and steep than in the Fort Dodge area. The soil there is also sandier and prone to erosion. In fact, “Geology of the Loess Hills, Iowa” reports that this area has one of the highest erosion rates in the United States and that agriculture in the area has only exacerbated the problem. As a result, stronger conservation measures are part of the dominant farming discourse, as soil washing down hill after a
thunderstorm is a serious, observable problem. For example, when conservation measures are not taken, gullies at the bottom of the hilly farmland are often filled with dirt. Therefore, conversations about terraces—for example—are commonplace when talking to the WFOs who live on this side of the state. Terraces are large buttresses of dirt and vegetation that are scaffolded in long rows at several places across a hillside to hold soil in place. From my interviews, WFOs in western Iowa are quite familiar with the importance of conservation on their farms and have a stronger relationship with the local conservation office than do the WFOs in central Iowa.

The section that follows includes the six narratives that I knitted together from my multiple conversations with the WFOs, with the exception of Helen, who was available only for the first interview. I called her several times to schedule additional interviews, but she was either traveling or otherwise too busy to see me. Alternatively, it is possible that she had changed her mind and didn’t want to be interviewed any more. In any case, Helen was a valuable participant even though I was able to interview her only once. The order of WFO narratives begins with Beatrice, Cassie, and Sylvia in Fort Dodge, followed by Sarah, Annette, and Helen in western Iowa.

**Beatrice’s narrative: “I'm convinced about what I know.”**

Beginning these narratives with Beatrice is useful because she has such decided opinions about each of the six themes that emerged throughout the interview process. Beatrice’s narrative develops the original focus of the research questions regarding the importance of gender and agency in decision making. Other narratives that follow complicate the research questions and the theoretical issues involved. Beatrice is knowledgeable and confident about the business of farming and is the only WFO to transgress the gendered meeting places of male farmers and regularly attend Iowa State
Extension meetings, farm auctions, and conservation talks. Beatrice is frank regarding her business and conservation decisions and fearless when negotiating with her tenant, until it comes to the subject of conservation.

**History with the farmland**

In her mid-seventies, Beatrice lives in Fort Dodge proper, not on the farm. For our interviews, I met Beatrice at the Hy-Vee in Fort Dodge, and we each ordered our own coffee each time, as she always arrived early to sit and read the paper while she waited for me. Financially, Beatrice seems comfortable; she has three sons who all went to Iowa State University, and “not on the government,” Beatrice likes to say. She and her family paid the tuition themselves, and she is proud of her fiscally conservative values. Beatrice and her husband have cash-rented their farmland to the same tenant since the 1950s, after inheriting approximately 200 acres from her husband's parents. Forty of those acres are set aside in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and include woods, a pond, and various plants to help support wildlife. Over the years, Beatrice and her husband bought around 200 more acres, at her insistence. She states that even as a child she had noticed that farmers seemed more financially stable in hard times:

> Well, I'm kind of a, I'm a Depression kid, so that kind of comes through, you know? And I came from Rockwell City, which is a rural farming community, and I saw all these farmers always had more money than any of the rest of us, so I thought, “Hey, maybe that's the way to go.” (She laughs) So when I started working, I thought, I decided, “You know what? I just better buy me some [land].” So, after we got married, I think I sort of disgusted my husband, but I said, “I think we better buy more.” And we did.

I never fully discovered specifically why buying more land would have disgusted Beatrice's husband. She would prefer that her husband were still alive and managing the farm. But as with most of the WFOs in this study, the farm and its decisions are now Beatrice's responsibility. Beatrice has managed the 400-acre family farm since 1995 when
her husband was diagnosed with Alzheimers. He died in 2006. She told me she had no choice but to start managing the farm when he became ill.

Financial issues and decision making

While Beatrice may have been reluctant to take over the farming decisions for her husband, after three interviews with her, it was clear to me that this WFO is a savvy business person, and that her biggest concern is receiving the highest reasonable rent she can from her tenant, based on his yields. She states, “I’m very active in it [managing her farmland] because the rent changes, you know, the conditions in the last few years have been so different. We have, you have to, every year, evaluate the markets and the farm program and adjust the rent.” Beatrice consistently asks her tenant and other farmers at conservation meetings and auctions what their yields are in order to accurately adjust the rent on her lease with the tenant each spring:

  Rachel: How did you arrive at that figure that you knew you were going to lower it, and how are you already thinking that it might be higher next year?

  Beatrice: Well, I sort of keep track of what other people are paying. And what the markets are and his yield. When he gets a good yield, and beans are $9.50 a bushel, I need to get more than when he’s getting 6 bucks for his beans or 8 bucks or 7, whatever the market value.

  Beatrice is the only WFO I have met who conducts her own primary research while deciding her lease rate in order to protect her investment as the property owner. None of the other participants, with the possible exception of Helen, would ask their tenant how high the yield was, in order to adjust the rent. Many WFOs call Iowa State Extension office or look at the website to find out average yields, corn/soybean prices, and rents for the past year to help them establish a lease amount. Sylvia, another WFO in Fort Dodge, doesn’t even have a lease with her tenant.
Another example of Beatrice’s decision-making process is an eroding creek on her land that she told me about in our first interview. She and her husband had had it repaired about ten years ago, but she stated that the creek has begun eroding out of its banks and is unattractive. Beatrice’s method for making a decision about how to repair the creek is through talking to various farming professionals to gather a range of opinions and then decide. She states, “I’m working with some of the local fellows, and thinking, trying to decide what would be best and do less damage to the farm. This way… It’s a big waterway with wild grass. It’s really ugly, and it really ruins the look of the farm. And I think we could tile it and do it a different way. And I think it could be just as efficient.” Beatrice’s goal is “to keep the farm in good shape,” and by our third interview over a year later, she had finally repaired the creek. She explains how she developed her plan:

Beatrice: What I do is, I just talk to other people you know, “what have you done? What are you doing?” You know? Because the experts, I swear… they don’t really give a toot. That’s terrible to say that, but my experience has not been really good with them. So, I’m going to shore it up along the stream, I just hire a guy to do what I want him to do. And I say, “Just put this big piece of plastic along the dirt, and put the rocks on top of it.” Because I learned it that day [at the WFO meeting at the Ann Smeltzer farm].

Beatrice stated that she had based her decision on what she had learned about creeks out at Ann Smeltzer’s farm at a WFO meeting the first day I met her in the fall of 2009. After asking conservation officers and professional landscaping companies, Beatrice developed her own plan for repairing the creek and hired a landscaper to carry it out, although a little ruefully, as she would have liked to repair the creek herself. She states, “If I was a man, I would do my own farming. I would take care of that waterway. I would dig out the ditch.”
Gender remarks

Beatrice laughs as she pictures herself trying to look over the tractor's steering wheel in order to drive it in a straight line. She shakes her head and states, "I know nothing about farming." This surprises me, as she obviously understands a great deal about farm management. Yet she distinguishes that knowledge from the hands-on work of farming itself. Our conversation continued:

Rachel: Well, so, you know a lot about the soil and the crops. Is it the equipment part?

Beatrice: Well, I wouldn’t know how to drive all that stuff. Have you ever seen those tractors?

Rachel: They’re huge.

Beatrice: I’m looking right in the middle of the wheel.

Rachel: How do they, how do the men learn it? Their dads?

Beatrice: I guess, I don’t know. They’re huge… huge wheels. I mean, they’re this wide [she outstretches her arms].

Rachel: I mean, do they go to tractor school?

Beatrice: I don’t know, I think they grew up on farms. It’s just like learning to drive a car.

Rachel: Yeah. The equipment has gotten bigger and bigger, so you wonder. Maybe they learn it when they’re buying the equipment. Maybe somebody comes out to help them learn how to drive it.

Beatrice: I think with men some of it just comes kind of natural.

From this exchange, I understand that Beatrice sees a gendered gulf between men and women regarding farming, for example, in the ways that farm equipment seems built for men rather than women and somehow farm boys learn to drive tractors, while girls do not. Furthermore, she is highly aware of her gender as she deals with men in agriculture:

You always have to deal with being a woman; it’s always back there; you’re always aware of it. I really don’t think they [men in farming]
are malicious; it’s just that they don’t see women passing that barrier beyond dealing with kids, clothes, and laundry.

With this statement Beatrice reinforces much of the feminist research about the quiet, marginalized role of women in agriculture. In her own dealings with male farmers, she uses that “farm wife” role to her advantage as she seeks knowledge from them.

Beatrice is the only one of the WFOs in my study who consistently attends conservation meetings, Iowa State University extension meetings, auctions, and any other farming-related events in order to educate herself about the best farming practices. When attending conservation meetings in which she is the only woman, Beatrice stated that she is not shy about asking questions:

Beatrice: Sometimes I walk in there and those guys look at me like, “What are you doing here?” You know how farmers are….

Rachel: No, I don’t [we laugh].

Beatrice: It’s like, “This is my turf. My wife doesn’t bother me, and I don’t bother her in the kitchen.”

Rachel: So, it’s still like that.

Beatrice: But they’re very, they’re very polite and nice. I still go.

Rachel: Do you ask questions?

Beatrice: Sure. And they look at me like, “Why doesn’t she know that?” You know, cause I ask; I do, and they’re very, very good about answering, very courteous.

Beatrice always laughed while telling anecdotes about attending various kinds of agriculture meetings and seems comfortable playing that female role of asking the more knowledgeable male farmers about farming. In discussions about being a woman farmland owner, Beatrice seems proud of her knowledge of agriculture and conservation, yet she often “plays dumb” when pumping men for questions about their land and yields. Beatrice
shared an anecdote about when she went to conservation meeting as the only woman with 25 farmers. She explained her strategy for acquiring information from them:

Beatrice: I’m sitting there with all these men, “Hey, so, how much are you renting your farm for?” Well, that’s Calhoun County, and they get a little bit less than Webster [where she lives] does, for whatever reason; they have wonderful soil over there. But anyway, that’s how I find out information. So, then I say, “hey, where is your farm?” “How much are you getting?” So, I look like a dumb lady, so they tell me. Otherwise, they might say, “No, it’s none of your business.”

Rachel: Oh, you kind of play that role?

Beatrice: Yeah. “I need some help here. You need to tell me.”

Rachel: Because you are just the antithesis of the dumb lady. Jeez.

Beatrice: I am not that smart, but you know what, I got pushed into this, and I’m the kind of person that says, “You gotta take care of things or rid of them.”

Beatrice does seem to base her decisions on taking care of her primary investment, her farm. Besides making repairs when they are needed, such as with her creek, she asks a lot of farmers how much rent they receive for their land as she decides how much to adjust her own lease from year to year. Yet she believes that if she were to let male farmers know how savvy she is in the farming business, they may feel threatened and not answer her questions. Beatrice disguises her intelligence and business savvy to maintain the appearance of a female in need of men’s farming knowledge. From Beatrice’s perspective, this strategy helps obtain her own financial objectives.

Besides handling the farming decisions, Beatrice told me she had owned a string of apartment buildings, had been a school nurse for several years in Fort Dodge, and even taught at Iowa Central College. Beatrice believes that having had these experiences earlier in life placed her in a stronger position than perhaps other farm women who generally do
not involve themselves in farm management. Regarding her confident decision making as a WFO, Beatrice states:

I just figure you can't go wrong. How could you, you know? If you research what you're doing…. I think a lot of farm women are not really maybe educated enough to know… if you research something, and you have a certain mentality, average even, you ought to be able to figure out what to do.

Beatrice made the above statement gently; the remark was not intended as a slight to “farm women.” It seemed that Beatrice was simply trying to explain that her work experience in business and education was quite different from that of many of the other women involved in agriculture that she had met over the years. In addition, Beatrice's background prepared her to ask questions when she needs to make a decision. She learns all she can about the issue at hand, particularly when it involves making a financial investment: “I'm not afraid to use resources. I think it makes a difference maybe. I don't know, maybe not. I'm not saying anybody is more intelligent than any other. But I know if you're not used to dealing with all this stuff all your life…” Beatrice broke off her sentence there. She understands how many women can find it daunting to manage the farm after their husband has died.

Negotiating with a new tenant

On the other hand, when one of Beatrice's business transactions is in jeopardy, she can quickly shed her demure, farm-wife personna and negotiate expertly to protect her investment. For example, in our third interview, Beatrice told me she had finally purchased an additional eighty acres of farmland, after attending several land auctions over the past two years. She said she had lucked out after calling a farm manager who was handling the sale of a 160-acre parcel for a family in Texas. The tenant who had been farming the land for several years wanted to buy the entire piece but could only afford half of it. So, Beatrice
called the tenant and offered to buy the other half. She states, “He and I negotiated. That was okay with the family. They didn’t care, if they got X amount of dollars per acre for that whole plot.”

The problem began when Beatrice and the cash-renting farmer discussed the breakdown of the purchase price. She told me that two well-maintained grain bins sit on the west half of the 160 acres, and such bins are valuable as a place for farmers to store their crop as they wait for market prices to rise for their corn or soybeans. Beatrice stated that the bins were worth a minimum of $20,000 apiece. The farmer wanted the parcel that contained those grain bins but did not want to pay extra for them; he argued that each of them pay half for “his” eighty acres. Beatrice adamantly said no:

Beatrice: There were a couple of grain bins that were in excellent condition. And in this day and age, grain bins are very important. And he thought, there again I am a woman; she don’t know what she’s doing. I said, “D., I can’t pay as much for my half as your half because you’ve got two 10,000 bushel grain bins that are in excellent condition.” They are not falling down, you know, the base is good.

He said, “Oh, that’s no big deal.”
I said, “Yes, it is. You take my 80; I’ll take your 80 with the bins.”
“No, I want those bins.”
I said, “Fine, then pay for them.” He hung up on me.
I thought, well, that’s over. That’s over.

Beatrice believes that the farmer tried to avoid paying extra for the grain bins based on the fact that he was dealing with a woman who would not know their value. Beatrice did not call him back, not so much because he had been rude, but because this farmer was the first-in-line buyer for the parcel and had the relationship with the sellers in Texas. So she thought the negotiation was the farmer’s to pursue or abandon. Therefore, Beatrice was surprised when he called her back a week later and not a little exasperated with the farmer’s attitude when he began the conversation, “Well, I haven’t talked to you…”

Beatrice: This guy is unbelievably stupid. He isn’t even dumb. I said,
“Well, D. [the farmer], you hung up on me. I’m sure not going to call you back.”

He said, “Well, you are mad, are you?”

I thought, Oh my god. [Rachel is laughing] Yeah. “No, I’m not mad at you.”

I was just perplexed at the fact that he could be so blatantly, obviously trying to route me. That’s all. It was a woman thing.

Rachel: Do you think it was?

Beatrice: Oh, I know it was. [She imitates the farmer’s attitude:] “You know, you’re not a farmer. What do you know about a bin? Those are no good.”

Of course they are.

Rachel: Did he say that? Or was that his attitude?

Beatrice: I said, “if they are no good, then I will take your half. Because I like the looks better.” I did, I did.

Beatrice sarcastically mentioned liking “the looks” of the acres with the bins to reinforce the stereotype of a woman making a purchase of something based purely on aesthetics. Obviously, she understood the significant value of the bins and stood firm in her demand that the farmer pay more for that half of the land that he wanted. After a three-week period, during which at one point the farmer hung up on her again, Beatrice won the negotiation:

I said, “Listen, it’s very simple. You either give me a break on this, and you pay more, or I’m not interested.” Well, he could have found anybody to buy it. That is how... [she trails off and shakes her head at what she considered the farmer’s dim-witted obstinacy] but I lucked out. Because he knew they were worth a lot. If you buy bins. We have looked into them, is the only way I knew. Because I am no genius that any of this. This is all trial and error. I said, you just read things and talk to people and... farmers, most of them, are good people.

In stating she is no genius, Beatrice concludes this story in her usual self-deprecating way after she displays her knowledge about farm management. Yet her recognition that the farmer was attempting to deceive her about the value of the grain bins based on her gender only reinforced her position during the negotiation. She reflects that if
the conversation had been between two men, the bin issue would have been settled quickly:

Beatrice: He wouldn’t have gotten away with this with a man. For five minutes.

Rachel: You think it would have just been a much shorter conversation?

Beatrice: Well, the guy would have said, “Hey, those buildings are worth X amount of dollars. And this is what you owe; this is what I owe.” Yeah.

In reporting Beatrice’s spirited account of her negotiations with that farmer, I realize that it is impossible to verify the farmer’s actual motives and assumptions. I do not know for certain that he was making such an issue of the bins because Beatrice is a woman. However, it was very clear that Beatrice firmly believes this was the case. And because she believed he was trying to take advantage of her, she refused to back down. Eventually she won the argument, and the farmer agreed to pay more for his share of the acres that included the grain bins.

In spite of what Beatrice saw as the condescending nature of the farmer’s negotiation with her, Beatrice is matter-of-fact-about the gender implications and states that most farmers are not malicious and are good people. Additionally, she feels somewhat guilty in not renting her newly purchased land to this same farmer after she had told him she would. Yet again, business was business. This farmer was supposed to pay Beatrice his cash rent by March 1 and he did not make the deadline. She called the farmer on March 1:

Beatrice: I called and I said, “Are you coming in today?”
He said, “Well, I haven’t talked my bank yet. I don’t know where I am, and I’m not sure I’ve got time today.”
And I said, “D., two weeks ago I told you I close March 1. It’s the way I do business. It’s done, it’s over.”
And he said, “What’s the rush on it?”
And I said, “You are not listening to me. You’re just not listening to
me. I close on March 1.” So, he didn’t show up.

Because that farmer did not meet Beatrice’s March 1 deadline to pay his rent, she rescinded the lease agreement and leased the new eighty acres to her regular tenant, who has worked the rest of Beatrice’s land for over thirty years. She said he was delighted to get the extra acres. Beatrice stated several times she felt bad about not working with the other farmer, but he was driving her a little crazy, and she did not think a long-term relationship would have worked out:

I don’t feel good about this, but I also explained to him about half a dozen times this is what we need to do. “I’m not going to screw around with you any longer,” [she told the other farmer]. So, for me when you have business, you do business. If the hogs don’t eat for an hour, and they are hungry and squealing, so be it. So, I don’t feel really good about that because when I tell somebody something, I usually follow through. But he did not meet me halfway, so that’s the way it is. You’ve got business, even if you are a farmer, come and do the business first, take care of the cattle and pigs later.

As the preceding interview excerpts indicate, making strong, sound business decisions is Beatrice’s most important objective, even if doing so means making an enemy. On the other hand, she did not have any social history with this farmer, like she does with her regular tenant. Before discussing that tenant, I think it is important to provide a picture of Beatrice’s outspoken views on conservation, as these views directly affect her relationship with her long-time tenant farmer.

Conservation and aesthetics

Similar to her views regarding the business of farming, Beatrice is also knowledgeable and opinionated regarding conservation. She is the only WFO I have met who noted that while most farmers love the look of a neatly plowed field, frequently tilled rows can mean increased soil erosion. Throughout our three interviews, Beatrice remained extremely concerned about erosion and her fear of damage to the soil after years of constant
tillage. In an ideal world, Beatrice would like to farm with the no-till method, in which the land is not tilled up in the fall; instead, the spring seeds are simply planted on top of the roots of last year’s harvest. Beatrice told me that her three sons have each purchased farm property for an investment, and they also keep her updated on the best farming practices. For example, one of her sons runs an organic hobby farm in Minnesota, where his family grows food and raises animals. She notes proudly that her grandson even has a booming egg business. Beatrice states, “Because I’ve always been real close to my boys, they’ve kept me pretty much thinking, ‘You either keep up with the times or you sort of lose out.’ So, I’ve been really receptive to a lot of this new stuff [such as no-till farming].”

Beatrice emphasized several times the need for farmers enact the stronger conservation practice of no-till farming if they wanted the land to continue to be productive in the long-run:

Beatrice: It [no-till farming] is a lot better for your soil than putting a whole bunch of herbicides. And the wind doesn’t take the topsoil because when it blows…. It looks terrible. But see, they love those fields that for generations…

Rachel: Yeah, that look so neat. And the fall is when they till it all back. But it leaves it [the soil] uncovered and kind of exposed?

Beatrice: And there’s nothing to stop the winds when they blow in the fall and then again in the summer. And so you’ve moved a lot of topsoil. Some summers are worse than others.

The aesthetic of an orderly field with perfectly parallel rows is part of the farming ideology that is difficult for conservationists to compete against. Beatrice noted below that farmers shake their heads at the messy no-till field that has not been plowed. Yet she sees that the roots of the corn are deep and healthy in this type of farm practice:

Beatrice: Well, they had a meeting in Claire…. And this farmer had actually taken off the top layer of soil, and there is his beans, no, it was corn, planted right along this no-till. It just looks awful. Cut off, you know. Here was this row of corn, and he had made, you could see
how deep the roots were. Because this ugly thing holds the moisture in. I mean, I could understand, but the old guys wouldn’t buy it for anything.

Beatrice “could understand” the conservation lesson at the meeting in Claire, but she states the male farmers shook their heads at the no-till idea. They are rooted (pardon the pun) in the pervasive conventional farming ideology in which the equation of razor-straight tillage plus seeds plus chemicals plus sufficient drainage equals a high-yield harvest. In essence, Beatrice was contrasting Peterson’s two myths from American agriculture: that of the yeoman and that of the farmer as technician (290).

Up until our third meeting, Beatrice spoke passionately about caring for the soil beyond fertilizers and adequate tiling for drainage. She noted in our second interview that farmers should take seriously their responsibility to protect the soil:

See, it has to start with someone. See that’s my point. It has to start someplace. And farmers right now are just interested in yields. And I said, “If you tear the soil down to a certain point, it isn’t going to matter the yield because you won’t be getting much. You just won’t, you know? You’ll wear the soil out maybe a generation from now.” But you do need to leave it [for future generations to use].

To bolster her argument for no-till farming to help maintain healthy soil, Beatrice cites evidence from conservation meetings she had attended where State Soil Conservation officers explained why both no-till and ridge-till farming are better for the soil and farmers’ financial bottom line, which is measured in yields. Beatrice states unequivocally that no-till farming is the better option:

Because in going to these meetings, I am convinced this is what… it’s the best thing for crops, more money, better for the soil, you don’t have the erosion. It can’t blow it if it’s not… a big old field of soft black dirt when the wind blows in the spring, it just blows it away; the top soil’s gone. And they [at the conservation meeting] showed roots from plantings of corn that are ridge till. The root system was just beautiful, so it had to be better for the corn and the beans. It has to be. I mean, you get a better yield, healthier.
While the unruly surface of a no-till field may not measure up to the aesthetic standard of many farmers, Beatrice has seen herself that the root systems are healthy and beautiful. The knowledge she has accumulated about conservation alternatives to traditional tillage seems incontrovertible. When I asked her why no-till farming has not seemed to find its way into mainstream farming, she stated it is “because we’ve got old farmers and their old thinking.” This ideology is exemplified in Beatrice’s long-time tenant, who has farmed her land for over 25 years. He shares the work and the proceeds with his son. Furthermore, this same tenant farmed for Beatrice’s parents-in-law before that. The relationship between the two families is a long one and almost impenetrable to change.

Beatrice has spoken often to her farmer about these issues of better protecting the soil. She would like for him to change his farming practices to no-till, but in the time I have known her, this change has not occurred.

**Relationship with the tenant**

Many of our conversations centered around Beatrice’s long-running debate with her tenant over his conventional farming practices, in which he tills the ground every fall to ready the it for planting the next spring, versus her belief that no-till farming is actually healthier for the soil and root systems of the crops. In our first interview, Beatrice stated, “See, that’s what I’m trying to convince him [her tenant]. The less times you have to go through this field, this is saving you money at three bucks a gallon for gas. It saves you money, it saves you time. Plus, it’s better for the soil.”

The fact that Beatrice “is trying to convince” her tenant to change is an enormous shift away from her decisive nature when it comes to financial decisions about the farm. However, in our second interview a few months later, Beatrice reported that she and her
tenant were having a serious disagreement over just this issue of practicing conventional till or no-till farming. At that point she thought they might part ways:

We are having a little difficulty, and I may lose him after second-generation, but I want no-till, or at least the next step down. And of course he’s an old guy, so it’s way too much to wrap your head around. I said, “R. [the tenant], you know, I’m an old lady. Go to the meetings. Listen to what they have to say. And if you want to leave anything for your children, this is the way to go.” I mean, I’m convinced about what I know.”

At that point of our second interview, Beatrice was convinced in her knowledge that no-till farming would be the healthiest for her farmland. As the preceding text illustrates, at times she has been frustrated with her tenant for being so obstinate. Additionally, Beatrice knows very well she has the power as the property owner and landlord to fire her tenant. In our second interview she stated that when money is at stake, such as negotiating the rent for her land, if her farmer does not want to meet her rent price, she is ready for him to walk away. When the issue is changing over to more conservational farming methods, breaking those ties may be simple, but it is not easy:

Beatrice: I can find a farmer in ten minutes. Because he already one year refused to pay, when I went up in rent, he didn’t want to pay it. I said, “I understand. See you.”
Fifteen minutes later, they were back, and they did take what I wanted. You just have to know what you want, I mean, really. When I do it [change tenants because of her farmer’s resistance to no-till], I’m going to have to go through finding a new tenant.

Rachel: I guess, for you to that would be slightly uncomfortable because you’ve had the same fellow for years.

Beatrice: Well, it is. It is. Here, I’ve got all this black dirt, and I don’t have anybody signed up, you know. There are always young guys that are looking. I’m not afraid to take a chance on a young man.

Rachel: I can see where it would be a tough decision.

Beatrice: Yes. I would prefer not to, if we can kind of come to a common ground.
Despite Beatrice's confidence in being able to rent out her land quickly, she did not pursue this option. In fact, by the end of our second interview, she had conceded the argument to her tenant:

Rachel: So, if you insisted on it [changing over to no-till farming], it would be probably a deal breaker for him [her tenant farmer]?

Beatrice: I don’t know because there’s a certain amount of equipment you have to change, your equipment, a few bucks. It’s not that spendy though. But it’s more of an attitude, and “I’ve done it this way forever.” And he’s a nice guy, and I hate to lose him. So, I’m gonna let my kids deal with it.

In spite of Beatrice’s confidence in her own knowledge about agriculture and conservation (especially no-till farming practices), she was not willing to give her tenant an ultimatum either to change over or quit farming her land. In fact, by our third interview she and her tenant had talked about conservation again, and this time he had at least partially persuaded her that traditional fall tillage is necessary to keep the soil healthy and maintain a high yield. She tells me he is the farmer, in other words, the expert. Here, the gendered farming roles and financial bottom line seemed to slam back into place and displace Beatrice’s knowledge about conservation:

Beatrice: The no-till thing, he’s not into that. He says that black Iowa soil needs to be turned over every year. So, you know, he’s the farmer. I’m not.

Rachel: Oh, so he has given you some reasons why that shouldn’t be the case.

Beatrice: It does make a lot [of sense], you know, this black gumbo soil we have here. Although, people do the no-till and a minimum till and all that, but they don’t get the yields.

Rachel: Oh.

Beatrice: At least the ones I talk to. I go to all those conferences, and people are so totally on it. Some of them are. My farmer does, and he wants the yields, because he has a son that’s with him. So, they need to have those yields.
Rachel: Okay. Wow. It sounds like you had conversations maybe since last time I saw you, with the farmer about it. Because last time I talked to you, you were going to keep talking to him because you were pretty adamant about, you know, trying the no-till.

Beatrice: Yeah. And I still am. We did have a conversation when we did our lease this time. And he still prefers not. So he’s a good farmer. He’s reliable. We’ve had them for forty-some years. We had his dad. You know, you just feel obligated to. And he’s not doing a bad job. If he were, he would be gone.

By our third interview, the relationship between Beatrice and her tenant proved impenetrable to change at that point. She used the phrase I heard from almost all the WFOs in this research: “He’s a good farmer.” That compliment seems to be the stamp of approval and main argument why most WFOs would not dream of replacing their tenant.

For years Beatrice’s farmer has been dependable and has conducted operations on her farmland in a timely and efficiently way. He’s a known entity. Additionally, Beatrice had just experienced a very negative situation with the other farmer I mentioned above, with whom she had negotiated over the price of the eighty acres she just purchased. What Beatrice called that farmer’s “irresponsible” behavior prompted her to turn over that newly acquired land to her long-time tenant. Ironically, the “irresponsible” tenant whom she had fired before they started their lease had been farming that land using the no-till method.

When Beatrice turned over those acres to her usual farmer in the spring, he began tilling conventionally on that ground. Another ironic part of this story is that when I asked Beatrice what her source was for stating no-till crops get a lower yield than conventional till, she stated that it was the same farmer she had fired; he is the one who told her that about the yield he had gotten the previous year, and it was quite a bit lower than Beatrice’s regular farmer:

He got 150 [bushels of corn]. And my regular farmer got 200, 220. And beans, he got 45 [bushels]. And my guy gets like 60, 65. I said
to him, “You are not getting much are you?”
And he said, “Oh, it was a bad year last year.”
Uhhh, I don’t think so. I didn’t argue with him. If he thought it was a bad year, it was a bad year. But he’s wrong.

My point in mentioning this exchange between Beatrice and the other farmer is that she did not agree that the number of bushels per acre had been low the previous year. She did not seem to think much of him as a farmer, yet the discussion of his yields was the evidence she used to tell me that no-till farmers receive a lower yield than regular-till farmers. On the other hand, it likely would not matter what the yield is for no-till farming. Beatrice is committed to the relationship she has with her long-time tenant. Indeed, it would be extremely difficult to change after all these years.

Cassie's narrative: “You should understand your land.”

Cassie offers a very different perspective on farmland ownership than the other participants in this research because she is an advocate for all things organic and has been arguing with her family for four years to change the farm they inherited back to its original organic state in which no chemicals were used. While I was organizing Cassie's narrative thematically, it became apparent that she did not talk about the wide range of issues that Beatrice and the other WFOs did, especially regarding the themes of gender and her (Cassie’s) relationship with the tenant. The reason Cassie’s narrative follows a different structure is mainly because she has a different kind of obstacle to attaining her conservation goals: her aunt, who is a co-owner of the farmland and is the intermediary between the family and the tenant. Therefore, Cassie’s comments focused more on her own conservational beliefs, the relationship with her family, and the decisions of the family regarding the farm since Cassie's grandparents died in 2006.
History of the farm

In her mid-fifties, Cassie lives a few miles south of Fort Dodge on a one-acre property where she operates her natural health products business out of her home, and this is where we conducted our interviews. She told me she is a master herbalist and naturopath doctor, and, indeed, she has a website promoting her products and services. Financially, Cassie seems comfortable. Along with five other female family members, plus her brother, she inherited 360 acres from her grandparents in 2006; the six heirs split the income from the cash rent received from the tenant, who has farmed the land for the past fifteen years.

Unlike my other WFO research participants, Cassie is married; her husband teaches courses at the local college in Fort Dodge, and he is also a master gardener. They live on an acre and grow herbs and take care of beehives and other animals there. She stated, “We have nine hives, we raise rabbits, we raise a couple lambs every year—my husband raises them. We are completely 100% organic and pretty much self-sustainable.”

Organic, self-sustainable farming is Cassie’s ideal model when it comes to agriculture. She adopted this ideology as she grew up watching her grandfather work the same farm she and her family members have inherited, and she feels very strongly about pre-industrialized agriculture practices. She explains her grandfather’s farm management:

Growing up with my grandpa, I was very close to him, and felt and seeing how much he loved the land, and his belief system about the land, and taking care of it. I mean, he was a true steward. He really believed in and loved it. And let nature really do what it is supposed to do and not try to manipulate it. And he was a very diversified farmer; they were, they had dairy cows he milked. They had chickens; he grew oats corn soybeans, alfalfa. I mean, basically, he could feed all of his own animals. And still had enough to sell to the elevator. And he was president of the grain elevator for a lot of years. And he was just very hands-on, diversified, and they had lots of other animals too. He could take care of them all. Basically, he supported his family
with the farm.

According to Cassie, besides her grandfather's ability to independently feed and sustain his family and the animals on the farm, he also possessed a thorough knowledge and understanding of his land that rendered chemicals unnecessary; yet today this knowledge has largely been forgotten, lost, or ignored by the general farming community. Cassie maintains that farmers have lost the knowledge that helped their land thrive before the age of chemical farming:

The whole time I was growing up, it [her grandfather's farm] was a very diversified organic farm. Although my grandfather at the time didn't consider it organic or realize it was organic. He just loved the land so much, and he would not use chemicals, and you know, they were just coming out in the 50s, and... and I guess by the 60s, though, a lot of people were using them. But he just never believed that was a good way to go, and you should understand your land.

For Cassie, “understanding your land” means using non-chemical means to eliminate weeds, as well as planting diversified crops for food instead of field corn, which becomes the basis for animal feed and processed food products. Cassie is confident and outspoken about the harm that industrialized farming can cause the environment and consumers. This confidence and her persistence in making the argument would eventually contribute to a changed lease agreement and farming practices on the land she inherited.

**Traditional, organic farming versus "Big Ag"**

Cassie is also knowledgeable about organic farming and is just as outspoken about the need to return to those farming practices. Below she contrasts the farming practices of organic farmers and conventional farmers, and states that the former group understands their weeds and soil management better, which is reflected in higher yields. She concludes again that these organic practices represent a return to the old way of farming:

If they [farmers] understand the soil, and they're using their
weeds like symptoms to show them what is missing or what they have too much of, then they can regulate that, and they can pretty much be weed free. The only problem they are having is, they don't like the no-till [farming practice] for the fact that if they have heavy machinery, it compacts that no-till, and compacts and compacts and compacts it, and makes quite the insect bed. And so the traditional farmers are using pesticides to kill the bugs, so what do they care.

But now, when you talk to an organic farmer, they don't have complaints. They are not saying it's labor intensive. They are making great money, I mean, because if you look at the price of a bushel of soybeans, of organic compared to, I don't like the word “traditional.” But you know, the chemical. And there is like a dollar difference per bushel, you know. So, the money is way better. But yeah, you do have to be a little more proactive, and you have to know your field. It goes back to the old way of farming. You have to know about the land, you have to know about the soil, you have to know about the weather.

So, the excuses that the chemical farmers give me are just stupid. And it just shows that they have not done their research. They have not, either they have listened to somebody, or they have just, you know, totally blocked it out and don’t want to.

Cassie makes a strong argument for organic farming, even from a financial perspective. She would be an excellent knowledge resource for someone like Beatrice, who could not articulate an argument with which to answer her farmer tenant about the financial and soil benefits of no-till farming practices. Furthermore, Cassie's narrative exhibits a clear dichotomy between Peterson's farming myths, along with heroes and villains. Cassie's grandfather represents that yeoman farmer, while industrial agriculture is the formidable Death Star of the “mechanized world view” of farming (290).

Regarding conservation, Cassie outspokenly abhors the entire “Big Ag” industrialized approach and believes the chemicals are slowly poisoning the people of Iowa. She likens farmers to “heavy machine operators” and “amateur chemical appliers.” She added:

Cassie: The machinery is so huge nowadays, and some of it doesn’t Even look like farm machinery. Some of it looks downright scary.
The chemicals they’re using are just powerful and horrible.

Rachel: You think they’re dangerous?

Cassie: Oh I think they’re very dangerous. Why else would Iowa have the highest cancer rate in the nation?

While cancer was the leading cause of death in Iowa in 2010, according to a report from the University of Iowa, I could not find evidence that this state has the highest cancer rate in the United States. Yet Cassie is convinced this is the case. She also contrasted today’s conventional agriculture practices and the traditions of her grandfather’s farm that she inherited. She said she used to think farmers were the smartest people in the world:

Number one, they had to do everything. They had to be mechanical. They had to know about animals. They had to know about plants, whether it was weeds or crops. They had to know how to store and harvest and plant, and they had to know weather, and they had to know what to look for in the weather, I mean they just really had to be connected to nature. Farmers are not that way anymore.

Cassie is right that farmers have for the most part done away with their livestock because animals aren’t as profitable as corn and soybeans, and that farmers use herbicides and fertilizers to control weeds and boost crop yields. All of the WFOs I spoke with told a similar story about how farming on their land has shifted over the years from growing a variety of crops and raising livestock to producing only corn and soybeans every other year.

Cassie is both worried about consumers’ health from eating so many processed foods and hopeful that education will turn the tide back to more wholesome eating. When I asked her whether women might be more sensitive to the problem with processed foods, she did not think so:

Rachel: Do you think it’s women who will make a difference?

Cassie: Well, I used to think that. Now I actually believe it’s going to be the consumers that are going to change things. There is more and more emphasis on where our food is coming from, how it’s being grown, how it’s being raised. I have to give some of the documentaries
big kudos for that. *Food, Inc.* has been a huge part of that. Dr. Oz, I don’t like everything he does, but he is teaching people to eat whole foods.

It’s teaching people the importance of whole foods, getting away from these Big Ag foods. Basically, farmers grow corn here; that corn is taken and changed and you know made into all these fake foods. There’s a whole industry based on corn syrup. On high fructose corn syrup.

Cassie shudders at the enormous impact high fructose corn syrup has had in food processing, particularly in contributing to children’s diets. She sees hope with parents who are asking why their children are overweight. She states that consumers are beginning to read food labels with an understanding about the potential dangers of processed foods that perhaps they did not possess before the push back of advocates such as Michael Pollan and stores such as Whole Foods became part of the mainstream culture. Cassie added:

[Parents ask,] “Why are our kids obese?” So, they are starting To look at labels; they are starting to look at the school lunch menus. And, they are like, “Wow, this has high fructose corn syrup. This has things we can’t even pronounce. It’s not food.” And just this year alone [in 2010], gardening, seed buying has gone way up. More people than in the past 20 years are now putting in gardens. So we are seeing some good changes, and I have to say a lot of it is become because of the consumer, because they don’t want to buy crap anymore.

In her personal and professional life, Cassie promotes healthy farming and eating. She explains that the food machinery politics of the state of Iowa are the driving force behind the almost ubiquitous production of corn and soybeans by farmers. It is difficult for farmers to survive in the self-sufficient manner that Cassie’s grandparents did. She explains how most farmers are heavily in debt and subsidized by the government, while their crop production is determined by the agriculture industry:

They [farmers] are either in debt, or, well, being subsidized out the ying yang. I don’t know why farmers complain about people being on welfare so much because they are subsidized too. It’s just a different word. And that’s the Catch-22 for them, I understand that, and I don’t hold that against them. Especially in this state. If you
want to grow potatoes or squash as a crop, you cannot get subsidized; you can’t get help.

And it’s not necessarily the farmer’s fault; it’s the Big Ag companies. Well, in Iowa, farming is really Big Ag. We don’t have hardly any true farmers anymore except for the hobby farmers and some people who are going back to homesteading and raising their own food. But as far as anyone with any great amount of land, it’s the Big Ag companies telling them what to do.

As the above excerpts illustrate, Cassie has learned a great deal about farming, food consumption and health over the years from the organic perspective. She blames the agriculture industry that makes its profits from the processing of corn and soybeans into other food and household products for the evaporation of self-sustaining family farms like her grandfather’s.

**Relationship with the family of co-heirs**

Ironically, even though Cassie is by far the most outspoken of my WFO participants in promoting staunch conservational measures in agricultural practices, she has been unable to convince her family members who co-inherited her grandparents’ farmland to adopt farming practices other than growing corn and soybeans. Cassie and her family’s inheritance of 360 acres is comprised of 180 acres of timber and 180 acres of farm land that are cash rented to a tenant who farms conventionally. One of Cassie’s aunts has controlled the lease and the relationship with that tenant ever since her grandfather died in 2006. According to Cassie, her aunt is perfectly happy with conventional farming methods and has been an enormous roadblock to Cassie’s goals of returning the farmland to organic production:

My aunt, she doesn’t think there’s anything wrong with the farming methods. She doesn’t think there’s anything wrong with the chemicals, she’s in that denial thing…. At the beginning when my grandparents first died, I spoke a lot and tried to change things, and it got real hard to deal with her.
Cassie reports that she has argued many times with her aunt to change over to farming practices that do not involve the use of chemicals, such as a cultivating a sunflower crop. Cassie's aunt would not budge, and none of the other family members have felt strongly enough about the issue to push the aunt to make a change. Cassie explains the added problem of her aunt's friendship with the tenant:

It's just basically my aunt takes care of the paperwork. And the farmer, I think they are friends, or business friends anyway. And since he didn't want to do it, she didn't want to try to find someone else. She didn't want to take it away from him, basically. He does pay on time.

The aunt's social relationship with the tenant is a powerful obstacle to making any changes to the farmland. Additionally, the fact that the tenant who works for Cassie's family pays his rent punctually is a very positive attribute in his favor with Cassie's family.

Cassie's discussions about gender were minimal; the largest conflict she reported was arguing with her aunt over conservation practices rather than ever negotiating with the tenant. Cassie said that the reasons her aunt won't change the lease and possibly the tenant are because (1) the aunt and tenant are friends, and (2) the aunt believes that the conventional agriculture practice of growing all corn and soybeans is perfectly acceptable.

**Decision making, sunflowers, and the tenant**

Cassie would like to begin changing the land back by growing sunflower seeds, yet she had lost the argument for several years. She explains that ignorance is another reason many U.S. farmers do not grow crops other than corn and soybeans:

Cassie: I just want to try to get some different kinds of plants growing, and there's a big demand for sunflower seeds, sunflower oil. You know, it's a commodity just like cotton and corn and all that is. So, here in the state, they were paid $180 an acre, which at the time that we found that out, we were only getting $175 an acre from the farmer so. The thing is, you still need somebody to plant and do all the labor, and that's where farmers aren't wanting to do that.
Rachel: Is the equipment different? Is the labor more intensive? Why wouldn’t he want to try it?

Cassie: He just didn’t want to; he just didn’t know anything about it. He had never grown it. All his equipment is for corn and soybeans. He just didn’t want to… [inaudible] about it. And that’s the problem with so many different crops is the learning. Farmers don’t want to take the time, you know, to learn about it.

Even with financial evidence that sunflower seeds offer a competitive market price to corn and soybeans, Cassie has fought an uphill battle with her family regarding their farmland, but mostly with her aunt who has the relationship with their tenant and who draws up the lease. During our second interview, Cassie revealed that her campaign to change farming practices and tenants for the 2011 farming season failed with her family. The inheritors of the family farm had met in February to discuss the farm’s future. Cassie explains the outcome:

The farmer that rents it now, cash rents, he did not want to do sunflowers. He didn’t know anything about it; he didn’t want to learn about it. He thinks he, you know, does well with corn and soybeans. So, had to be a family decision. And since he’s been renting for so long, my mom and me and my sisters, we all wanted, you know, we said, “Well, let’s find a new farmer.” And the rest of the family did not want to. So, for this year again we lost out.

Cassie lost the debate the previous year, but she learned some lessons and began doing her homework for the next farm meeting with the family in February 2011. Cassie knew she needed to have another farmer ready to go when she negotiated again with her aunt next time around. She states, “What I have to do is ahead of time is find people, a farmer, that would farm like that [growing sunflowers and returning to organic farming]. At the time, you know, when he [the current farmer] said no, I didn’t have anybody else.”

Another problem was that most of her family were somewhat apathetic about how the farming gets accomplished on their inherited acres. Most of the women are primarily
concerned with their share of the income the cash rent generates. Cassie explains that only she and her mother have been passionate about making a change to organic farming:

Cassie: The rest of them were just kind of, to be honest, they don’t really care. They get their checks, and you know, that’s pretty much, they haven’t really had anything to do with it anyway. So there are two of us that are really that passionate about it. Two others are one way, and the other [Cassie’s aunt], she’s not.

Rachel: That makes more sense to me. I get it. And your aunt is the one dealing with the paperwork.

Cassie: And I’ve offered to help, I’ve offered to take it over for her. And no, absolutely not.

Rachel: Why you think she feels so strongly about that?

Cassie: Probably because she does live there and, I mean, she’s got her own land, but it sits next to that land. And that’s just her personality. She’s just very controlling.

Cassie’s aunt lives next-door to the family’s inherited property and was a caretaker for Cassie’s grandparents in their later years. Cassie states that it was her aunt and uncle’s care and proximity that allowed her grandparents to stay on the farm all of their lives. With the aunt’s strong opinions to maintain the status quo with the conventional tenant, and her proximity to the farmland in question and unbudging control of the lease with the tenant, it seemed hopeless that Cassie would ever be successful in changing the farmland back to organic production.

Changing the family’s mind: winning the arguments of finances and conservation

However, by our third interview in March 2011, Cassie reported about the most recent family farm meeting among the inheritors of her grandparents’ farmland. She was pleased to tell me she had won the debate this time. She states that it was mainly her husband who presented research about alternative organic farming practices that would be beneficial for the land and the bottom line. When I asked her what data sources she used to
help convince her family, Cassie explained the lengthy process of changing her family’s mind was fortified with the presentation of grass-roots organizational knowledge from various organic farming proponents:

Cassie: We did a lot off the Internet. He has talked to a lot of, you know, the County extension. Talked to the Practical Farmers of Iowa. We’re members of that. Some CSA [Community-Supported Agriculture organization] people. A lot of different people. And sources of information.

Rachel: Okay. So you put together a body of evidence, and look at this.

Cassie: Yeah. And just showing them they have nothing to lose. But the land has everything to gain.

Rachel: That’s fantastic. Were you there, too?

Cassie: Some of the times.

Rachel: So, it was over a period of time?

Cassie: Oh yeah. It has been months and months. And with different parts of the family, too.

Rachel: Oh okay. So he didn’t have a big meeting with everybody?

Cassie: No. Finally, we did have a meeting where the ones who could attend and did. But before that, you know, we had talked and presented to the different ones. There are quite a few different people involved.

Cassie’s husband made the argument for organic farming to each of the five family members and their families over the past year before they all came together to make a collective decision at the February 2011 meeting. Besides convincing the heirs that organic farming would improve the health of the soil and the environment, Cassie’s husband provided what was likely even more important evidence by explaining that the family members would not lose out financially by making this decision. Cassie also found a new
farmer to begin the organic transition. She said that she and her husband found him
through their associations with organic farming organizations and from talking to people:

Cassie: We have been talking to a farmer who is okay without the
chemicals and stuff.

Rachel: How did you find him?

Cassie: I don’t know if my husband used email and put it out to the
different groups. Because we belong to, like I said, the Practical
Farmers of Iowa. And we belong to the Organic Association, the
Iowa Organic Association. There are quite a few different groups. And
then just word of mouth, too. My uncle knows a lot of people, and he
was a farmer for years and years.

Cassie states that it will take at least three years for the farmland to be rid of the
farming chemicals and be considered an organic farm. She still wants to start growing
sunflower seeds immediately:

Cassie: Definitely sunflower seeds. That’s probably the majority of it at
this time. Because the land is actually going to have to go through a
few years of… it has to sit, or not have any kind of chemical on it for
it ever to become organic anyway. The three years then, will have to
be kind of a transition, [grow] something that can still survive and
put something back in the soil, too.

Rachel: Like the crop that you would grow on it? During those three
years, would you be able to grow anything?

Cassie: Yeah. We just can’t say that it’s organic or anything. Which is
fine; we are not at that point anyway. Yeah, we will probably grow a
good share of alfalfa, too, because that’s a good way to put nitrogen
and things back in the depleted soil. And that’s pretty easy to sell.
There are so many horse people.

While Cassie has a specific plan for the farm’s transition period into organic crop
production, it still may not come to pass. The bottom line of most decisions revolves
around money, and Cassie’s family may just decide to sell, after all this energy expended
into saving the land from conventional agriculture practices. Cassie reports that the aging
members of her family are concerned about rising capital gains taxes and leaving their share
of the inherited land to multiple children. They may collectively decide to sell the land at some point soon even before the land begins its shift back to organic crop production.

Rachel: So, the two aunts, are they just kind of weighing it over financially?

Cassie: Well, they are up in their late 70s. And it’s kind of like, they kind of don’t want to put the burden on their kids. To have to take over the land and all of that. Because, then again another inheritance tax. Then there are more people. Each aunt has two daughters and two son-in-law’s. So, you know, that’s just more people, where it is almost easier if, land us such a good price now, that if they sell it before the capital gain doubles, each family then can take their money and just do whatever they want when they need to do it.

While Cassie would much rather keep the land and cultivate it for organic crops, she is resigned to selling it if the rest of the family wants to. At this point, however, the decision to sell has not been made yet, and Cassie is happy that she and her husband were able to convince her family to go organic, that is, with the exception of Cassie’s aunt who prefers the conventional farming. Her opinion has not changed:

Rachel: The aunt that was so strong with the conventional farming…

Cassie: And she still is.

Rachel: Okay. And she has a relationship with the tenant. What was her reaction? Is she one who would rather sell?

Cassie: No, no. She was rather keep the land and just keep it the way it is.

Rachel: Okay. But she would go along with the majority?

Cassie: She has to. She has to.

Rachel: Okay. So, it is kind of a business decision with the majority.

Cassie: Very much so. That really is what it has come down to. Yeah, majority rules.

What Cassie and her aunt do have in common is that they would both prefer to keep the farmland in the family. Time will tell what the majority have to say about that.
Over the past few years Cassie and her husband have expended a lot of energy and time to attempt to sway her family into changing the farmland practices back to organic production, the way her grandfather had farmed the acres originally. While the most difficult part of making that change was due to Cassie's aunt's extreme reluctance to change practices, Cassie's confidence in her knowledge about what is best for the soil and for humans breathing the air and making choices about their food has been unshakeable.

_Sylviia's narrative: “I never told him no during the whole time he was alive.”_

Sylvia is a WFO whose decisions focus on solving her financial problems and achieving independence after a troubled ten-year marriage. Although she is interested in conservation, she does not focus on it. Therefore, while all six themes are present in Sylvia's narrative, during her interviews we talked about marriage, death, estate planning, property repairs, an orderly farm, and cemetery plots. Conservation decisions did not occur much in Sylvia's affairs. Nor did any specific gender comments, although I believe Sylvia's gender played a role in virtually all the decisions she has made since her husband died. This narrative provided me with a broadened understanding of agency as demonstrated in the lives of my research participants.

_History of the second marriage and the farm_

This 72-year old widow lives on an acreage that includes a three-bedroom brick ranch home and 95 acres of farmland that she received after her 93-year old second husband died three years ago. The first time I interviewed Sylvia was at Buford's Steak and Barbecue at the Starlite Best Western Hotel in Fort Dodge. She chose that restaurant because it is easy to find and only a few miles from her house west of town. We met for over an hour-and-a-half the first time, having coffee, exchanging stories about our lives, and eventually sharing a piece of cheesecake.
After losing her first husband to cancer in 1992, Sylvia was a widow for five years. At the time she was working two jobs and stated that she didn’t have much of a personal life; she was lonely. Therefore, when her soon-to-be second husband appeared in her life, Sylvia accepted his advances, even though he was twenty-four years her senior. At the time they married in 1997, Sylvia was 59, and he was 83. She explains the brief courtship after she first met her soon-to-be second husband for coffee for the first time:

He just kind of picked me out of the blue and wanted to know if I wanted to get married. And I remember saying, “Well, as a lifestyle,” I said, “I guess I would rather be married than not.” You know, I didn’t particularly like being single; however, I do now.

Sylvia and her second husband dated for only three months before their wedding. During this time he persuaded her to sign a pre-nuptial agreement. Sylvia knew this was not a wise plan and even after talking to me about it at length, she did not provide a compelling reason why she did it. Even her attorney at the time advised her against signing the agreement:

Her [the attorney’s] statement to me was, “I don’t know why you would sign this.” It even said that he had no obligation to even support me. Well, he really didn’t, other than, you know, the house and the groceries. And anything else I had to pay for myself. But anyway, but I thought, you know, I always expect people to be honest and fair. So, I'm thinking, oh, this isn't going to matter.

But the pre-nuptial agreement did matter. A lesson that at least two of the WFOs in my research learned later in life is that understanding legal agreements is critically important to protecting one's financial assets. Nonetheless, Sylvia signed the agreement, got married, and lived with what she discovered was an overbearing and miserly husband for ten years before he died. She called the marriage “ten years of captivity.” For example, she describes her husband as being difficult and controlling of Sylvia's time and
friendships. Sylvia told me about an elderly neighbor that her husband usually refused to allow visit:

Sylvia: She [the neighbor] died; it must've been 1999. I always thought she was a pretty good neighbor to have, but R. [Sylvia's husband] kind of wanted to keep her at a distance. For instance, she didn't let him farm her land, her half of this [Sylvia gestures toward the property line where her neighbor's land merged with hers]. That bugged him. What else was there? Several other things. I think maybe she wasn't a Democrat, or something like that. Or if she let somebody who farmed her land that was a Republican, or something.

Rachel: Oh. They put up a big sign or something?

Sylvia: No, he just knew all these people, you know. So, he was always half mad at her. But I felt sorry for her because she was always down there by herself, you know. And I couldn't go against him, you know, very much. But once in a while she would come up; he would let her come up. She would visit and eat ice cream. She always liked to have a bowl of ice cream. So, I was sad when she died.

The phrases Sylvia uses in this reflection, particularly “I couldn't go against him” regarding about her husband's vague grudges against neighbors and his control over Sylvia's life help illustrate what a difficult time she had had during those ten years.

In addition, for the final three years of her husband's life, Sylvia was his primary caretaker. By then Sylvia said she had grown used to her husband's abrasive personality. In another anecdote, she explained the hospice nurse’s reaction to meeting Sylvia's husband:

Sylvia: You just had to let everything be his way. And you know, after a while, you just get so used to it that you don't think about it. I remember when the hospice nurse; we had several. This one, she was a little bit mouthy. She said, “Does he always treat you like this?” And I'm like, “Like what?” Anyway, she said, “He needs to have some Prozac.” It's an antidepressant or something.

Rachel: Yeah. Well, it's to calm you down.

Sylvia: Okay. Because he was pretty high strung most of the time. So she got him some, and my goodness, I said, “Where were
you ten years ago?” [Sylvia laughs].

While Prozac helped to smooth out the final days of Sylvia’s marriage, the consequences of Sylvia’s signing the pre-nuptial agreement became fully clear to Sylvia after her husband’s death, when he left his 800 acres and almost half a million dollars in cash to his only daughter and nothing to his wife. Sylvia always shakes her head when discussing her step-daughter and her late husband’s original will:

Sylvia: I always thought, if the tables had been reversed, I would have shared with her. I mean, I wouldn’t have ever even thought of not sharing. She didn’t share, not one dollar. And I couldn’t persuade her, no matter what. So, that was when, then when I contacted a lawyer, I said, “Well, maybe, you know, maybe I could put in a claim for healthcare services or something.” Because it was like a 24-hour job for the last two or three years.

Rachel: Taking care of R. [her husband]?

Sylvia: Uh-hmmm. And she [his daughter] didn’t, and it [taking care of him] was like everything... everything. And she didn’t ever pitch in.

Being the full-time nurse for her husband as his health failed was a hardship for Sylvia, and she believed that she deserved compensation for her time spent in that role; however, Sylvia stated that her husband and his family viewed her as an outsider because she had only been with him for ten years. Regardless, Sylvia believed the will was completely unfair, despite her having signed the pre-nuptial agreement. It was when Sylvia saw her deceased husband’s bank statements and realized he had declared only a fraction of the cash as an asset in his will, that she decided to consult an attorney about the will’s validity. Subsequently, when Sylvia formally challenged the will, her late husband’s daughter made her an offer to receive the brick ranch house where Sylvia had been living for the past ten years just west of Fort Dodge, as well as outbuildings on a small acreage, and 95 acres of farmland. Sylvia accepted the offer immediately. She mentioned to her
attorney at the time, “You know, I think that’s probably the best we can ever come up with.” I said, “I didn’t even expect that.”

When Sylvia first received the deed to the property, she was elated. She noted that receiving cash with the property would have been extremely helpful; otherwise, Sylvia stated, “It’s like a dream because it’s the way I was raised.” Sylvia told me she’s admired the red brick house she lives in since she was eight years old when she would drive by the property with her parents. She added, “I would always say, ‘Oh, those people must be so rich,’ because it’s the only brick house I’d ever seen.” Besides gaining title to the house, owning a farm has also been Sylvia’s dream:

Sylvia: I remember when I was younger, I used to always think, “I wish sometime in my life that I could own 160 acres of land and a little bit of machinery, and farm it myself.”

Rachel: Really!

Sylvia: Yes. I always wanted to do that. I never... you know, there was never an opportunity for that, so this is the closest I’ve ever come. However, I’m too old to own any machinery and operate it now.

Sylvia’s dreamy reflection is another reminder of the “yeoman” narrative in Peterson’s collection of farming myths (290). Yet instead of farming herself, Sylvia cash rents the land to her husband’s nephew and now spends much of her spring, summer, and fall tending an enormous garden and repairing the outbuildings she inherited with the property.

Because Sylvia’s financial settlement with her step-daughter did not leave Sylvia any cash, the need to make these repairs on her house and several outbuildings constantly worries her. Therefore, Sylvia has recruited herself as a laborer on her farm to make improvements while minimizing costs. Sylvia stated:

I need about $60,000 for the roof on the big shed. And see, R. [her
late husband] could have done all that when he was still alive, but he kind of pinched pennies when he didn’t need to, and he wouldn’t fix things. And then the house roof, I don’t know how old it must’ve been, I finally had to do that last summer. It was like disintegrating; it was terrible. So, I had to do that, and that cost like $8,500, and it’s a small house.

Sylvia’s big shed was built in 1944 in the shape of a Quonset building that looks similar to the Armory at the Iowa State University campus. Her building is the size of two basketball courts and around three stories tall at its height. Sylvia loves this shed and describes the bowed-out rafters: “They call them half-barrel rafters. Big thick wooden ones, you know. I go in there, and I just, it’s like walking under redwood trees or something. You just feel small.” She has spent the past two summers taking out and installing new windows herself. Sylvia has two sons from her first marriage, and while the brothers also live in central Iowa, they are busy working, and neither is involved in her work on the farm. Sylvia described her work on the windows:

Sylvia: So, I went to Menard’s, and I bought a bunch of these barn sash windows, you know, with the four glass panes in them. What is it, 22 x 29. And started replacing the windows in the sheds.

Rachel: Yourself?

Sylvia: Yes. It wasn’t too hard to get the old ones out because they were all rotted, you know. And then once you get those out, then it’s not too hard to figure out how to fit the new ones in their place.

Rachel: Okay. I’m just picturing you out there doing this…

Sylvia: Well, I got half of it done, and next summer I can get the other half done. And it sure looks better. So, anyway, I’m working on that, but I’ll never get that big roof done, $60,000.

By our third interview, Sylvia had found a part-time handyman to finish the windows for her in the big shed. Yet by then she had also decided the eaves troughs needed to be replaced, so this and tree trimming were her current projects. Therefore, between the windows, the garden, the mowing, and other chores, Sylvia’s spring, summer,
and fall seasons are busy. Yet after more than two years of working so hard, she is beginning to doubt how much good it does her financially to own the farm; she has a lot of bills. Sylvia states, “If I had started out with some cash, then it would have been different. Because I could've gotten things fixed up. I wouldn’t have had to pay $1,000 for windows on the house.” The $1,000 Anderson window is just one item on a long list of needed improvements on the property. And Sylvia does not have enough money to make all the repairs.

**Relationship with the tenant**

Besides her Social Security check, Sylvia receives rental income from the tenant who farms her 95 acres. The tenant is her late husband’s nephew and is descended from a long line of farmers with a solid reputation in the area, according to Sylvia. He has been farming the land for fifteen years, and Sylvia trusts him implicitly to make the conservation decisions about her farmland, even to the point of signing over power of attorney to the tenant at the local conservation office in Fort Dodge:

Sylvia: Over at the FSA office, Farm Service Agency, it’s a federal office. You can sign, what do they call it?

Rachel: Power of attorney?

Sylvia: To where your tenant farmer can make all of the decisions for the crops and things. And so I thought, you know, there is no reason for me not to do that because he knows the best thing to do, and he is totally trustable. And so I signed that so he can just do whatever he wants with the land. As long as he farms it. It just has to do with farming.

I raised my eyebrows when Sylvia told me she gave decision-making power over her farmland to the tenant. This was land over which she had begun a legal fight to own. And she had unwisely trusted her husband by signing a pre-nuptial agreement, I was surprised that Sylvia had made a similar decision with her farmland. It is difficult to reconcile Sylvia’s
desire for agency while she simultaneously gives it away. Her focus has never been on the farming, though; instead, she spends a great deal of time making repairs to her house and outbuildings, which perhaps are domains where she has more expertise than farming.

The lack of enough cash flow troubles Sylvia not only because she was left with an old house and several dilapidated outbuildings, but also she makes only enough from her tenant’s cash rent payments to cover property taxes and other basic living expenses. There isn’t enough rent for Sylvia to repair the buildings:

Rachel: So, now that the taxes are going up, and you still have these roof problems, is there anything you can do?

Sylvia: I’m not sure what’s ahead.

Rachel: Will you talk to your attorney friend?

Sylvia: Yeah, I probably will because, you know, it’s going to come down to almost a break-even thing where you don’t have any extra to repair or anything like that. And yet with the economy being the way it is now, you really wouldn’t want to raise rent on the tenant, so I don’t know.

One of Sylvia’s last options for raising money is to increase the rent on her tenant. I am struck as I consider how different the WFOs in my research are; for example, raising the rent would have been a quick and easy decision for Beatrice. However, Sylvia’s sense of agency is based on her own individual journey and sources of stress. Engaging in a legal battle to win the farm was enough anxiety for her, and idea of negotiating with her tenant is a nightmare. In fact, besides giving her tenant power of attorney status over the land, Sylvia does not even have a formal lease with her tenant, and she is quite comfortable with this arrangement. She explains how the situation developed:

Sylvia: I don’t even have a written lease. R. [her second husband] used to; he used to have a lease for simply as a formality kind of thing, you know, with the price break for rent on it. But then, actually, different ones said, “Well, you know, we would rather just take it year by year,” you know, and see, if times are good you [the landlord] get higher pay; if times are
bad you get lower pay. Actually, the lawyer went along with that.

Rachel: okay. The one that you trust?

Sylvia: Um hum. He probably has a lot of clients that are doing it that way, you know. And so he thought that was okay to go that way. So, that doesn't tie anybody into anything, and, you know, the rent that M. [her tenant] had been paying was really low. I suppose because he was a relative, R. just never charged him a whole lot. And so I knew that, you know, that it needed to go up. So all of that first winter when everything was in legal activity, I was trying to determine how much should it be, you know, how do I? He [the tenant] knew we needed to have it talk about it. And so I was trying to inform myself so I could discuss it.

Sylvia's apologetic attitude over the thought of negotiating about the rent was influenced by the low rent her husband had set with his tenant who was also his nephew. Abiding by a husband's farming decisions after he is gone seems to be a common theme among my research participants, even though Sylvia did not particularly care for her husband. At least his decisions were a map she could use to chart her own role as the decision maker.

Sylvia was also at a loss over how to find accurate rental rates for her farmland. So, like all the participants in my research, Sylvia turned to knowledge resources she trusted, although she did not have many. They included her attorney and the tenant himself. Other WFOs, like Beatrice, Cassie, and Sarah, have a much larger cadre of information sources, but Sylvia took the advice of those two people, the attorney and the tenant, for better or for worse.

Sylvia believes her land could bring in higher rent from her tenant; however, she was relieved when her tenant simply brought her a check for just the increased amount per acre that she had been thinking of:

Sylvia: It was just amazing. “Here's your check.” And he said… “That’s $175 an acre.” And I, well, the attorney had told me that it should be worth at least $175 an acre. And here M. [the tenant] comes with that check, and it's $175 an acre! So, I thought, oh, I
don’t have to say anything.

Sylvia did not think the coincidence seemed odd; she was simply relieved that the problem solved itself. Confrontation is very high on the list of events that many women in my research would like to avoid. For the most part, they prefer not to negotiate, and definitely not face-to-face with their tenant. Beatrice, who happily debates rent prices with her tenant, is an unusual exception to this observation, based on my talks with my participants and with Eells and Adcock, who work daily with WFOs.

Even though Sylvia needs a higher income, said she doesn’t want to be “greedy,” and she reiterates that she trusts her tenant. Like many of the participants in my study state about their tenants, Sylvia’s tenant “is a good farmer,” a trait that runs in the tenant’s family:

Sylvia: Whatever he [the tenant] would think about doing would be fine. Because see his dad was R.’s [her husband’s] brother.

Rachel: The one up the hill? With the tractor? [Sylvia’s brother-in-law restored an old tractor.]

Sylvia: Yes. And their dad who would be M.’s [her tenant’s] grandfather, were always pretty much known west of Fort Dodge as being the best farmers in the area. They just were always, known for whatever was needing to be done with the land or the ground or whatever, they were always just a step ahead of it. So, they didn’t get behind, like I do (Sylvia laughs). They always kept up and had everything done on time, no matter the weather. They were just good.

In Sylvia’s description of her timely tenant, she reiterates the importance of an orderly farm, which reflects her own sense of making an orderly life.

**Conservation and the farming aesthetic**

Along with the other WFOs in my research who live in the Fort Dodge area, I first met Sylvia in the fall of 2009 at a Learning Circle event during which the group took a bus out to the Iowa Learning Farm, owned by the Ann Smeltzer Trust. Smeltzer was noted for
her strong conservational beliefs, and the 157-acre farm we visited that day was created to
demonstrate a variety of agriculture, soil, and wildlife. Sylvia attended the meeting that day
because she had always wanted to visit this particular farm. A few months later during
our second interview and after lunch, Sylvia took me on a tour of Fort Dodge, where we
saw Smeltzer’s mansion that is on the National Historic Registry, according to the Ann
Smeltzer Charitable Trust website. Sylvia told me she has always admired that Ann
Smeltzer ran her farm just the way she wanted to, which meant her tenants could not use
chemicals on the land. Sylvia added to her explanation after I asked her if she ever
experienced conflicts with her tenant:

Sylvia: Now, talking about conflicts, Ann Smeltzer's land, like
what we visited last fall, south of Otho there, well, she owns land
everywhere east of Fort Dodge. But she is not alive anymore either.
But anyway, there were always conflicts with her and her tenants
because she never wanted any herbicides, any of these chemicals.
No herbicides, no pesticides. She probably had to have some
fertilizers but you know, she made them all it the old-fashioned
way [which would have been the application of manure], which
is probably good.

Rachel: For the environment?

Sylvia: Yes. But, you know, that wasn’t the way they wanted to do it.

Rachel: Her tenants?

Sylvia: Yes. But she owned it, so, you know…

Rachel: She sounded like she knew what she was doing.

Sylvia: She was quite an environmentalist.

Sylvia admired Ann Smeltzer’s ability to make strong decisions that were potentially
unpopular with the tenants who farmed her land. And while Sylvia spoke several times
about Smeltzer's environmental legacy, Sylvia has not applied those principles to her own
farmland. Her tenant farms Sylvia's land conventionally, growing corn and soybeans every other year and using the conventional pesticides and herbicides of industrial agriculture.

However, while Sylvia has no problem with her tenant using chemicals on her 95 acres, she does have a strong memory of the pre-industrial farming days of her childhood. Sylvia grew up on a farm before industrial agriculture with its chemicals transformed farming practices. For example, she has specific memories of walking beans, which she still believes is a superior practice to chemicals:

You know, when I was a kid, we didn't have all these herbicides, and so we had to walk beans every summer, you know, like walk the bean fields at least twice and maybe three times, and cut out the weeds... With like a corn knife. When I was a kid, we always did that. And that's still the better way to do it, and not use the herbicides. But then you have to have a walking crew, which, you know, a lot of teenagers used to depend on that [for income] in the summertime, to walk beans.

Sylvia concedes that bean-walking crews do not exist anymore, and chemicals are more convenient and efficient for farmers. Yet a consistent opinion about chemicals seems to be missing from Sylvia's discussion about chemicals. Even though she states the old bean-walking crews were better for the soil, she has no problem matter-of-factly describing her tenant's use of herbicides; below she explains this practice during the rainy summer of 2010:

Rachel: So, as far as the herbicides and fertilizer that are used on your land, that's pretty standard. How do you feel about that?

Sylvia: I think some of it is necessary because otherwise, you keep ahead of everything, the mess. On soybeans, they don't use any fertilizer. I think normally he [her tenant] uses some weed spray, which he normally would have already done. It's been so rainy and so wet, I notice things are looking pretty green out there because he hasn't been able to get in there to spray anything yet. But I think you would normally use some weed spray. And then later on, when they talk about mites, soybean mites, like in August. Then I think he does something with a pesticide. But that's it; it would be an herbicide and pesticide. They give it a once over. It's the minimum that you could do without having to go out there and cut weeds
by hand.

In Sylvia's description of her tenant's use of pesticides, I think of how much Cassie would disagree with this assessment of the farmland. Cassie would argue that the farmer did not understand his field and that the weeds exist for a particular reason to tell him about his soil. But again, Cassie and Sylvia's journeys to their status of WFO have been quite different. Yet Sylvia's views of chemicals remain inconsistent. While she describes her tenant's use of chemicals as simply the way farming is done these days, she would never use herbicides in her own garden:

Rachel: So, [in your garden] why don't you use the chemicals or anything?

Sylvia: Well, if you're going to eat that stuff, you would just as soon not have it poisoned first.

Obviously, Sylvia understands the difference between her garden vegetables she eats fresh and the soybeans that are produced as processing elements for an enormous variety of consumer, industrial, and fuel products, according to the Iowa Soybean Association website. It seems Sylvia's view of farming before industrial agriculture as “the better way” is set aside as she accepts the inevitability of modern agriculture, in which the efficiency of machine and chemical technology have minimized human labor.

And Sylvia does prefer a pristine field with zero weeds. She wholly ascribes to the aesthetic of the classic Iowa field's straight, uniform rows. During our second interview, Sylvia took me to a restaurant for lunch in Fort Dodge where a painting of a farm landscape hung on the wall. She described her ideal farming aesthetic:

Sylvia: I hate them [button weeds]. And cockle burrs.

Rachel: So, the look of the… the neatness of the field, is that part of farming culture, do you think? Is that important? I mean, you think it's important. It's one of the very first things you ever really told me about your land.
Sylvia: That picture on the wall by the table. I think that picture is so beautiful that it’s just like a perfect field of corn. There is not a blemish in the whole field.

Rachel: That’s true.

Sylvia: It’s perfect.

Sylvia’s focus on taking care of her neat, orderly farm was a prominent theme in our interviews, placing third just after our discussions about finances and difficult marriages. She also spends significant time mowing her acreage each summer and explained her philosophy on neatness and pride of ownership:

Sylvia: I just like for things to be in order, and not needing lots of repairs. There is lots of mowing to do, which, I said I spend the summer riding the lawnmower.

Rachel: Is it an acre or two?

Sylvia: It’s an acre and a half of mowing.

Rachel: That’s a lot.

Sylvia: And it’s like every five days, you have to mow it. It’s a good thing I like to mow. But everything else gets neglected. But anyway, like my brother says, everything there is perfect all the time.

Rachel: At your place?

Sylvia: Uh huh. And the neighbors who drive by, too; they say That, too. I mow the front ditches out to the highway, and so, I just like to have everything in order.

For Sylvia, it seems that order constitutes much of her ideology about farming practices and about re-making her life after her marriage. Whereas Beatrice and Cassie are comfortable enough financially to devote much of their time toward pursuing stronger conservational practices on their farmland, Sylvia does not have that luxury. Since marrying her second husband, burying him, engaging in a legal battle to own the farm, and
now spending large quantities of time maintaining it, Sylvia’s focus is necessarily more about survival than conservation practices. In fact, it seems that Sylvia’s acreage and outbuildings have become an extension of herself: a place where she decides how things should be in order.

As we completed our three interviews together, Sylvia’s narratives did not easily fit in to my initial research goal of finding out how WFOs made decisions about conservation on their farmland once they have the responsibility of property ownership, which would then allow me to reflect on the theoretical concept of agency. Instead, Sylvia demonstrated her decision making in other ways, largely in the re-making of her life after her controlling marriage. Sylvia has been very purposeful in making a decision to challenge her husband’s will and live out her long-ago dream of owning her own farm. Regarding plans for her own future, more specifically after her death, Sylvia also decided several years ago that she would be buried in a plot that she owns, rather than next to her second husband:

Rachel: Is R. [Sylvia’s second husband] buried with his first wife?

Sylvia: Uh-huh. And then I’m supposed to be buried next to him on the other side. I never told him no during the whole time he was alive, because I didn’t want to have him in a fuss about it. But I have lots in… you probably don’t know about the Oakland Cemetery in Fort Dodge? It’s the first cemetery; it’s a historic cemetery. Just right on the north edge of town. I have three lots there from my grandmother. And it’s like, that’s where I’m going to be buried. I never said that to him because I knew he would have thought I should sell those lots or something. Anyway, so I’m not going to be buried out where he is.

Learning about Sylvia’s decision to be buried near her family was an endearing moment between researcher and participant. And it was then that I began to understand that Sylvia had larger decisions at stake as she recovered from that marriage than simply taking over conservational decisions on her property as the land owner. Conservation had been the focus of my original (and simplistic) research questions; however, I realized that
those questions did not allow for answers that lay beyond concerns about farming and conservation. And that discussion will be a large portion of my analysis in the next chapter.

Sarah’s narrative: “And then he does these little things for me that I appreciate.”

Moving on to the western Iowa narratives, Sarah is a convenient place to begin, as she discussed all six of the themes directly during our interviews. However, she focused a good deal of energy discussing her relationship with her tenants. Sarah spoke the least amount about her finances, which led me to think she is financially comfortable, a sharp contrast from Sylvia and from Annette, whose narrative follows this one. I make this observation with each participant, as her focus on financial resources seems to directly impact how she makes decisions.

When discussing her decision-making process as manager of the farmland, Sarah described how important her children are with respect to counselling her and helping affirm her actions. Sarah has made the strongest decisions of all the WFOs in my research, but doing so was not easy for her, as I relate in her narrative below.

History of the family and farm

Sarah lives on a farm of 280 acres a mile west of Shelby, Iowa. She invited me to her house for coffee, and we talked in her dining room that overlooks the hilly cornfields with their mesmerizing terraces as well as the pasture and cattle. Sarah has two tenants and is particularly fond of her second tenant who owns the cattle on her property. She explained that the cattle have a regular schedule for grazing near her house each day. “When it was really hot they came up earlier and would lay under the trees out there. I like to have them around. Some days that’s the only living thing I see,” Sarah stated matter-of-factly. Solitude seems to be a normal part of Sarah’s life in the country as a widow.
For each interview I sat directly in front of her grandfather clock, which had the loudest chime I have ever heard, and caused me to jump at some point each time I visited her. When I asked “Sarah” what she would like her pseudonym to be, she said, “Hmmm, either Lady Gaga or Sarah Palin.” I chose the name **Sarah** because it seemed more appropriate for the dissertation genre. Sarah agreed, as she said with a laugh, “It sounds better for an 80-year old woman.”

When her husband died of prostate cancer in 1997, Sarah began managing the farm and its two tenants who cash rent the land. She has two daughters who live in Minnesota and Colorado as well as a son who lives near Williamsburg, Iowa and works in the farm department of a bank. Sarah and her children each own an equal share of the farm in a partnership, and Sarah handles the bookkeeping each year. She consults her children regularly about farming decisions.

Before their retirement, Sarah told me she worked in a local school office, while her husband farmed and drove a school bus. In 1980 he gradually started renting out their land, and until September 2010, Sarah had dealt with the same cash-rent tenant that her husband had hired thirty years earlier. This tenant had farmed corn and soybeans on approximately 215 acres. Sarah’s second tenant is the first tenant’s son; he purchased the Black Angus cattle herd from Sarah and her husband in 1996, and the descendents still roam around her approximately 65 acres of pasture.

**Aesthetics and relationship with the original tenant**

Regarding conservation measures taken on the hilly landscape, Sarah’s land has several terraces, and she is diligent about making improvements to the farmland, such as improving drainage in wet spots. However, her larger concern throughout our conversations focused on the aesthetics of her property, which is a characteristic in
common with many of the participants in this research. Trimmed weeds and neatly plowed fields are important elements of a successful-looking farm. I have learned from my participants that farmers drive by one another’s properties regularly, making comments on the looks of their neighbors’ caretaking. In Sarah’s case, she detests the weeds along the fence line and beside the road on which her neighbors drive on their way to town.

The first time I interviewed Sarah, I knew almost immediately that she would become one of my participants because she reported problems with her (then) current tenant. She explained early in our first interview that her main tenant does not cut down weeds the way her husband had when he was alive:

He [the tenant] follows good conservation practices and things like that. But… the weeds are as tall as the corn up here along the road, and things like that. My husband was really particular about things like that. And if it’s your own place you have more pride in it. Where he [the tenant] is just interested in getting the crop in and getting it out. Collecting the payment.

For Sarah, her tenant’s neglect of the weed trimming in the years since her husband died has been a growing source of irritation. And as our interviews progressed, the weed issue became comparatively minor as Sarah slowly unraveled a number of offenses the tenant had committed since her husband died. However, instead of merely complaining about the state of affairs on her farm, Sarah is the only WFO I met who made a significant change as the owner of her farm: She fired her long-time tenant, as of September 2010.

The day of our first interview, it took her at least twenty minutes into our conversation to “confess” to me that she had recently dismissed the tenant. This news shocked me somewhat because I had not met any WFOs who had actually taken action if they were dissatisfied with their tenant’s farming practices. During that first interview I had been asking Sarah my standard interview questions about how long she had known her tenant and what sort of crops he grew on her land (for every WFO, the answer to this
question was always corn and soybeans). Sarah mentioned that she thought her farm looked like a “rental property,” because the tenant had not trimmed the weeds near the road and had let dreaded volunteer trees grow up in some of the terraces. When I asked if those tasks were outlined in the lease with the tenant, Sarah said yes but not specifically enough, and then she informed me there would be some changes:

Rachel: What else do you think you might change?

Sarah: [Very quietly] Renters. [she laughs quietly]

Rachel: [momentarily speechless as this surprising news sank in]

Oh… renters?

Sarah: Yeah. That isn’t public knowledge….

It was imperative to Sarah that I not mention this news to anyone, particularly because at the time she had only terminated his lease a few weeks earlier, and she wanted to find a new tenant on her own terms and not have farmers knocking on her door looking for land, which Sarah was afraid would happen because available farmland is currently scarce: “Once it gets out, they will come out of the woodwork looking for, you know, people wanting to rent it,” stated Sarah. Even after several months passed and after Sarah had found a new tenant, she did not want to air the unpleasant business with her former tenant, but she did give me permission to tell the story in my research, as long as it did not end up in her local newspaper.

Sarah made it clear that she did not grow up as a farm kid, and her husband made all of the farming decisions during their marriage. This is a familiar theme with my research participants. Sarah explains: “I wasn’t raised on a farm…. And when we did move out here [in 1977], I continued to work, so my husband would tell me, you know, what was going on in different things. But as long as he was doing it, I was like, okay.” An important element of this narrative is that in the past fourteen years, Sarah has tried to honor her
husband's farming and conservation decisions, especially because she did not have the farming knowledge that he had. One of the decisions her husband made years earlier was to create and maintain headlands along the perimeter of the property. She asked me if I knew what they were:

Sarah: My husband was very interested in conservation; he wanted wide headlands left. You know what headlands are?

Rachel: No.

Sarah: They are the space between the fence and the crop. You know, grasses. Because he liked the pheasants and the wildlife. Well, most of those have disappeared now.

Rachel: Oh. With the tenant? Did he fill them in with crops?

Sarah: Yeah. He just planted closer to the fence.

Sarah added that the headlands disappeared soon after her husband died. During our third interview I clarified what she had told me previously and asked her if the tenant had asked her permission to plow up the grassy borders. She said no:

Rachel: I was thinking about the headlands around the perimeter that your husband had established. And he did that for conservation purposes, for the wildlife?

Sarah: Yes. He liked to see that pheasants and stuff like that. And that was supposed to have stayed the same, and after he was gone, I noticed that they got cropped right up to the fence.

Rachel: Well, that was my question. Did the former tenant ask you permission?

Sarah: No…. Before my husband died, I remember him saying to R. [the tenant] when he was here one day, and he [her husband] said, “Now, you’re going to have to help Sarah.” And he [the tenant] was, well, sure he would, you know. But it was shortly after he [her husband] died that it got changed, that it got right up to the fence row.

In short, the tenant made the decision without permission to till up additional crop acres from the headlands. As a new widow and still unsure of herself as a farm manager,
Sarah let it go at the time. Her husband had expected, even asked, the tenant to help his wife make wise decisions about the farm. But apparently that did not happen. The tenant mowed down the headlands without permission between 1997 and 1998, just after Sarah’s husband died.

The next problem that occurred with Sarah’s tenant was a couple of years later when she got a surprise bill for tiling work ordered by the tenant. Sarah explained that she had asked the tenant each year whether the land needed improvements. The tenant replied one year that a spring on the side of the hill that often caused swampy farmland and stuck tractors needed to be tiled to drain the soil more effectively. The tenant told her the tiling would cost around $3,000, and she agreed to pay for it. She stated that she knew about an additional repair for work on the pasture that was into that original estimate, but the tenant handled the rest of the paperwork, and then she did not receive the bill for several months. When she called the company that had completed the work, the representative told her that the tenant had received the bill. Sarah explained what happened next:

Sarah: I called him and said, “I need that bill. I need to get it paid up by the end of the year.” “Okay.” He brought it out, and it was $9,000.

Rachel: Oh.

Sarah: I paid and didn’t say a word. I mean, I didn’t know the difference. I mean, they did more work, and so it came to allow more than that.

Sarah did not argue the bill because she had no idea whether the $9,000 to improve the drainage in the wet field was necessary or not. She chose to believe that it was: “I just thought, well, that’s the way it is. It was an improvement.” Neither did Sarah ask her tenant why he did not communicate with her about an expense that became three times what she had expected. It is impossible not to compare this scenario with the likely reaction of Beatrice, whose bottom line is generally a financial one. She likely would have
fired the tenant on the spot. Beatrice’s confidence in her own knowledge of farm improvements and how much they cost would have left no room for the tenant to make his own decisions.

On the other hand, the idea came to Sarah that tiling the swampy field to improve its drainage would provide her tenant a few additional acres to farm and herself additional rental income. However, this did not occur because the tenant told her he had already been paying rent for the swampy land prior to its tiling. Sarah stated:

Sarah: He said we rented him like 200 and some acres, and that [the formerly wet ground] was included. So, maybe it was, I don’t know.

Rachel: Wow. What did your kids say?

Sarah: I don’t know. We talked about it, but I don’t know. I guess they just figured that he probably knew he was talking about. But I don’t know.

That Sarah said “I don’t know” four times in the brief excerpt above helps illustrate her lack of confidence in her own knowledge about the farm and about managing its primary tenant. And in this case her children did not offer any guidance except to give the tenant the benefit of the doubt regarding both the price for the work done and the number of acres the tenant for which the tenant was paying Sarah.

Gender remarks

During our third interview, I asked Sarah some follow-up questions about the tenant’s giving approval to the farm landscape company to complete the improvement projects for an additional charge without asking her permission:

Rachel: Is that normal that the tenant is the one that deals with the company?

Sarah: Well, if my husband had been here, he would have. But I didn’t. You know, he [the tenant] told me the company that did it had been doing work around here and all.
Rachel: Wow. Now you mentioned before that situations like that, you felt like he treated you like a woman?

Sarah: Yeah, like a dumb woman.

Rachel: Okay. So, do you think he took advantage?

Sarah: I think he’s just cocky enough that he thought, oh, he knew best, and he would go ahead and do it. He was a man, and he knew better than I, you know. And truthfully, I wasn’t raised on a farm, and I wasn’t that familiar with it, even though we had been married 49 years by the time D. [her husband] died. I still wasn’t that knowledgeable.

In asking whether Sarah “felt treated like a woman” in the above excerpt, I may run the risk of having planted ideas in Sarah’s mind with which she might have thought I wanted her to agree. However, because my first research question asks whether WFOs have a gendered relationship to their farmland, I pay particular attention to any conflicts reported by the WFOs that seem even remotely caused by gender differences. Therefore, I have the tendency to ask more questions about potential gender conflicts. Yet in my defense, I would never have asked Sarah about her feeling treated “like a woman” if she had not mentioned it several times in our previous interviews. For instance, as she discussed another questionable action taken by her tenant, Sarah told me that she felt that he took advantage of her gender:

There have been some little things that I have been unhappy about. I just want to change and… okay… I feel that he treats me like a woman. He has pulled a couple little shenanigans on me that I don’t think, I don’t think he would have if I’d been a man. And I caught him at it.

After I assured Sarah again that her privacy would be protected, she explained the incident that occurred around seven years ago, and that it eroded any trust she had left in her tenant. Sarah discovered a discrepancy of about fifteen acres of land that the tenant had declared for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), a federal program through which
farmers can receive payment to set aside acres that are problematic for tillage. The Farm Service Agency office in Shelby County (which Sarah calls the ASC office) sends reports with these declarations to the property owner. When Sarah read that report, she discovered that her tenant was receiving government funds for approximately fifteen acres that were supposedly not in production; yet, in fact, he was actively farming that land. She explained more details about the discrepancy and stated that while her tenant denied the allegation when Sarah confronted him, he did pay her rent for those additional acres:

I got this report from the ASC office or something, that gave the last five years of how much he had said he was putting in, that he had farmed 214 or 216 acres. And what we were charging him for was 200 acres or something. But anyway, and we figured it up. I talked to him about it when he was here, and he said, “That’s not the way it is,” and all. I think then he thought probably he would get terminated. But he did come out, and he paid me the difference. Either he did that to make sure he got to continue farming it, or he did it to make sure it was legal, I don’t know. And I didn’t report it to the ASC office.

Sarah stated that while she did not report her tenant, she did ask the ASC office for clarification on the report, so she could be sure of the details. She also discussed the matter with her children, who agreed that the tenant had declared too few acres in the CRP report. Additionally, one of Sarah’s sons-in-law told her at the time, “Get rid of him.” This son-in-law is another valuable information resource for Sarah because of his life-long farm experience. He grew up on a farm, graduated from Iowa State University with a major in agriculture, and works for Hormel Foods in Minnesota. Sarah told me she should have fired the tenant back then, but she “didn’t feel secure enough to do it.”

In an ironic twist that—from my perspective—added insult to injury to Sarah and her husband’s farming legacy, those fifteen acres at the center of ASC paperwork dispute had been created a few years earlier by the tenant when he tilled up those headlands
without permission. Sarah told me this during our third interview, and we discussed it further:

Rachel: That was where he got those acres?

Sarah: Yeah.

Rachel: That he had plowed up and didn’t declare it?

Sarah: Well, of course, he swears he did. You know, when he came out, and I talked to him about it. He wanted me to think that I didn’t understand. “You don’t understand it; you don’t know how it is.” But both of my boys were familiar with stuff; they looked at the papers, and they said, “No, that’s not right.” Yeah, that is where he got it. He plowed up that lane; he cut the headlands.

Despite her growing distrust of the tenant and her irritation that he tried to discredit her argument by telling her she “didn’t understand” the issue of the acres discrepancy, Sarah chose not to terminate her tenant’s lease at the time. However, for Sarah this incident was the beginning of an end that would finally occur seven years later. Why did she not fire him at the time? Sarah stated, “Because he [the tenant] had had it so long, and my husband was the one that rented it to him, and we were friends with the family and all, I just let it go. And that’s been six or seven years ago. We should have did it then right away.”

The year following the dispute over the fifteen acres, Sarah’s son changed his mother’s lease to more specifically reflect the exact number of acres the tenant was renting from her. She explained, “We figured out what we wanted and put down, ‘We want this many thousand dollars rent.’ And we based it on this many acres.” This language gives Sarah approximately the same rental income yet leaves no room for the tenant to declare otherwise.

Still another incident with the tenant that occurred over a several-year period involved Sarah’s decision to pay for a corner field that used to have silos on it to be plowed
up. She expected her tenant to farm those acres, which would have meant more income for both of them. Yet each year the tenant gave her a different excuse for not farming the additional land. She said that one year he was afraid of hitting something buried under the soil with his tractor, and another year he thought the acres were too steep, and finally he said the soil there was hard pan, or heavy with clay instead of soil, which would cause the tractor to get stuck. Sarah said she offered to invest in further improvements to the land, including building more terraces if that was necessary, but the tenant was not interested. Sarah stated, “It got to be kind of a joke because the kids would say, ‘What’s his excuse this year?’” Sarah believed that these excuses year after year occurred because she was a woman:

Well, that was one of my big deals too. And I always felt that if I had been a man, I would have said, you know, “I want that farmed.” He would have did it. But I think he just, kind of, pushed me about as far as he could. He was always very pleasant about it. And the last time I said, “You’ve told me three or four different reasons why [he would not farm the one corner],” I said, “What’s the real reason?” He said, “Oh, it’s hardpan.” Well, why didn’t he say that years ago? He didn’t think of it [Sarah laughs]. And I don’t think it is [hard pan].

Until her tenant mentioned that hardpan was the problem on those acres, it was clear to Sarah that in five years the tenant simply had not given her a consistent, reasonable reason for not farming that land. And what escalated her annoyance into a full-fledged aesthetic problem was that volunteer trees began growing throughout the unfarmed acres. Sarah emphatically dislikes these trees because they root quickly, grow in large numbers when given the opportunity, and look hideous in her opinion. She then explained her solution:

Sarah: I paid to have all that bull dozed off. Well, then, it got so there were all these volunteer trees were coming up again. And I went out and cut them down.

Rachel: You did yourself?
Sarah: Yeah. And I said [to the tenant], “You either cut those trees out of there or you keep it mowed.” So, you know. And they mow it off, and his son [the second tenant with the cattle] bales hay off of it, which I’m not getting anything out of. And, which I don’t begrudge him. But it irritated me that he [the first tenant] wouldn’t farm that.

Despite Sarah’s paying to till up the corner field for farmland and then chopping down the pesky trees herself at one point, she has never received any income for her investment. Sarah’s second tenant with the cattle now bales hay off this ground, but Sarah does not charge him rent for these acres. She did not explain why this was the case; however, I think the reason is that Sarah feels much closer to the son than she ever did to his father. The passionate manner in which Sarah relayed these anecdotes about both the father and son as tenants helps illustrate that her role as property manager for her farm is very personal, and that her satisfaction in the decisions she makes are strongly tied to the personal relationships with her tenants.

**Decision making and firing the original tenant**

As Sarah and the other participants in this research have made clear, the social relationship surrounding a legal agreement between the WFO and her tenant is a powerful bond. Sarah’s second tenant, who owns the cattle, is the first tenant’s son; in addition, Sarah is a close friend of the first tenant’s mother, who lives just around the corner from her. Furthermore, Sarah was still attempting to respect her husband’s legacy. She explained the problem further:

Rachel: A lot of women I’ve met feel very tied to their tenant because of longevity, you know, the long relationship.

Sarah: Me too.

Rachel: Or they don’t feel confidence or knowledge about what to do.

Sarah: Yep, yep. Yeah, yeah. Part of it was, I thought, well, this is what my husband set up for me, you know. He, he basically picked who he wanted to rent, I mean, you know. This guy was trying to
get started [in 1980]; his folks were good friends of ours. He [Sarah’s husband] set it up that way. And I was perfectly willing. We helped him [the tenant], you know, we helped him get started. Now he rents two or three other places.

An important reason that Sarah felt tied to her first tenant was because her husband had chosen him and had even asked him to protect Sarah’s interests after her husband died. None of the incidents that Sarah related happened while her husband was still alive, which is why she believes that the tenant took advantage of her lack of knowledge as the primary decision maker and as a woman. Yet she still felt stuck with the tenant for many years.

Upsetting these long-time stable relationships was not easy, even when Sarah believed wholeheartedly that her tenant was trying to swindle her by declaring on federal paperwork that he had taken fifteen acres out of production, when he was actually farming that land. Sarah stated several times that the incident made her “leery” and it “ruined my trust in him.”

After fourteen years of dealing with the problematic tenant after her husband died, Sarah was ready for someone new. The incidents with the headlands, the unexpected $9,000 bill for tiling improvements, the misreported acres in the CRP report, and the long-term excuses for not farming a corner field finally led Sarah to make a decision in the fall of 2010 to fire the tenant who had farmed the family’s land since 1980. She had long ago lost all trust him, but to worsen the relationship even further, Sarah said that he often paid the annual rent late. As an example, Sarah mentioned in the third interview that one year the tenant purposely did not pay the rent until he returned from a cruise:

I have had to wait two weeks while he went on a cruise, and things. And when I look back, that irritates me now. But this one time he came out a day or so before it was due and wanted to know if I could wait two weeks until they got back from their cruise. And I thought, why didn’t he pay me ahead of time?
When Sarah told me about the cruise, I again thought of Beatrice’s short window of patience for collecting rent payment, and I told Sarah about her. Sarah nodded with surprise and approval when I mentioned that this other WFO would likely have fired the tenant immediately if he did not pay the rent on time.

However, in Sarah’s case, the change in tenants took many years, and even after it was over and she had found a new tenant, Sarah told me adamantly that she did not want her termination of the tenant to become public knowledge. After thirty years this news would be somewhat shocking around Sarah’s social sphere. She explained that making the decision to fire her tenant caused her much anxiety, and she wondered whether her husband would have approved of her decision and even whether the tenant’s mother would be angry with her:

I thought, oh, my husband probably wouldn’t like this. But then he’s not here. And if he were here, probably things would be different. Of course, when he was here and was able, he went out and kept weeds down and did all these other little things, you know. But this guy [the first tenant], I guess, just thought, well, I am just renting that crop ground, and that’s all I have to take care of. And whenever I would mention anything, he’d say, “I can do that, yeah, I could do that.” But I know when he said, “I could do it,” it didn’t mean he would do it. I kind of caught onto him. And then his mother and I are good friends. And I hated to ruin that friendship. And I don’t know if he has said anything to her about it or not. But she hasn’t said; we are still good friends [Sarah laughs].

Sarah has a close relationship with the first tenant’s mother, who is over ninety. Sarah regularly picks up the older lady and drives her around town to help her with errands. And of course Sarah has known the tenant’s son, who is also her second tenant who owns the cattle that roam on her property, since he was a child. Sarah wanted to avoid jeopardizing those two relationships when she the original tenant.

I have found through talking with all of the WFOs that relationships with tenants and their families span decades; it is important social capital that is not easily severed. Sarah
also mentioned that she had actually lost sleep over how the tenant would react to the termination letter that her son (the agriculture banker in Williamsburg, Iowa) had drawn up. Sarah was terrified that when the now former tenant drove out to see her a few days later that a confrontation would occur. Yet contrary to Sarah’s prediction, the final conversation with her now former tenant was pleasant:

Sarah: I know I was real, real nervous about it. I didn’t know what he would say or do or anything. But when he came out and paid his September rent, well, he was very congenial. [He said] “So, you decided to make a change.”
I said, “Yeah. Thirty years is a long time.”
And he said, “I didn’t realize it was thirty years.”
And I’m sure he hates to lose it because it’s one of the biggest places he farms.

Sarah does not believe her former renter has ever told anyone about her firing him, which is what she prefers. Furthermore, she would be content if the story emerged with the tenant letting people think it was his idea to stop renting her land. I understood that Sarah wanted to remain quiet out of respect for the tenant’s family, particularly for his mother’s sake. Additionally, she said that she did not want farmers knocking on her door asking her to rent the newly available land to them. However, it was not until our third interview that Sarah revealed an even more important reason for keeping the news quiet: She was concerned about her own reputation in her community if her tenant spun the story against her. Sarah stated, “I can just hear people saying, ‘Oh, that old lady doesn’t, you know, she’s hard to deal with,’ or something like that. And I haven’t heard a thing.”

In this brief reflection, Sarah reinforces that controversy and confrontation are anxiety-producing scenarios that she avoids whenever possible. She believes that people in Shelby and elsewhere would easily believe a story in which the “old lady” in the scenario was a quarrelsome woman. I wondered why that might be a case and considered the story-
telling impact of far-reaching narratives, such as Peterson’s farming myths that almost every WFO in this research re-tells.

Sarah’s description of a cranky old lady also caused me to think of the Bible verse, Proverbs 21:19, which refers to the repellant “contentious woman.” It then occurred to me that in a conservative farming community in which masculine hegemony writes the discourse, the “contentious woman” may be a familiar archetype to apply. Even worse, the verse offers an ancient archetypal narrative that some women use to interpellate their own actions.

**Relationship with the tenant who owns the cattle**

If Sarah’s relationship with the original tenant was strained, her relationship to his son is just the opposite. She sees her tenant with the cattle much more often than she ever did his father. Below she described how she celebrates the second tenant’s birthday each year:

D.’s [the tenant with the cattle] rent is due 1 April. Somehow or other his is April 1, and the rest is August 1. So, he will be over one of these days [to pay the spring rent]. And then he does these little things for me that I appreciate. But he never has let me pay him for doing the snow removal. So, his birthday is the last of this month, and I will send him a card with a $100 bill. Then he will say, “You know, I only scooped it once or twice. That’s more than enough.” “Well, maybe next year it’ll be more, you know” [Sarah laughs]. So, I try to pay him a little bit for what he does for me, too. He’s a good kid.

That Sarah is glad for the second tenant’s visits is understandable, particularly as she does seem to have time on her hands. Sarah added that this tenant lets her know when he will be working in the fields and with the cattle. “He’s real good to keep me informed,” she added.

What Sarah wants in a tenant is someone who takes the time to understand what she wants and handle the details with care. She stated, “I wanted to look like somebody
takes some pride in it, in the place. Not just in it for the crop.” Additionally, she wants to trust her farmer. If her tenant with the cattle had asked her to rent the 215 acres, she would have gladly let him. Sarah stated, “The son never ever came near or asked me. I mean, he was here, but he never said, ‘I hear you have it for rent; can I rent it?’ He never said boo.” Therefore, Sarah eventually leased her farmland to a new tenant who has caused her to grin from ear to ear.

**Finding a new tenant**

After Sarah had finally terminated her original tenant, she was immensely relieved because of the stress it had caused her. And a few months later when I pulled up in Sarah’s driveway for our second interview, she met me at the door with a smile and was aflutter with details to share. She had found her new tenant and could not wait to tell me all about him. She found a capable man who needed land to make his start in farming, and she was especially pleased because he was someone she believes her husband would have liked:

Rachel: Who would, ideally, who would you want to see taking care of this place?

Sarah: I think it’s going to be somebody that doesn’t already have a lot of land. These young guys, or these guys that want to get started farming, they don’t have a chance unless their dad has a big set-up or something. And the guys that are already started, they’ve got the money, they’ve got the machinery, and they want to get more land all the time. They are grabbing it all up. So, I don’t think… One of the things, one of my goals is not to rent it to somebody that has a whole lot of land already, that doesn’t really need it.

Rachel: Okay, so that it would matter more to somebody.

Sarah: My husband, you know, he helped this guy [the first tenant] get started. This was the first place that he rented. And he started with 100 acres of it, and then he got up to 200 and some. And then he [Sarah’s husband] also helped the young guy that has the cattle here. He helped him. And when we were renting 80 acres down here [on someone else’s property], and then when we quit renting that, he [Sarah’s husband] put in a good word for him [the tenant with the cattle], and he got that.
Sarah mentioned her attempts to follow her husband's farming management practices a number of times during our interviews. When Sarah did find her new tenant, her decision to work with him was strongly based on maintaining her husband's legacy in helping young farmers get started. She had found just the farmer she was looking for—someone she believed she could trust and who really could use a break. “I think the world of him,” Sarah stated.

After sharing her initial excitement about finding a new tenant at the start of our second interview, Sarah then provided me with an hour's worth of details about this new farmer. Sarah had known him for a long time as a carpenter. Approximately fifteen years earlier when he had just begun farming, his wife had left him and their two children. So, he gave up farming to work full-time as a carpenter, to provide stronger financial support for his family.

The story fast-forwards several years to the fall of 2010, when this same carpenter was remodeling rooms in Sarah's house, and she invited him to stay for lunch. Sarah explained to him that she might be changing tenants and asked him if he would be interested in farming her land. The man initially told her that he could not; however, a few days later he returned, having given the idea more consideration:

Sarah: He said, “You know,” he said, “I got to thinking about what you said.” He said, “If I ever got a chance, I would like to start farming again.”
And I said, “Well, why didn’t you say something?” [She laughs]. Anyway, I wound up renting it to him. And I am so relieved. I mean, I didn’t realize how much it was bothering me until it was all over. And he is so happy about it.
He told me later, “You know, when I left your house, I felt two feet taller.” Because he said he thought he would never get another chance.
And I said, “Well, you don’t even know it’s going to rent for because my kids take care of that.”
And he said, “I know,” but he said, “You know… anybody would
give you whatever you are asking.”
So, we didn’t quibble a bit [Sarah laughs].

Sarah and her new tenant were in agreement before they even discussed the amount of the rent. And even by our third interview a few months after she had signed the lease with her new tenant, Sarah was still glowing. She emphasized that he had graduated from Iowa State with a major in agriculture and added that her children were also thrilled with this new relationship. Best of all, though, Sarah trusts this tenant, based on having known him for such a long time and on the advice he has given her regarding home repairs.
Furthermore, Sarah has spoken with the new tenant about the large and small details that she wants him to be responsible for on her farm, and she believes he will take care of them:

This guy takes more pride. I mean, the first guy, he didn’t do anything he couldn’t do sitting in the tractor. He didn’t do anything that took anything. Well, this guy… I talked to B. [the new tenant] about it. I said, “I just, I don’t want it to look like a rental place. I wanted to look like somebody, you know, takes care of it.”

To my knowledge, Sarah’s lease with the new tenant does not specifically require him to treat the property like his own; however, for Sarah, the legal agreement is not the point. She wanted and she found—at least to this point—a trusting relationship, even a friendship, with her tenant. In one way Sarah’s tenants probably remind her of her own husband. It was obvious through the interviews that she was close to her husband and misses the days when he was the one coming out of the field late in the afternoon.

As Sarah described her relationships both with the new tenant and the tenant who owns the cattle, I told her about the similarities between her and Annette, another WFO in my study. Annette is eighty-four, lives alone about ten miles west of Sarah and also has a close, long-time relationship with her tenant:

Rachel: he [Annette’s tenant] checks in on her. You know, I think that things would be really different if she didn’t have that. It’s almost like extended family.
Sarah: Yeah. See, that’s kind of the way I feel about B [her new tenant]. I mean, I could ask him to do most anything, and he would. He was telling me that he had a friend that has farmed this ground for some couple for years and years. And he says they are almost like family now. And so awhile back I said, “You know, that’s probably the way it’s going to be with us.”

For now, I will leave Sarah to happy sunsets with her two tenants and her family. It took her several years to take action to fire her former tenant, even after being convinced for a long time that she wanted to make a change. Even though Sarah had the full support of her knowledgeable children to back her up, her own knowledge of farming and confidence in making decisions were not strong enough to terminate the tenant’s lease. It took time for Sarah to develop the courage not only to make that decision but also to be ready for the potential consequences. From her own perspective, in firing the tenant Sarah was risking her friendships with the tenant’s family as well as her own reputation among the townspeople she knew in Shelby and other surrounding communities.

Annette’s Story: Knowledge is power, especially when “I never knew nothing.”

Annette is 84 years old, and she provided me with an extensive history of her life, much of it related to her husband and in-laws because they all lived together on the farm. Financial hardship is also a prominent theme in her narrative, along with an emphasis on decision-making. Annette’s story contains tragedy as well. Unlike Sarah and her first tenant, Annette is happy with her renter; he is part of the regular scenery on her farm, and making a change would never occur to her. She does not specifically refer to her gender as contributing to the decisions she has made over the years, yet the issue is tacitly present in the marginalizing way that her parents-in-law treated her.

History of moving to the farm with in-laws

Annette lives on a farm of 160 acres about five miles south of Persia. She is the oldest of my WFO participants, and one of her first statements to me about her history was
an old-fashioned phrase about being a bride: “L. [her husband] and I were married in June, 1950. He was an only child. And he brought me here as a bride.” Annette could not have know then that her moving to this farm would define her life for the next 61 years.

Our first two interviews occurred in Annette’s kitchen, where we discussed marriage, in-laws, financial catastrophe, the death of a spouse, farm conservation, and general survival. At our first interview we had coffee, and at our second, Annette stood at the counter preparing lunch for us while I asked her questions. For our third interview, we met at Mickels Family Restaurant in Harlan, the bustling center of commerce and medical appointments in Shelby County. The interviews I shared with Annette were the most intimate of any I had with the participants in my research. Perhaps it was because Annette has experienced more hardships than the rest.

Annette had known her husband since they were children at school. When they got married and Annette moved to her husband's farm, his parents also lived there; they had purchased the house and land in 1944. In the early days, Annette and her husband had lived in a tiny unfinished house with no running water, not far from the main house. Her husband's parents had built the little place, Annette told me: “And we were to live in it, and their intentions were to retire and move it [the house] to Persia.” This decision of where Annette and her husband would live forecasted the influence that her in-laws would have over her much of her life.

Annette and her husband had two daughters and wound up living in the bare little house for over thirty-three years. “We just barely could live in it, and we lived two years in it without any water or telephone. Well, we never had a telephone until our oldest girl went to school,” Annette stated. Her parents-in-law never did move the house to Persia, about
five miles to the north. Instead, her father-in-law died in 1960, and her mother-in-law remained on the farm until she went into a nursing home in 1976.

After they had been married a year-and-a-half, Annette’s husband joined the Army, and she fondly remembers the two of them getting off the farm and moving to El Paso, Texas. She stated, “I worked at the telephone company, and he went to camp, just like a job. He was in a guided missile experiment program, and that’s what they put him in. And he didn’t have to go overseas, and we had a two-year honeymoon.”

Annette explained that on their own, she and her husband got along well: “when he and I were ‘us,’ it was good.” Yet after their two years away from his family, it was time to return to the farm, and this time permanently. Annette found that living in close proximity to her mother-in-law was “difficult.” Annette would never provide a specific example of the problem between her husband’s mother and herself; she simply mentioned that her husband had been an only child and that his mother dearly loved and pampered him. Annette describes the mother-in-law’s affection as “a selfish love” that Annette dealt with for a long time:

Annette: It was something I… You know, you don’t really know anyone until…

Rachel: You live with them?


In addition to Annette’s perpetual conflicts with her husband’s mother in the twenty-six years they lived on the same farm property, Annette’s in-laws told her explicitly in 1950 and in the years to come that she would not be included in farming decisions. Annette stated, “They told me I wasn’t having anything to do with the business of the farm. And I never did.” I asked her the reason, but Annette did not have a logical answer:

Rachel: Do you have any idea why? Was it because you are a woman?
Or you are not a blood relative? Or…

Annette: I just think they didn’t want to share.

Rachel: Wow.

Annette: This kind of knowledge. And why, I can’t give you an answer to that.

Annette never did learn much about the farm operations in all those years before her husband died in 1994. And she did not explain why her husband did not include her in the farming decisions either. From Annette’s description of him, it seemed that her husband was a quiet, hard worker who respected his parents from childhood on. Neither Annette nor her husband seemed to question the arrangement of the two generations living in close proximity on the farm or question the automatic authority of his parents. At least Annette did not question that at the time. She would later.

Financial burdens

Although Annette’s mother-in-law went into a local nursing home in 1976, several years passed until Annette and her husband moved out of the tiny “temporary” house they had moved into as newlyweds and into the three-bedroom bungalow where Annette still lives today. The mother-in-law lived for another thirteen-and-a-half years at the nursing home, according to Annette, and she and her husband paid the bill, which quickly became a burdensome expense. But since no estate planning was in place, the responsibility fell to them.

During the first five years of that period, Annette and her husband were still farming and raising cattle and sheep for income. They had been in the dairy business for 25 years, until Grade A milk became the preferred standard, but the required farm improvements were too expensive for Annette’s family. In time the financial costs of the nursing home kept rising and became too much for Annette and her husband to pay
through farming. She stated, “The nursing home and everything, it got beyond us.” So, they both took jobs in town and began cash renting their farmland. Annette would have been approximately 65 years old when she started working as an administrative assistant for the local school district.

Eventually, an attorney helped Annette and her husband arrange an agreement to pay the nursing home a set amount monthly (not including medications), as well as give the nursing home the mother-in-law’s monthly Social Security payment, and when she died, the agreement would be completed. This debt took another five years to settle.

In the mean time, Annette's own mother had died in 1979 and left her farm to Annette and her brother. The siblings eventually sold the property, and Annette put her share in a savings account. She mentioned to her husband at the time, “Now we are not going to touch this. We are going to save this till we're old.” Unfortunately, that did not happen. When the financial crisis happened over the nursing home, somehow the nursing home was able to take Annette’s inheritance. She explained:

It stayed there, just in a savings account because I didn’t know anything about money. Then when we got in all this trouble, they took it. So, I feel like what I inherited, what L's [her husband's] folks put in his farm, and what we put in this farm, my whole family is in this farm.”

I was expecting Annette to make a bitter comment, but she did not. She reflected back that losing her mother's inheritance hurt her a great deal, then added, “I just feel like, probably that was the way it was supposed to be, and I'm supposed to be the one to look after it.” She is referring to the farm where she has lived since 1950. Now that so much time has passed, Annette takes a longer view of the financial events that shaped so much of her life. She said that if the nursing home had not taken her inheritance, she and her husband would have lost their farm instead:
Annette: I wouldn’t have this home, and I wouldn’t have this income. At the time it was terrible [she is tearful]. But I can see that it helped. It [losing her inheritance] did what it was supposed to do.

Rachel: Because otherwise you would've lost…

Annette: Everything.

Rachel: All of it.

Annette: And that inheritance that I had from my mother wouldn’t have kept me all these years. See what I’m trying to tell you?

Rachel: I do. I do.

Annette: Because it was it wasn’t invested anything.

Rachel: Savings account, right? [Shirley nods]. Yeah. Boy, you learn a lot along the way.

Throughout our interviews, Annette never make an unkind remark about her in-laws, even about the mother-in-law who is the one that specifically told Annette she must stay out of the family farming business. Despite all those years of tension, Annette took care of that mother-in-law until the end.

Annette’s fatalistic perspective about all these events turning out the way they did and her loyalty to her husband’s parents restricted her actions and her voice; in other words, Annette’s ideological commitments made agency to act otherwise largely impossible, that is, until the family members were all dead, and she became the decision maker. And the lesson Annette would take from this financial loss and burden was the absolute necessity of financial planning and legal agreements, particularly among family.

**History of the farm and the transition to industrial agriculture**

Regardless of the friction on the farm beginning in 1950, it quickly became home for Annette. She, like most of the participants in this research, fondly recalls the self-sufficiency of the farm before industrial agriculture swept into the picture. Annette’s
family had animals that were fed with the produce harvested on the farm. She explained, “In the beginning when I was here, we had pasture and the milk cows. Then they had alfalfa that they harvested for hay. And oats and corn. And those three crops were rotating.” Annette and the family also kept a large garden that produced a myriad of vegetables, which they would freeze or can to eat later in the year.

Annette said that her husband began using chemicals on the farmland in 1960, and eventually this practice caused them to give up their large garden:

Annette: He kept using more and more spray.

Rachel: Like herbicides?

Annette: And for weeds and stuff in the cornfields and that. And we just got so that we didn’t have any more garden. And that was the main reason because it would get to a certain stage, and then the spray would come.

Rachel: Would it kill it?

Annette: No, it just kind of went dormant, wouldn’t do anything. So, that’s the reason we quit raising a garden. And my husband was still here. He said, “It isn’t worth it. For the two of us, we’ll just eat and buy what we want.”

Annette added that in the 1950s the farm also had several kinds of fruit trees, grape vines, and strawberries; however, they could not withstand the impact of the herbicides spread on the fields either. However, there was no arguing with profit. Annette said she could remember the first time her husband produced 100 bushels per acre of corn. From that point on in the early 1960s, the family garden faded away. And now in 2011, Annette’s tenant makes almost twice the bushels-per-acre that her husband did.

On the other hand, Annette told me in our first interview that she was concerned that the higher and higher yields would burn out the soil, due to the excessive use of chemicals. She stated, “It seems like every year it takes more products.” Yet the idea of telling her tenant to change his farming practices is not even a remote possibility for
Annette. She lives on that rental income and would never consider jeopardizing her relationship with the tenant.

So, we started cash renting it [their farmland] to our neighbor, a young man. He was a young man then. And he was born and raised over across the road, so wasn’t like anybody we didn’t know. And he lives right over here. We only charged him cash rent enough to take care of her nursing home.

The tenant who began farming Annette’s land in the early 1990s still farms it today. Again, it was important for Annette to explain the social ties she had had to their neighbor even before he became their tenant.

**Lack of conservation practices**

The farm Annette has lived on for over sixty years is hilly, similar to most other farms in western Iowa. And for many farmers, conservation in the form of terrace construction to stop erosion is a necessary part of their farming practices. Yet this was not the case for Annette’s parents-in-law; for them conservation was a moot subject, and no terraces were ever built into the hillsides of the farmland until Annette took over the farm’s management in 1994. She explained:

Annette: Well, they didn’t believe in all these big terraces and things like that. They just, no way. They did start farming around the hills instead of up and down, you know. They did those kinds of things. But they didn’t believe in these terraces, these big caterpillars coming in and building these terraces. No, no, no, no, no.

Rachel: Did you ever figure out why they didn’t believe in it?

Annette: No. I just think they were still of the old school enough. And they had gotten to the age, when these things started, they were getting too old.

Annette’s in-laws would have nothing to do with modern conservation of terracing their hilly acres, and her husband did not either, except for what he could do himself: “L. [her husband] would use the plow and just put up just a minor little terrace-like thing,”
Annette said, explaining that he would stack up dirt in the areas where the soil would run to help curtail the erosion following a rain. Such was the state of conservation on Annette’s farm from 1944 to 1994.

Had Annette been in charge of the farm management all those years, conservation practices likely would have been in place. Annette told me that her definition of conservation is to protect the soil through adding the right fertilizers and building terraces to prevent erosion. At the Learning Circle event where I first met Annette, I wrote down her statement, “I don’t know why; I just have a natural feeling about the soil.” She said that she learned it from her mother’s side of the family and growing up on the farm:

   My mother’s people on both sides… they come from England, both sets come from England. And they were farmers. And they believed in soil and protecting it and improving it. Even way back in the 1800s. I mean, we always just had that preached in to us, that you’ve got to do this.”

While Annette’s husband and in-laws were living, she did not have the opportunity to make conservational decisions about the farmland. The exception was when she spoke up about saving woodlands on her mother’s property that she and her brother had inherited in 1979. The family was discussing terraces and other improvements that should be made to their mother’s farm before it was sold, and Annette’s husband recommended taking out all the trees along a creek at the bottom of one of the hills. Annette adamantly said no:

   I said, “The wildlife has got to have a place to live.” And I said, “They can work on that crick, do what they want to do on each end. They don’t need to take out the whole thing; they can leave the trees for the wildlife.” I mean, I just feel like our animals, the wild animals and stuff, they’ve got to have a place to get into.

For Annette, wildlife is also an important piece of conservation. She did win the argument with her husband to keep the trees on her mother’s property; however, on the farm where Annette lived with her husband and the in-laws, she made no decisions about the land until the rest of them had died.
Tractor accident

When the mother-in-law died in 1994, it looked as though Annette and her husband could finally feel financial stability in their own retirement years. However, that same autumn Annette's husband died in a tractor accident. When she told me this story during our first interview, the news took my breath away for a moment. Below is Annette's account of what happened:

Rachel: A tractor accident… what was he doing out there?

Annette: Well, out north of the barn he had a place where he could get dirt. And over in the field with the rain and everything, it cut a gully and made a hole, and he was getting dirt from this place here north of the barn. I had just talked to him. Anyhow, the scoop full of dirt, he went to the field to dump this dirt in the hole. And about half an hour later… because I was ironing… And about half an hour later, why, R's [the tenant's] wife called and wanted to know where L. [Annette's husband] was.

And I said, “Well, he's hauling dirt with his tractor and scoop.” Well, then it wasn't long, here she came. It was over.

Rachel: I'm so sorry. That was in 94?

Annette: Uh hmmm [very quietly]. So, it was tough.

Her husband's death shattered Annette, and she is still emotional when talking about the day of the accident. As I re-read the transcript about this event, it struck me as ironic that Annette's husband died trying to fill a hole in a field where rain had washed away the soil. It seemed that he was out there pushing dirt on the side of the hill because no one in his family believed in installing terraces on the farmland, that is, until Annette took over the farm's management in 1994.

During our third interview, I gingerly asked Annette whether her decision to put in the terraces was a result of her husband's death. She said no. Instead, Annette explained that about five years after her husband died, she and her daughters decided to raze the outbuildings surrounding the house as well as the pasture because neither Annette nor her
tenant had animals anymore. She explained that with no structures to stop the soil from running down the hill due to a rain storm, installing terraces became imperative:

   Annette: Every time it would rain, that dirt would just come down off of these hillsides, and end up on the road.

   Rachel: So, you could see it.

   Annette: Yes because I even had to call the county. The ditches filled, and it went over onto the road, they would have to come and take it off of the road and clean up the ditches. And I told my girls, I said, “We've got to do something to keep that soil from going down there.”

   From Annette's point of view, the terraces became an obvious necessity after the buildings and pasture were no longer there to act as barriers to stop the erosion. However, I wanted to press the subject a little more in our third interview because the correlation between her husband's death and the complete lack of conservation practices during his lifetime was so clear to me. So, I tried once more with a very halting question:

   Rachel: I started reading what you told me about your husband's accident. And he was working on the tractor, and it overturned. And I just, it occurred to me that, was there a connection between your husband's accident and then you… I mean, did it have anything to do with there not being terraces?

   Annette: No. His parents just didn’t believe in those new, I call them upgrades. I don’t know what they call them. You know, where you push the soil all up. And his parents just didn’t believe in that. And didn’t have any. So, that’s the reason. And then when I knew that I had to do something to stop that water. Then that is what we used.

   Annette had not answered my question whether she believed her husband's death was related to the lack of conservation practices; so, I pressed once more, hoping not to upset her or make her angry:

   Rachel: Yeah. So, that day he was out there…

   Annette: He was dumping dirt in a hole to stop water.

   Rachel: Okay.
Annette: Because this water was coming down off the hillside and making this hole. And he was filling it with dirt.

Rachel: okay. Thanks for clearing that up for me. Because I just wasn’t quite sure. And I mean I know it’s a difficult subject.

Annette: But he had a narrow, front-end tractor with a scoop on it. You know what I’m talking about?

Rachel: yeah.

Annette: a scoop that comes up, and then it dumps.

Rachel: right.

Annette: and I don’t know what happened, but I have been told over and over that he got the scoop too high, and instead of it dumping, it over-balanced the tractor, and everything came back on him. So, that’s all I know. I don’t know; that is only what I have been told, Honey.

Rachel: Wow.

Annette: And I have been told over and over, those narrow front-end tractors are the most dangerous. I suppose they don’t even make them anymore. I don’t know. But they were the most dangerous.

According to Annette, the tractor accident was the fault of the tractor. And she stated “I don’t know” three times in explaining what others had told her about the accident at the time. From speaking with Annette in three separate, hour-long or more interviews, I do not believe that she sees any connection between the lack of terraces on the property and her husband’s accident. Perhaps it is because she had accepted the family’s ideology all those years that terraces had no place on their farm. And it was not until five years after her husband died and the buildings were torn down that the need for terraces became obvious in a river of soil that flooded the road and the ditches.

During that third interview, Annette and I had been chatting away and eating potato soup until I brought up the subject of her husband’s death. It is not in my nature,
either as a researcher or as a sociable person, to ask people to dwell in sad places for too
long. So, we changed the subject, but not before I heard Annette utter the first and only
expletive from any of my WFO participants. This broke the heavy mood:

Rachel: Yeah. Stuff happens sometimes.

Annette: That’s right. Like my son-in-law says, “Shit happens.” [She
says this very quietly, then giggles. We both laugh].

Rachel: That is true, too.

Annette: That is about the best word for it. [Laughs again].

When Annette’s husband died, she was faced with a tidal wave of responsibilities
and an education deficit in farm management, conservation, and financial planning. At her
in-laws’ insistence, she had been left completely in the dark about the farm operation for
forty-six years. Annette reminded me that her in-laws “made all the decisions. And then L.
[her husband] died; it was in my hands.” Annette’s strategy to begin to make decisions
about the farm was similar to the strategy of other WFOs in this research: she found
people she trusted and took their advice.

As a result, in 1995, for the first time in the fifty-five years that the farm had been
in the family, Annette worked with an attorney, a banker, a conservation office, her
daughters, and her tenant to protect the farm in two ways. The first objective was to put
the farm into a trust with Annette and her daughters as beneficiaries in order to protect the
farm as an asset that would not be snatched so easily away by potential creditors such as
nursing homes. Annette learned this lesson after losing her mother’s inheritance several
years earlier. Using any kind of legal agreement was new to Annette: “After L. [her
husband] died, and then I began to learn about investments, and we have a trust. I didn’t
know what a trust was. So we’ve got everything up to snuff. For the girls.”
Annette’s second objective to protect the farm was to install as many terraces as she could afford, which turned out to be five or six, she said. Then she explained that the state conservation office paid for half of the terrace construction and assured me that, “you don’t have to stand the whole thing.” I grinned at her:

Rachel: Okay. So, knowledge is power, right?

Annette: Right.

Rachel: Yeah. What an education.

Annette: Yeah. I tell myself, I’m like Virginia Slim cigarettes. Their slogan used to be, “I’ve come a long ways, baby.”

Annette does believe that she has been responsible to undertake her own education; she also expressed several times how grateful she has been for all the help she received to help her make decisions about the property: “I have to say, these past 16 years I have been put with…people to my knowledge have been very honest and very trustworthy and led me in the right direction.”

Annette’s self-deprecating description of “being led along” by the farming experts helps illustrate her humility, which also seems like a symptom of her lack of agency throughout much of her life. Similar to Sylvia in Fort Dodge, though, Annette is also a survivor who has managed her own set of hardships in the face of outright marginalization as the invisible farm wife by her own in-laws. Regarding conservation, Annette can still see dirt washing down the hill at times with the rain. Although the NRCS office will fund half of the project for more terraces, Annette still must pay for the other half. She said, “I put in the really important ones. And R. [the conservation officer] wanted me to go a little bit more, and I said, “R., I’ve got to live too. I can’t put all my money in terraces.” For this WFO, the lack of finances remains the tangible roadblock to achieving her conservation goals on the farm.
Making decisions with her daughters and the tenant

Despite her limited finances, Annette uses other available resources to help her make decisions as well, and these resources most often include her two daughters and her tenant. Annette’s daughters both live in the Council Bluffs area, only about twenty-five minutes away. Annette said that her younger daughter in particular is a reader and knows a lot about farming. Of course, both women grew up on the farm. Annette said, “My youngest daughter, I don’t know whether she has had a second sense, but she really helped me. There were so many things that she knew. But I didn’t realize she knew.” When important issues arise regarding the farm, such as the terrace construction, Annette schedules a meeting with her daughters and sometimes their husbands, along with Annette’s tenant to discuss the issue and come to a democratic decision. These meetings and spirit of democracy are a matter of principle to Annette:

Annette: I won’t have any other way. I mean, and that’s the same way with the girls. They never really say anything, but if I have a question, or if I have to go to the lawyer, or the conservation office or wherever I go, they sit there and they listen to my conversation with the person I’m getting advice from. They don’t say, “Mom, you’ve got to do this or that.” Or, “no, you can do this or that.” But I just want them to know what I’m doing and why. And then I tell them, “When you go home, you make sure you tell your husbands what we’ve discussed.” I say, “I want them to know.”

Rachel: Okay. Why is that so important?

Annette: Because I never knew nothing.

Annette’s final statement in the above excerpt was one of the most poignant moments of our three interviews, at least for me. She hated being in the dark all those years; yet that ignorance of farming decisions was a catalyst for transforming Annette into a strong and confident property manager. And while my original research question asked about WFOs’ decisions regarding conservation, the answer in Annette’s case is complicated
in that her concern with conservation is based on how well the farm functions as income for herself and in time for her daughters. However, it is clear that Annette’s management of the farm as an asset is based on the hardships and lack of knowledge she faced earlier in her life.

As with the other WFOs in this research, Annette’s tenant is an important part of her life. He has been farming her land since Annette and her husband had to stop farming in 1985. And it was the tenant’s wife who rushed over to the house that tragic afternoon to tell Annette her husband had died. Annette and her tenant update the same lease agreement each year: “We talk everything over, but we still use the same agreement.” She said. For Annette, the relationship with her tenant is somewhat of a lifeline. He is a close neighbor, he plows her driveway in the winter, and he stops in once or twice a week to check on her. He has all the characteristics of what Sarah would consider an ideal tenant. Annette explained further:

Annette: They keep track of me. They don’t call and stop every day, but they keep track of me. If things don’t just look like they did all week, why then they look in on me. And his mother lives right over here. So, you know. And her [the tenant’s wife] mother is in a nursing home. So, I try not to put too much on them from me personally. Because I know what it is to take care of parents.

Rachel: Oh wow. Does he always plow your driveway?

Annette: Yes. The electricity for the [grain] bin is connected to what I use. Everything is on one meter. So, I pay the electricity regardless, whatever. If he uses the bin or if he doesn’t use the bin, I still pay the electricity. And then he is to keep my lane open.

Rachel: Oh, okay. So it’s kind of an arrangement like that.

Annette: Yes. And if I get a big tree limb that comes down, he comes over and pulls it over to where he takes his stuff.

Rachel: Sure, sure. He lives close.
Annette: Yeah. Just right over here, this new house.

Common geography and a close social history have linked Annette and her tenant for the foreseeable future. While the narratives of some WFOs in my research (e.g., Beatrice, Cassie, and Sarah) have focused on tenant conflicts, Annette’s problems manifested with now-departed family members and financial setbacks. She vehemently believes in legal protection for beneficiaries of legal assets and even wrote a letter about it to the editor of *Iowa Farmer Today*, which she told me she reads cover to cover each week. Annette’s letter was printed, and she found a copy of it after our second interview, and she mailed it to me. In it she had explained about the farm not being protected in any sort of trust and was vulnerable to the nursing home creditors.

Annette reiterated to me several times that regardless whether the owner of a farm trusts the family members or the tenant one hundred percent, a written agreement simply must be in place. This statement made me think of Sylvia, whose attorney told her she did not need a lease:

Rachel: Some women, they have this trust, and it’s like the renter is almost like family…but that shouldn’t make a difference. But there is just this implicit trust. Some women, I have found that they are afraid to make any kind of wave.

Annette: Well, I will agree with you on that statement. I am that way. But I’ve had to learn that, no, you’ve got to stand up for yourself, what you want and what you don’t want. And you got to talk about it. And each party has got to understand how you feel, and I’ve got to understand how they feel.

Annette is the only WFO I have met who is so outspoken about making herself heard as the property owner and protecting herself and her family. And although I already knew the majority of the answer, I asked her what circumstances had caused her to speak so strongly about the protection of legal agreements. Annette grew tired of being excluded:

Annette: I feel that way so strongly because of the way L. [her husband]
and his folks farmed here together, and I didn’t play any part in it…. And see L. and his dad never had a contract. There was never anything of what they were willing to support and not support. There was never anything written down what L. was willing and not willing. It just seemed like, except for living in two separate houses, we all lived in this one together. And what his parents decided that day was going to be run like, that’s the way it went.

When Annette finally gained management of the farm, the only autocratic principle she maintained was that the farm would be protected as an asset an investment for herself and her daughters. Other than that, Annette has transformed the decision-making structure into a democracy where all the parties involved are encouraged to give their opinion. Ironically, Annette has consciously created a new identity for herself as a decision maker. A more apt pseudonym for this participant might have been Phoenix.

Now that Annette is getting older, she is beginning to make other decisions. Last winter she fell in the garage and cracked a bone in her arm, which required a cast and physical therapy. Annette told me during our third interview that she had found a trustworthy female attorney to help her with her estate planning. And in the next breath she told me she was moving to Harlan in the fall of 2011. She added that she had made this decision after talking it over with her daughters and her lawyer. She plans to sell the five acres and house but keep the farmland and her tenant. Harlan is where Annette shops, sees her doctors, and goes on outings with her daughters, so it makes sense for her to go there. However, she is still somewhat reticent about moving to town:

Rachel: What are you afraid of?

Annette: A lot of things [she laughs].

Rachel: Just the change?

Annette: Yeah. Because, see, I always intended to be there [at the farm] until my last day.
If anyone understands how one's expectations for the future can change drastically in a moment, it is Annette. So, while I was initially surprised at her news, I see that it makes sense for her to move to town and away from that farm that has so tangibly shaped her identity throughout her life. Annette will likely thrive in Harlan, and she asked me to contact her every few months so we can check in on each other. We learned a good deal about one another during those interviews, and I will keep in touch.

_Helen's narrative:_ “It was just natural for everybody back then. Now it’s called free range.”

Helen was available to meet me only once because she was either traveling or otherwise unavailable when I attempted to contact her for additional interviews. However, during that one interview I found a knowledgeable and confident WFO who is active in conservation within her county. She spoke widely about the various themes that emerged through all the interviews. Talking with her provided a glimpse into a WFO who is heavily involved with the conservation decisions as the property owner. At the same time I was particularly interested in Helen’s internal conflict over farming practices; it was difficult for her to reconcile her personal ideology with the industrial agriculture with heavy chemicals on her land.

In her mid-fifties, Helen lives in the town of Oakland, Iowa, in the house that belonged to her mother, who died in 2007. Helen owns 400 acres that she inherited from both of her parents, and the family has had the same cash-rent tenant since 1976. She and I met at Embers (not affiliated with the national restaurant chain) just south of Interstate 80 and north of Oakland. She had brought her own herbal tea bags to the restaurant and offered me one as we ordered hot water.
History in the professional world and on the farm

Helen seems financially comfortable after spending much of her life working in the corporate world and traveling. She still has her condo in Chicago but moved back to Oakland in 2000 to marry her second husband, a widower who had also recently moved back to his hometown of Oakland after his wife died. In 2007 Helen and her husband ended the marriage shortly after both had lost their elderly parents to illness. Helen is the only WFO I have met who is divorced. After her divorce and her mother’s death, Helen moved to house in Oakland, which is where her parents had lived after they retired from their farm in 1976. Additionally, Helen has cats in her household and no children.

Helen’s family has been farming for several generations, and in 2005 the farmland achieved Century Farm status from the Iowa Department of Agriculture. Recipients of this designation receive their Century Farm certificate at an awards ceremony at the Iowa State Fair each year. At that time Helen’s mother was wheelchair-bound in a nursing home, but Helen told her, “You’re coming,” and they attended the event together.

At first I was not convinced that Helen would be the right fit for my research project. She is financially stable, works in tandem with her tenant and local conservation office to make her farm a model for best water and soil practices, and does not have any obvious hurdles to overcome. However, the more we talked, the more I decided Helen was an enlightening participant who could describe the past and present of Iowa agriculture and provide an example of the decisions that an active and involved WFO makes on her farmland. Helen is a unique WFO in my research in that she has not lived in the local community all her life. She was executive assistant to the chairman of a large commercial real estate firm in Chicago and had also lived in London for several years with her first
husband. We agreed that meeting different people affects our identity and changes our lives:

Rachel: That’s exciting just to meet a variety of people. It changes you, I think. It changed me over the years, definitely.

Helen: Yeah, it definitely does. I’m not the same person I was when I left here when I was 22.

**Relationship with the tenant**

Unlike most of the other WFOs in this research, Helen has no qualms about taking an active role in the farming decisions as she works in tandem with her tenant and the conservation office. Helen has a close working relationship with her tenant regarding the farm’s business. The tenant and his family have lived on her farm since 1976. She and her parents have always charged them low rent to live in the farmhouse and does not ask them to pay for using the original outbuildings on the ten-acre property. The tenant and his family reciprocate by taking care of maintenance issues themselves. Helen said she went out one day to see the tenant painting the side of the house: “I said, ‘Well, make sure you send me the bill. I’ll pay for all this.’ I never did see it.”

For our interview Helen brought me copies of newspaper articles that dealt with her farm and her conservation efforts over the years. For instance, in 1995 Helen and her tenant received a certificate from the NRCS office in the Landlord Tenant Division for their efforts to improve water quality on her farmland. Another newspaper clipping described Helen’s role as a member of the Jordan Creek Watershed Board, a committee tasked with cleaning up the Jordan Creek waterway in western Iowa that runs mostly through farms in Pottawattamie County. Helen described the Board’s objective:

We tried to get as many people to clean up their fields, including grasslands, you know, CRP grasslands. Cleaning creeks out and put rock in so that the cows won’t stand in them as long. So, I think they included putting more terraces in, and doing all that. So, that was a
good incentive for cost share, to get that cleaned up. I took advantage of that.

Helen actively participates in similar state funding programs to improve the water and soil quality of her farm. She and her tenant work together to solve problems that arise, such as poor drainage areas in low areas. Making frequent trips to the farm and into the fields is Helen’s management style.

She even makes it a point to ride in the combine each fall during harvest season. Another issue she is currently mulling over is whether to take out old trees on the acreage:

Nowadays everybody is getting rid of the windbreaks, you know, and planting. So, I don’t know what I’m going to do about that. Keep it or just... because it's always grass, and somebody always comes and bales the grass up. We go out and we talk about soil samples. I’m always out there a couple of times, especially at harvest, and ride the combine with him.

Along with deciding about improvements to the farmland, Helen also updates her tenant’s lease annually. She said they used to base the rent on fence-to-fence acres, but since she has created more waterways, terraces, and headlands over the years, they decided it would be fairer to base the rent only on cropland. Helen explained further:

We go by the number of acres that he gets like on his combine, and acres that they have noted down at the office, at the FSA office. So, that’s our base of how many acres. And then, I have taken out the barn, and there used to be a farmstead at one place, so that was five acres that we took out. So, we had to change the lease on the number of acres. And that’s happened a couple, two, three times. And then the amount of rent goes up every year. So we change that.

Helen owns the largest amount of farmland out of all the participants in this research. Therefore, more rental proceeds are at stake, both for her and her tenant, so it makes sense that she keeps a strong hand on the pulse of the farm business. Helen stated that her tenant is just as meticulous about his part of the business. While he mainly plants corn and soybeans, the tenant has included headlands along the fence at the
suggestion of the local NRCS office. However, rather than planting grass for baling hay, the tenant decided that growing wheat would be more profitable, while still serving effectively as a headlands crop. Helen explained:

He said, “Well, wait a minute. I'm going to find out if I can plant wheat.” And they [the NRCS office] let him do it, it's working out really well. So, then he combines the wheat, and the stubble is bailed. And he sells the stubble. So, he is very conscientious with his bookkeeping.

Both Helen and her tenant know the state and federal programs that provide them incentives to make conservational improvements to the land; however, implementing changes involves a year of planning. Helen provides how they planned a cost-share improvement to install terraces during the required summer timeframe:

Helen: The timing is really catchy to get with the crops in to do any changes like putting in terraces or tiling.

Rachel: You have to wait until it's all out?

Helen: Yeah. And we had two summers ago, we had, there was a cost share that the state and the federal would pay 75% if you put the terraces in during the summer. P. [the tenant] planted winter wheat. And then they [the terrace installers] staked out where the terraces were going to go in the fall. So then, P. planted winter wheat there. And then late spring he could harvest that wheat. And then they came in the summertime and put the terraces in. And there was enough time that he could put late beans in that. So, he got something out of it during summertime, and we got 75%, versus 50% if he would do it in the fall or the spring time.

The point of Helen's anecdote is that her tenant planned carefully to plant specific crops that could be harvested within the timeframe of each step of the terrace installation project. As a result, the tenant received higher yields, and Helen received additional rental income because of their advance plan to work around the terracing.

Originally, two tenants rented Helen's parents' farmland, and she spoke highly of both of them. The retired tenant is now an assistant commissioner on the Conservation
board in Pottawattamie County. Helen praised him as an excellent farmer, particularly in the aesthetic sense: “He keeps excellent fields; you won't see a weed; he's just so immaculate. Waterways, everything. Very proud.” It seems that from Helen’s and other WFOs’ statements in this research that a farmer’s reputation is at least partially derived from the neatness of his or her fields. In other words, many farmers and landlords abhor weeds. Helen’s remarks sound very much like those of Sylvia and Sarah. And in Helen’s lease, the tenant is responsible to keep the headlands and terraces free of weeds:

Rachel: If the lease goes by farm property or acres, then who is in charge of those waterways?

Helen: He still uses them, but he's got to be in compliance with keeping them clean. Weedless and clean. They need to be, with the plow or with the disc or whatever. And the same with the terraces; he's going through clearing the trees. And the same with the fences; he'll keep the fence lines clean and all that.

Helen’s tenant abides by her stipulation to keep the fields clean. It is a non-issue and an intriguing contrast to the frustration that Sarah’s felt for years when her long-term tenant became more and more lax over removing the weeds on her property.

The possibility of farming organically

Helen does not have most of the problems with which the other WFOs in this study are faced. She has sufficient income, independence, and an excellent working relationship with her tenant. I realized this quite early in our interview and wondered if Helen would fit the type of participant I needed for this research: one who reports any conflicts or roadblocks in her decision making about her farm.

However, I discovered clues to Helen’s potentially conflicted ideology about the farming practices on her land when she offered me the herbal tea at the start of the interview and later provided a detailed and enthusiastic description of shopping at Whole Foods in Omaha. She was incredulous that I had not yet been to one. She stated, “You
know come you can get your meals there, hot meals, cold meals, salads. And they’ve got one bar with nothing but olives. And then all the cheeses and wines and, in all your vegetables and grains by the bulk.” I include Helen’s excerpt about the organic grocery store as an illustration of her enthusiasm for eating high-quality, organic food.

The more we talked about our common interest in healthy eating, it became obvious that Helen was aware of the contradiction between her farmland that produces industrial-grown corn and soybeans and her concern that her own food come from chemical-free sources. Additionally, like the other participants in this research, Helen fondly remembers the pre-industrialized farm of her childhood:

Helen: I think growing up it was more organic. I mean, we didn’t call it organic, but it was.

Rachel: Did you have animals?

Helen: Well, we had cows and chickens and pigs and cats and dogs….. My dad had the cattle and hogs, you know. Mom took care of the chickens, and we had cats and dogs. The chickens ran loose in the yard. I mean, it was just natural for everybody back then. Now it’s called free range.

Rachel: Yeah, it’s on the eggs [egg cartons]. I’m trying to buy eggs to be ethical. It’s so complicated.

Helen: Yeah. And to this day, I will only buy free-range eggs. I think it’s the growing up that I had, too. My mother had a huge garden. I’ll never forget my dad sitting down, and he said, “Everything in this meal came from our farm.”

Rachel: That’s amazing.

Helen: Our beef, our potatoes, our vegetables. Mom would make the dessert with some of our fruit or whatever.

Helen’s memories of her family’s food coming directly from the farm and animals are realized in her actions as an adult. She consciously buys the safest eggs she can find, drinks distilled water, and shops at organic grocery stores and farmers markets. Therefore,
when I asked Helen what changes she might want to make to her land, it was not a surprise when she said she would be interested in changing her farm over to organic crop production.

Helen is self-aware enough to realize that a conflict exists between the principles she maintains regarding her personal lifestyle versus her farm that uses industrial agriculture practices. She called this schism of ideologies a “struggle within” herself. On the other hand, Helen has made the decision to maintain the current status quo on her farmland because her tenant does not want to change to organic farming: “We talked about it, and he [the tenant] is such a good farmer. And I don’t even want to mess with it right now.” And here is a similar plight to the problem several other WFOs face: Helen does not want to endanger her 35-year relationship with her tenant. She explained further:

Helen: I’m thinking of going organic, but my tenant wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t do it.

Rachel: How come?

Helen: He just wouldn’t. Well, they [the tenant and his wife] believe it would take more people; I don’t think they want the hassle.

Helen explained to me the details and multi-year process of changing chemical-sodden farmland back into organic acres; she has definitely researched this idea. However, for now, negotiating her farm’s contribution to industrial agriculture with her personal health habits will remain an internal struggle for Helen. Like most of the WFOs I have met, Helen’s long-time relationship with her tenant trumps her desire to begin shifting her farm over to organic produce. Helen did mention that if or when her farmer retires, she might give organic farming a try.
Summary of the narratives

The preceding six narratives were composed to separate each participant’s interview data into individual case studies. The goal was to illustrate how unique are the women’s histories, relationships with family and tenants, and decisions about their farmland. Beatrice is savvy about business but less certain about conservation decisions. Cassie succeeded in her unrelenting goal to change her family’s farm back to organic crop production. Sylvia has been building an independent identity through the ownership of her farm since her husband died. Sarah has made strong decisions to terminate an untrustworthy tenant and hire one she respects. Annette has learned to protect her farm through conservation efforts and estate planning after many years of being marginalized in her own family. Helen works in tandem with her tenant to make strong conservational decisions on her farm, yet she would rather be farming organically.

While these six participants are distinct individuals, they also share some of the same obstacles. In the next chapter, I analyze these narratives through the theoretical lenses of gender and agency.
CHAPTER FOUR: EXAMINING GENDER AND AGENCY THROUGH THE WFO NARRATIVES

The research data presented in the form of WFO narratives in Chapter 3 were structured thematically to forecast an analysis of gender and agency in this chapter. Now I want to return to the two research questions and develop answers for each one through the production and analysis of these WFO narratives.

Research question #1: To what extent does gender influence WFOs’ decisions regarding agricultural practices used on their farmland?

By the time the interviews were halfway concluded, it was clear that gender is an enormous influence over the WFOs’ decisions about their farms. To answer the first research question, it is important to re-visit briefly the framework I am using to analyze gender’s influence on decision making. To avoid viewing the WFOs as a homogeneous group of farm women with essentialist gender characteristics, I structured the data chapter to present each participant’s unique narrative. Agarwal reminds researchers of women and agriculture to examine gendered relationships to the land through the women’s “material reality, in their specific forms of interaction with the environment” (126). Women’s work on the farm is often different than men’s. For example, the title of Leckie’s research on gender differences between women and men in farming states, “They Never Trusted Me to Drive,” which is an effective illustration of girls and boys on the farm growing up and learning different tasks to prepare for very different responsibilities on the farmland.

Likewise, the women in this research have never worked the land at all. They have a different connection to the land than their husbands, fathers, and tenants, who perform the physical work of farming. This different, gendered connection to the farmland is reflected in the ways that WFOs make decisions about it. Specifically, in the next sections I argue that three factors related to gender affect the participants’ decision-making about
their farms: (1) the history and legacy of their farmland, (2) the transition from an “invisible farm wife” to a WFO, and (3) the relationship with their tenant.

**History and legacy of the farmland affects decision-making.**

Each WFO reported a strong connection to her farmland, especially as it relates to the history she has shared with it as well as the legacy she feels that she inherited along with the responsibility of property owner. Furthermore, the WFOs’ narratives shared a similar theme to the “yeoman” myth constructed by Peterson, who describes an “agrarian vision of careful husbandry from which farmers’ caretaker image grows” (300). The image of farmer as caretaker appeals to all the WFOs in this research and was reflected in many of the decisions they made about their farmland.

Furthermore, according to Adcock, the farmland is like a family member for many of the WFOs:

Leigh: And it’s really a very natural audience for conservation, because of the way they look at land.

Rachel: How do they look at land?

Leigh: They look at land as a piece of themselves. They see it as an extension of their family and their values as a human being. I mean, that land may have been in their families since their ancestors came to the state. So, they see a very emotionally… it’s a family member, basically. So, they wanted the best for it.

The strongest example of a WFO’s adherence to the “yeoman” myth and view of the farmland as a family member is Cassie’s admiration for her grandfather’s farming practices. She called him a “steward” who understood and cared for the land, unlike many farmers today who don’t need an in-depth knowledge of their farmland because chemicals much of the work for them. Cassie’s attempts to convince her family to return the land to organic production resulted directly from her admiration of her grandfather’s legacy.
Helen also described somewhat wistfully the organic farming practices of her parents’ generation and noted that no one considered it unusual. Now “organic” farms are the minority in our industrial agriculture economy. Cassie and Helen’s appreciation of organic, whole foods and their abhorrence of chemicals affected decisions they make their personal lives as well. Cassie’s in-home business is making and selling herbal remedies, and the acre where she and her husband grow diverse crops and raise animals provides a self-sustaining way of life and eating. Likewise, Helen is very conscious and careful about her food choices and prefers local, organic produce whenever she can find it.

Unlike Cassie, however, Helen purposely separates decisions about her personal life with those about her farm, even though she would like to change over to organic farming. As with many of the WFOs, Helen’s tenant prefers to farm conventionally, like he always has. Instead of endangering that relationship, Helen works with her tenant as they both focus on practicing the highest standards of conservation possible within the dominant paradigm of industrial agriculture as it exists in hilly western Iowa. Helen and her tenant have won awards from the state for their conservation efforts, and it is these decisions to promote healthy soil and minimize erosion that allow Helen to remain faithful to the farming legacy she inherited from her parents.

Whereas Cassie and Helen have made decisions that tangibly impact conservation practices on their farms, the other WFOs—who are all older widows in their 70s and 80s—honored the traditions of their farms in different ways. Several participants noted that they tried to carry on the legacy that their husbands had begun. Sarah in particular revealed that part of her anxiety over changing tenants was that her husband had hired the original tenant and had faith that he (the tenant) would help Sarah make wise decisions about the farm.
Sylvia's tenant is her late husband's nephew, and she was proud to tell me that this family she had married into were known as the best farmers west of Fort Dodge. As much as Sylvia had resented her marriage, it was important to her to extend her husband's decisions where she thought he was right, and this was to continue renting her farm to his nephew. In fact, she went even further and signed over power of attorney to this tenant, so he could make all the farming decisions.

Beatrice's farmland had served as the family's main financial investment over the past half-century, and she feels very responsible to make that investment successful after her husband's death. Every one of her decisions about the farmland focused on whether or not the outcome would be profitable. For example, in negotiating with her tenant, Beatrice was ready to walk away over the amount of rent she wanted to receive in the next year's lease. She reiterated several times that how important it was that she make improvements to the land in order to protect it for the future when her sons inherit it.

Annette's connection and sense of responsibility to her farm and its history is almost palpable. Every decision she has made about the farm has been to protect it financially and to hold onto it. During the nursing home crisis involving her mother-in-law's care, Annette worked in town to help pay the bill and even lost her own inheritance from her mother's farm to this debt. Despite her in-laws' refusal to let her be involved in the farming decisions, when Annette finally stepped into the role of property owner, she began making improvements to the farm and nurturing it as a long-term investment for herself and her daughters.

In summary, while Cassie and Helen's relationship to the history and legacy of her farmland translated directly into their decisions about conservation, the other WFOs concentrated their decisions around preserving the legacy of their husbands and protecting
the farms as an investment for their future. What the women have in common, however, is that their decisions were made from the historically gendered connections they have to their farmland.

**Transitioning from the identity of “invisible farm wife” to WFO affects decision-making.** Several researchers of the subject of women in agriculture have claimed that farming is a hegemonic culture of dominant, decision-making men and subservient women (e.g., Brandth and Haugen, and Shortall). Sachs, in particular, notes that women are often construed as “invisible farmers” whose work is not valued equally with that of the traditional male farmer's (114). While my research focuses on women as property owners, I found that the women’s transition from farm wives to WFOs produced many decisions that pushed forward this transformative process.

Throughout much of her life, Annette strongly resembled that “invisible” farmer who literally lived without access to “land ownership, financing, agricultural training, or information to be a visible force regarding farming practices (Sachs, 114). Annette's in-laws forbade her from being involved in making any decisions about the farm. The irony is that it was another farm wife (her mother-in-law) who caused Annette the most damage. Therefore, when Annette was suddenly thrust into the role of WFO, she relied heavily on outside advisors to help her make decisions about the farm.

Sylvia also exemplifies a farm wife transitioning to WFO through her decision-making. “Diminished” would accurately describe Sylvia at the end of her second marriage that she compared to a ten-year prison sentence. When she finally became free in 2007, many of Sylvia's decisions since have focused on unraveling her identity from that associated with being R.’s wife. The desire to resurrect a form of independence manifested in Sylvia’s desire to seek legal assistance to acquire the brick house and farmland that she
believed should have been left to her. Moreover, Sylvia's insistence on an orderly, weed-free property and her own burial plot apart from her second husband's are explicitly gendered efforts to gain control of her own life.

Likewise, Sarah’s struggle to emerge from farm wife to farm owner is illustrated in her not making the decision to replace her tenant for almost fifteen years after her husband's death. Sarah believed that her tenant took advantage of her vestigial identity as an invisible farm wife instead of respecting her new role as the property owner. It took Sarah several years to emerge from that identity cocoon and transform into more encompassing identity of responsible property owner. As she gradually took that transformative step, she was able to terminate her relationship with her tenant.

Cassie and Helen were not afflicted with this identity crisis in shifting from farm wife to farm owner, perhaps because their lives involved more varied experiences and opportunities beyond life on a farm. Neither did Beatrice seem to need time to adjust to being a WFO. Beatrice had lived in Fort Dodge since she got married, and she and her husband had always cash rented their land and treated it as an investment. She also had worked as a nurse and owned other investment properties, so she was more used to making decisions than the WFOs who had spent much of their lives mired in that identity of an invisible farm wife. My argument is that the WFOs such as Cassie, Helen, and Beatrice, who were not “farm wives” or not primarily “farm wives,” adjusted more easily to the role of WFO.

**WFOs’ relationship with their tenant affects decision-making**

The third connection between gender and the WFOs’ decisions is how much the women value their relationship with their tenant. These relationships are an important gender issue because of the different material connections that women and men have to
farming. For instance, the participants in this study own the land and rent it out; each WFO has a lease agreement with male farmer who performs the physical farm labor. Eells and Adcock note that this arrangement is typical when women own the farmland. It is clear with the ubiquity of WFOs who have tenants that the work of conventional, industrial agriculture is gendered. For example, Beatrice is the first to admit that she does not know the first thing about driving farm machinery. She asked me, “Have you seen those tractors? They’re huge.” The WFOs admittedly do not know much about farming, and they rely on their tenant to get the work done.

Furthermore, with the exception of Cassie, the participants made it clear that they valued their tenant as more than just a business relationship. The relationship with their tenants is a fundamental part of the social strata of their farming communities. In most cases the women have known their tenants for many years and share strong social ties. Beatrice, Sylvia, and Annette have each had the same tenant farming their land the past 25 to 30 years. Before Sarah fired her tenant, they had been together almost 30 years as well. Helen’s tenant has been with her over 20 years, while Sylvia and Cassie’s families have had the same farmer for 15 years. Annette and Sarah’s tenants plow the women’s driveways in the winter, and the women look forward to their tenant’s stopping over to visit with them. Sarah is friends with her former tenant’s mother and is a neighbor to the whole family.

Because of the WFOs’ long-time social connection to their tenants, many of the women’s decisions are affected by this relationship. Sylvia provides the most extreme example in signing over power of attorney to her tenant so he can make all the farming decisions. Annette asks her tenant to join her and her family when they discuss decisions about the farm. Annette’s bond with her tenant is practically indestructible because of their
personal history together. It was the tenant’s wife who knocked on Annette’s door that dark afternoon to tell her about her husband’s fatal accident.

Sarah told a somewhat unique story about her tenant. In fact, the crux of my three interviews with Sarah focused on her firing her long-time tenant and hiring a new one. Sarah faced great anxiety over that decision. Adcock remarked over how difficult it is for many women in Sarah’s position to push back against a lifetime of social norms and gender conditioning:

The women, even if we give them meeting after meeting, and try to tell them, “You’re the decision-maker, you’re the decision-maker,” we are not going to change 80 years’ worth of social conditioning. All we can do is show them examples of exactly what you say. strategies. But they are not just going to run back home and say, “You’re fired, and I’m going to do it this way.” That will never happen.

From Adcock’s statement and my own research, it does seem that Sarah is an exception to the rule that farm women are reluctant to overturn a man’s decisions and act otherwise, especially having lived in the small community of Shelby County her entire life. Despite the fact that Sarah maintained her outward composure as she spoke with the tenant after he had received the termination notice, she was inwardly terrified that he would gossip about her in town. She ardently did not want to be viewed as a “cranky old woman,” a stock gendered figure that men do not have to deal with. Even though Sarah had a number of compelling reasons to fire the tenant, she faced potential gendered prejudice for doing so.

While the WFOs’ relationships with their tenants are an important part of their lives and decisions about their farms, the narratives have shown that a tenant can also be an obstacle when the women want to adopt different farming practices. The WFOs’ conservation values generally favor the traditional methods of pre-industrial farming without chemicals. Adcock notes, “Many of them [the WFOs] are aware that the
chemical-intensive farming that we have done over the last 30 or 40 years is damaging the land.” However, while none of the WFOs thought that modern industrial farming is particularly healthy, no one except Beatrice reported arguing with her tenant to change farming practices.

For instance, Sylvia and Annette would never consider having such a conversation with their tenant; and as confident as Helen is about her farming decisions, she has chosen not to pursue organic farming because her tenant is against it. Even Sarah’s decision to fire her tenant had nothing to do with his industrial farming practices; she terminated his contract because she did not trust him. Consequently, Beatrice is the only WFO who tried to convince her tenant to change his farming practices to no-till. Yet despite all of her own knowledge and experience she has gained over the years in managing the farm, Beatrice acquiesced the role of expert to her farmer when he balked. Ironically, when Beatrice deferred to her tenant’s refusal to practice no-till farming because of the “gumbo soil,” she did not recognize that her own identity and ideology reverted back into that same, diminutive, non-expert “farm wife” that she parodies at the farm auctions.

The only participant who has remained unaffected by a tenant relationship is Cassie. She had no connection with the tenant who cash rented the family’s farm; instead, Cassie’s aunt controlled that relationship. Cassie’s identity and ideological commitments have been to restore her farmland to organic production. Unlike the other WFOs, Cassie’s identity is firmly embedded in the sustainable agriculture movement, which is the antithesis of industrial agriculture. Trauger states that organic farming offers women more traction for “legitimate identity” as a farmer, instead of the marginalized helper in conventional farming (299). Because Cassie is so entrenched in the sustainable agriculture worldview, she has
been unencumbered by the social and gender norms that have interpellated the other WFOs and affected their decisions.

**Research question #2:** In viewing WFOs as “sites of contradiction” (Belsey, 168), to what extent do these female property owners use that position for potential agency to conform to and/or “transform” their seemingly black-boxed identity from the marginalized, invisible subject as a farm wife on the family farm to an agent who makes purposeful, conservation-minded decisions about her farmland?

At the outset of this research, I formed question #2 as a device to analyze identity and agency. Going through the interview process, I realized that this question assumes that the WFOs in my study began as “marginalized, invisible subjects,” which is not necessarily correct, nor is it fair for me to blanketly categorize the participants in that manner. As my study progressed, analyzing agency within the context of these narratives became my focus; therefore, I have modified the second research question so it more accurately represents the direction of this study: “In viewing WFOs as ‘sites of contradiction’ (Belsey, 168), to what extent do these participants as property owners enact agency to make conservation-minded decisions about their farmland?” This revised question still assumes that the WFOs are “sites of contradiction,” meaning that identity is never static but always in construction, particularly when change occurs, such as when the participants step into the new role of property owner. The revised question also assumes that the participants enact agency in their role as WFO, and this is the argument I am making. Furthermore, whether the participants make conservation-minded decisions about their farmland is the focus of my analysis of agency.

**Humans enacting agency**

To analyze agency in the decisions made and actions taken by the WFOs, I will use Cooper's description of “embodied agents” who do things intentionally and voluntarily” (439). Cooper's emphasizing the actions of human agents helps reclaim agency from its
postmodern commitment to external forces acting upon a de-centered, passive subject. She insists that “individual agency is necessary for the possibility of rhetoric, and especially for deliberative rhetoric” (426). Cooper’s claim that humans act and make decisions as “unique, embodied, and autonomous individuals” (425) seems straightforward as she places the burden of responsibility for consequences back on human agents. However, no one makes decisions in a vacuum, and agents’ actions are necessarily affected by internal and external influences. Cooper re-complicates agency once again by claiming that agents, “as well as the surroundings with which they interact, are always changing” (425). In other words, agents make conscious choices, take actions, and decide on one option over another—all of these are ways of saying that humans enact agency—within a swirling vortex of their own history and experiences as well as the constant flux of external forces and events.

Decisions made by the WFOs in the narratives help illuminate embodied, human agency because it becomes clear that individual actions and decisions are impossible to divorce from an agent’s larger cognitive network of feelings, values, opportunities, responsibilities, and desires. Additionally, while humans enact agency within the constraints of their own personal histories as well as external influences, I would also argue that identity, or, how an agent views herself and her place in the world, is a particularly important contribution to the enactment of agency.

Therefore, to answer the second research question, I will examine agency by analyzing the decisions made by the participants as WFOs in the midst of their individual histories and external events, both of which shape the participants’ enactment of embodied, human agency. First, I will analyze the enactment of agency within the specific context of the WFOs’ attempts to enact stronger conservation practices on their farmland. Second, I
will analyze the enactment of agency within the context of WFOs who did not pursue conservational goals, but nevertheless did make purposeful changes to their lives as embodied agents emerging from their own identity crisis.

**Sites of contradiction**

The second research question asks that the WFOs be seen as “sites of contradiction” (Belsey, 168). This part of the question touches necessarily on gender again, as it relates to the participants’ identities. Belsey describes a subject whose ideologies are shifting and identity is being re-constructed after the impact of a crisis (168). Within the context of the participants becoming WFOs, this crisis has occurred by the death of a family member who had owned the farmland. The women in this research inherited the farmland and thereby entered the role of WFO. Some of the WFOs were more ready to assume this role than others.

For Beatrice, Cassie, and Helen, becoming a WFO was not a great leap from the identity they had known before they inherited the property. Beatrice had been active in making decisions about the farm as an investment since she was first married; moreover, due to her husband's fifteen-year long struggle with Alzheimer's, she assumed complete responsibility for the farm management decisions long before she became a widow. Neither Cassie nor Helen inherited their farmland from dead husbands. For instance, Cassie shares ownership of her farmland with family members, who received it when Cassie’s grandparents died.

Helen inherited her farmland from her parents, and she had taken over management of the property as her parents aged and became ill. The point is that when the crisis of a family member's death changed Beatrice, Cassie, and Helen into WFOs, this event and their subsequent new role as WFO did not wreak havoc on their identity. In other words, the
crisis did not cause the identities of these participants to be “sites of contradiction” because who the women were before the crisis did not require that much change after they became WFOs.

Conversely, when the crisis of a family member’s death caused Sylvia, Sarah, and Annette to assume the role of WFO, these women entered into that new identity from a much more marginalized space that resembled Sachs’ description of the “invisible” farm wife (114). When Sylvia first became a widow, she was the inheritor of no property at all; she had signed a pre-nuptial agreement and then married a miser who controlled her actions and left her no money or property. When the crisis of her husband’s death first occurred, Sylvia’s identity was the epitome of a marginalized farm wife.

While Sarah and Annette were much happier in their marriages, when these women became widows and, subsequently, WFOs, they were not prepared for this role. Up to that point, Sarah and Annette had been farm wives, not farmers or property managers. Trauger describes the “social script for most women in rural communities” as that of assisting her farmer husband, not handling the farming business herself (299). Sarah was an administrative assistant for the local school district and was not involved with managing the farm until her husband was diagnosed with cancer. Even at that point she and her husband believed that the tenant would help her with the decisions, and she had her children to rely on as well. However, Sarah’s daughters and son live far away from the farm, and after her husband’s death Sarah was not prepared to make confident decisions herself when her tenant proved untrustworthy.

Annette’s identity at her husband’s death perhaps best fits the description of invisible farm wife. At her in-laws’ insistence, she had never been a part of the farming decisions, so when Annette inherited the farm 44 years after moving to it as a newlywed,
she began her new role of WFO with virtually no experience on which to draw to make decisions.

In short, at the crisis point of their husband’s death, the identities of Sylvia, Sarah, and Annette resembled that of the marginalized and invisible farm wife; and when they entered the identity space of WFO, they were much less prepared for it than were Beatrice, Cassie, and Helen. Therefore, for Sylvia, Sarah, and Annette, becoming WFOs caused their identities to resemble Belsey’s “sites of contradiction,” as the distance between their farm wife identity and WFO identity required time and the experience of making new decisions to construct an expanded identity in which they could become more confident and knowledgeable property owners. As a result of Sylvia, Sarah, and Annette beginning their role of WFO from a more marginalized identity space than Beatrice, Cassie, and Helen, I would argue that the former’s decisions about their farmland focused more on surviving after their husband’s death and adjusting to their new role as farm managers rather than thinking about enacting stronger conservation practices on their land.

Analyzing the participants as “sites of contradiction” was the first part of the second research question. The second part asks to what extent—within that context of identity—do these participants as property owners enact agency to make conservation-minded decisions about their farmland? In the next two sections, I will describe first the enactment of agency through the decisions of Beatrice, Cassie, and Helen, the WFOs who specifically wanted to improve conservation on their farmland. Second, I will describe the enactment of agency through Sylvia, Sarah, and Annette, whose decisions did not revolve around improving conservation practices.
Conservation practices and geography

The second research question seeks answers about how identity and agency relate to the WFOs’ decision making about conservation. Before launching into that analysis, it is important to note that the geography of where the participants live in Iowa significantly affects the discourse of conservation practices.

Besides the unique experiences and events that have shaped each WFO’s decision to pursue or not pursue improved conservation practices on her farmland, another important factor is whether the women’s land is near Fort Dodge or in western Iowa. On the steep, hilly western side of the state, conservation is much more prominent in the discourse of conventional industrial agriculture. Incorporating terraces, grassy waterways, and other conservation strategies that help keep the soil in place are already a systemic part of farming in that area. So, the participants who live in western Iowa—Sarah, Annette, and Helen—do not have to argue with their tenants over better ways to protect the soil. For instance, Helen’s argument for stronger conservation centered on changing to organic farming and eliminating chemicals altogether, not about tillage methods.

The Fort Dodge area, in contrast, is relatively flat, and the problem of soil erosion due to gravity is not as obvious as it is in western Iowa. Therefore, in the dominant conventional agriculture discourse, standard conservation methods are largely understood as tiling effectively underneath the soil to ensure adequate water drainage. Therefore, when Beatrice and Cassie make their arguments for no-till and organic farming, respectively, they are actively resisting the local dominant discourse about conservation.

WFOs convincing tenants and family to improve conservation

Convincing people to change is a rhetorical act. Beatrice, Cassie, and Helen are strong proponents of protecting the soil and water quality on their farms. In particular,
Beatrice wanted her tenant to reduce the amount he tilled up the soil by changing his practice to no-till farming, in which the ground would be left untilled after harvest to better protect it from erosion over the winter. Cassie and Helen’s goal was to take the strongest conservation step possible by returning the ground to organic crop production and eliminating the use of chemical fertilizers and herbicides. Making the change to organic farming is an enormous step because it requires a change in machinery, the possibility of more human labor to combat weeds, and at least three years’ worth of planting and harvesting before crops are considered organic, according to the Organic Agriculture Extension website from Iowa State University.

Besides these financial and time commitments, the ideological differences between organic and conventional farming are as vast as the contrast of Peterson’s “yeoman” and “farmer-as-technician” myths (290). Convincing a conventional farmer to change to organic farming could be compared to moving a mountain. For example, that Cassie wanted to turn her family’s 180 acres into sunflower fields seemed unrealistic even to me, and I am the outsider who is always cheering for these WFOs. Yet it really was difficult for me to visualize sunflowers blowing in the summer breeze in the middle of an Iowa ocean of corn and soybean fields. During our third interview, when Cassie told me she had succeeded in changing the family’s mind, I was astounded.

Helen immediately recognized that convincing her tenant to adopt organic farming was an almost insurmountable task, and she abandoned her pursuit after one conversation about it. He was flatly uninterested in changing, and Helen dropped the issue because she valued their relationship over her own interests; she said she might pursue the change to organic farming again after her tenant retires. As an agent who is in the habit of making purposeful decisions about her farmland, Helen chose not to wrangle rhetorically with her
tenant. Instead Helen focuses her actions on maintaining stellar conservation practices such as terraces, headlands, and grassy waterways within the existing agriculture industry in western Iowa.

Beatrice and Cassie, on the other hand, decided to enter the fray and argue for the conservation practices they wanted enacted on their farmland. Beatrice’s opponent was her long-time tenant, while Cassie’s obstacles included several family members and one aunt in particular who was opposed to changing to organic farming. Both Beatrice and Cassie are knowledgeable and outspoken about conservation. Several times during our interviews Beatrice described the evidence she has seen that demonstrates no-till farming is healthier for the soil than conventional tillage. Cassie spends much of her professional and personal life raising awareness about the detrimental effects of chemicals in the environment and health benefits of organic, whole foods. Both women have compelling facts to support their arguments for conservation. Yet it was Cassie who succeeded in convincing her family to adopt organic farming, while Beatrice continues to yield to her tenant’s resolve to continue conventional farming practices.

The strongest debates over conservation practices between the WFOs and their tenants or family members surrounded the topos of money, a powerful constraint in the material world that is often the deciding factor in a rhetorical argument. For example, farmers in conventional agriculture invest hundreds of thousands of dollars into their tractors, combines, and other equipment, and to consider modifying that equipment to till up the soil less frequently or to abandon the use of chemicals is unthinkable for many of them. However, Cassie refused to accept that argument from industrial agriculture advocates that heavy farming equipment does not factor in well with no-till and organic farming. On the other hand, this same argument was successful in defeating Beatrice. Her
tenant said he would have to modify his expensive equipment in order to adopt no-till farming. Who is right, Cassie or Beatrice's tenant? There does not seem to be a clear answer, and which person’s argument is more accurate is not the main point. It is useful to consider Grossberg’s understanding of agency when examining the decisions of Cassie and Beatrice; he states that humans are involved in “a constant struggle to construct the concrete realities of their lives” (114). In these two rhetorical situations, Beatrice and Cassie, in their roles as WFOs as well as agents making conscious decisions, are affected by external contraints, or “concrete realities,” in different ways.

The issue of financial investment is the primary factor that determines almost every decision Beatrice makes about her farmland. For her tenant to argue that he would be at financial risk if he were to adopt the practice of no-till farming was a savvy move that rendered Beatrice's point moot in this argument. She would never put herself in financial jeopardy, nor would she insist that her tenant change farming practices if doing so would leave him financially vulnerable.

On the other hand, the argument that changing to organic farming is more expensive than conventional farming did not faze Cassie at all. Her objective to re-claim her family farm’s organic production legacy was unburdened by its financial cost, her relationship with the tenant (or even with family members), or her own need for financial security. Cassie's rhetorical position was a “concrete reality,” which was so firmly embedded in the ideology of sustainable agriculture’s benefits that her family’s resistance eventually crumbled.

However, it took time and energy to convince the family, and for the first three years as co-heir of the property, Cassie lost the argument to her aunt annually at the family’s business meeting about the farm. These defeats caused Cassie to employ stronger
rhetorical arguments. For instance, Cassie researched the financial and conservational benefits of organic farming through the assistance of Internet information sources and organizations that advocate for more sustainable and organic farming practices. Then she engaged her husband to visit with each co-heir in her family to deliver these conservation and financial arguments that would eventually convince the group to adopt the change to organic farming.

An effective rhetor knows her audience, and Cassie understood that little is to be gained by arguing against profit. She had to prove to the family that the change to organic farming would not lessen their income from the farm. She and her husband explained that the sunflower crop would be just as profitable, and making this argument successfully was the most powerful move to convince the majority of the family to side with Cassie.

Both Beatrice and Cassie attempted to enact agency in the form of improving conservation practices on their respective farms. They both made purposeful decisions that were influenced by their own beliefs as well as outside influences. Beatrice’s goal to improve conservation failed in light of her tenant’s rhetorical argument, while Cassie was successful. When Cassie faced resistance from her family, she countered with more effective strategies to convince them that organic farming would work.

Analyzing the actions of these two women helps illustrate that the enactment of agency is inextricably linked to human agents who have an agenda. Cassie’s actions throughout her narratives have been straightforward and unwavering as she worked toward convincing her family to re-adopt the organic farming practices of her grandfather. Conversely, Beatrice’s failure to change her tenant’s mind as well as her decision not to replace him result from the vestiges of her own interpellation as a farm woman handing over authority to the male farmer expert. I would argue that while the participants are
making decisions that sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully enact agency, one of the most important factors in their success is their identity and ideologies to which they are interpellated. The success of that agenda still depends on the agent’s application of rhetorical principles.

**WFOs enacting agency with decisions unrelated to conservation**

While the work of convincing an audience to agree with a rhetor’s idea is a rhetorical act, so are other forms of making material changes in the world. Considering the WFOs as a research site to examine agency, it was important for me to understand why several of my participants who attended a Learning Circle event and seemed interested in conservation at the outset of our interviews did not subsequently pursue conservational goals on their farms. In particular, Sylvia, Sarah, and Annette pursued other improvements within their farming lives.

Sylvia’s story, for instance, was the first narrative to help me realize that although my research question about how WFOs might exercise agency in their decisions was simple, the answers to that question can be complex and extend far beyond decisions about conservation. Sylvia’s narrative helps illuminate embodied, human agency because it becomes clear that individual actions and decisions are impossible to divorce from an agent’s larger cognitive network of feelings, values, opportunities, responsibilities, and desires. This network can cause contradictory actions. For instance, while Sylvia has taken several actions to regain her identity as an independent farm owner since her husband died, she gave legal control of the farming decisions to her tenant. And while it is difficult to reconcile why she signed over power of attorney for the farming decisions to her tenant after she so immensely regretted signing the prenuptial agreement before her second marriage, I think Sylvia believes that farming decisions are simply beyond her expertise.
Despite her interest in conservation and memories of pre-industrial farming, Sylvia is willing to concede issues of conservation to focus on her own survival.

Like Sylvia, Sarah was concerned in her narrative about managing her farm and solving the problem of her unreliable tenant, rather than conservation practices. Moreover, the decisions Sarah finally made to fire the original tenant and hire a new one are directly related to her developing identity as a WFO. The enactment of purposeful human agency in the form of a strong, resolute decision is never separate from the agent’s context and history. Sarah spent several years working up enough anger and frustration over her tenant’s actions to finally take action. Without the gradual development of her identity as a WFO through time, experience, and knowledge through making smaller decisions, Sarah might still be unhappy and with the same tenant. Furthermore, the most important external influence to reinforce Sarah’s decision to change tenants was the support of her children and legacy of her husband. She relies heavily on the support of her son and two daughters as well as the memory of her late husband in the decisions she has made about the farm since her husband died in 1997. If that support had not existed for Sarah, I do not know whether she would have made the decision on her own to change tenants. The fact that she adamantly wanted the matter kept private and had such anxiety about the former tenant’s reaction to her termination of their contract leads me to doubt whether she could have made the decision without that outside family support.

Adcock was right in stating that changing eighty years’ worth of social conditioning is nearly impossible. On the other hand, Sarah’s narrative provides a valuable lesson about agency. Cooper prefers to view humans as free-willed agents rather than subjects, which are necessarily defined by their relationship to an “other”; this relationship, then, hampers the range of a subject’s choices and actions (423). Contrastingly, agents do not have such
constraints and are free to build any sort of new connections in their interactions with one another (441). Despite her fears and reluctance to take action, Sarah did so; as an agent she ended one relationship and began a new one with a tenant that she trusts. Likewise, Annette's narrative demonstrates that agency can be complemented and its power enhanced by positive social relationships. Annette's daughters, her tenant, legal professionals, and conservation officers have helped her make strong decisions in the past sixteen years. These relationships have given Annette the education, knowledge and subsequent confidence to re-construct her ideology and take control of her life and farm.

Social relationships can both empower actors to make decisions, as seen in Sarah and Annette's narratives, or inhibit the exercise of agency, as seen in Beatrice, Sylvia, and Helen's relationships with their tenants.

Annette is the participant who has changed the most since becoming a WFO, perhaps because she was the most unprepared for the role out of all the participants in this research. Before further examining Annette's various enactments of agency since she became a WFO, it is important to first examine how the external force of tragedy determined Annette's entry into that role. If there is little room to argue against profit, there is no room to argue against death. It is important to understand a nonhuman form of agency in relation to the tractor accident. From a Latourean perspective, agency emerged that dark afternoon like a “nonnegotiable speed bump” from Pandora’s Hope (187). This actor network included human and nonhuman actants such as Annette's husband, a steep, muddy hill with a hole after a rainstorm; a narrow-nosed tractor; and forty years' worth of no conservation practices on the farm. These actants combined to produce a terrible accident, the death of Annette's husband, which in turn produced a new woman farmland owner who neither wanted nor was prepared for the role.
Ironically, in writing a dissertation that is partially about WFOs’ decisions to adopt or not adopt conservation practices on their farmland, it did not occur to me at first that the tractor accident may have been related to Annette’s in-laws refusal to install terraces or make other attempts to keep the soil from washing downhill. When I spoke with Eells and Adcock about the accident, they made the connection immediately. However, when I asked Annette about what factors she thought caused the her husband’s death, she blamed the tractor for over-turning on the steep grade. Regardless of which actant might be to blame, the result was the same. In its postmodern form, agency can have an enormous effect on actors’ decisions. The exorbitant prices of the nursing home and neglect of estate planning are other examples of the strong external forces that negatively impacted Annette and her husband financially.

Until her husband’s death, it seems that Annette’s life resembled a pinball in action, bouncing and reacting to difficult events. However, after the catalyst that took the form of a tragic tractor accident, Annette changed. And one of her first decisions in the role of WFO was to begin making decisions and enacting agency, rather than only reacting to these events that had shaped her life. She installed terraces on the hills to combat erosion and protected the farm as a financial investment by putting it into a trust for herself and her daughters. She also refused to carry on the tradition of autocratic rule on the farm and encourages her daughters and her tenant to participate in the decision-making process.

Annette is the WFO who transformed most substantially in her identity as a “site of contradiction,” as she emerged from the role of marginalized farm wife into that of a WFO who very purposefully enacts agency within her sphere of influence. Her insistence on collaborative, democratic decision making is a manifestation of her transformative ideology as a farmland owner. Furthermore, Annette communicates in thought and action
an effective example of deliberative, ethical agency that might not have emerged had her life been easier.

To summarize this response to research question #2, I have framed the answer by analyzing the WFOs within the context of their narratives as “sites of contradiction,” whose identities, Belsey states, are in a constant state of construction (168). The emergence of the women’s identities as WFOs helps exemplify Cooper’s description of agency as this concept is personified and carried out by “unique, embodied, and autonomous” agents (425). Three of the WFOs—Beatrice, Cassie, and Helen—focused their enactment of agency to adopt stronger conservation practices on their farmland, which is specifically what the research question addressed. The other three participants—Sylvia, Sarah, and Annette—focused their decision-making on solving problems that were significant to them but did not involve conservation issues. All six participants are taking actions that attempt to make change within their unique contexts. Agency is shaped by a broad and distributed network of constraints as well as by a history that shapes the agent’s desire, ability and resources to act.

I have also attempted to argue that while agency continues to emerge in complex and multifaceted ways, for researchers who want to analyze the human component of agency, it is important to trace the identity and identity transformation of the research participant. This move in qualitative research enriches the details of the stories told and helps illuminate agency more clearly as human agents go about making decisions and living their lives.
CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Conducting this research over eighteen months has provided me with a valuable education in conventional and sustainable agriculture, Iowa geography, feminist and cultural studies research, theories of agency, and the lives of my research participants. Their narratives illustrate that identity is an important component in understanding the complexity of agency. During the interview with Eells and Adcock, I had summarized several of the WFO anecdotes for them. Adcock reinforced this point about complexity, stating: “It’s cultural, its language, its community, it’s conflict avoidance, it’s gender, it’s age, it’s a lot of stuff going on.” Indeed, all of the WFO narratives offer varied perspectives on how gender and agency play out in relation to the challenges, relationships, and opportunities that face these participants as they make or do not make decisions within their position as woman farmland owner.

This dissertation began as complementary research to my work on the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Grant with Eells and Adcock to conduct rhetorical analyses of the language that the WFOs use to talk about their farmland and conservation. The most important implication I found was that the rhetorical strategies the participants use to enact agency result directly from the identity(ies) to which they are interpellated. Better understanding those conflicting identities and their sources helps conservation advocates such as Eells and Adcock develop more effective communication strategies to reach WFOs about the importance of conservation on their farms.

While the scope of this research was large with respect to the amount of data collected and narratives produced, my analysis focused only on implications of gender and agency. Clearly, a researcher could easily focus on other analyses of the data. For instance, the participants shared many details about the differences between the friendlier family
farms of the past and industrialized agriculture today. Yet other than Cassie and Helen, the participants did not consider this significant change to be problematic, and in further research I would like to discover why. Is it that the higher yields produced by modern conventional farming are an acceptable tradeoff for more and more chemicals to be used on the farmland? Seed and fertilizer companies have such a tight grip on farming practices that perhaps many WFOs (to say nothing of their tenant farmers) do not see how any other kind of farming would be possible.

Industrial agriculture as an institution controls how farming is conducted; the exception is organic farming. I also noticed through my research that a chasm of incommensurability seems to exist between conventional farmers and organic farmers. In future research I would like to find more WFOs like Cassie, who have successfully transformed their farms to organic production and I would like to analyze their rhetorical arguments for making that happen. It would be useful to apply the lens of de Certeau’s resistance strategy of tactics. De Certeau explores “miniscule” and “quotidian” practices of resistance through tactics, defined as subtle and uncentered actions that constantly shift according to the circumstances at hand; de Certeau states:

Because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing.’ Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’ (1988, p. xix).

De Certeau equates tactics with everyday acts people adopt that may surreptitiously subvert dominant structures of Foucaultean control. This theory would be useful to analyze how WFOs in both conventional and organic farming usurp the authority and discourse of dominant agriculture to practice more sustainable farming.
Another aspect of this research that I would like to pursue is examining the researcher as an activist. One early goal for this dissertation that I had to abandon was conducting my research with an activist agenda to help effect positive change by my participants. Ideally, this kind of research would be done in the spirit of Foucault’s “specific intellectual.” Foucault provides a detailed description of his specific intellectual, whose work centers on “detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (317-318). Foucault finds the power of truth within constructions of discourse, which makes his description of the specific intellectual particularly relevant for rhetoric scholars. This intellectual is an academic who occupies a local position within a community that is formed according to her social class, her research work in the academy, and her political associations and allegiances.

Furthermore, Foucault states that the specific intellectual occupies her space to enact change, which is linked to the “general functioning of an apparatus of truth” through her class position, the location of her work, and her relationship to the politics of truth in society; these three factors are the spaces in which the specific intellectual moves and communicates to affect and alter the “regime of truth” (317). What strikes me about this description is the intensity and pervasive nature of the specific intellectual to fight sometimes clandestinely and sometimes publicly for her marginalized group. However, this is an idealistic goal for any research project and was an unrealistic goal for me in this project. I was an outsider to the WFO community and did not have enough time to develop a local position in that group to be of any use to these women. Eells and Adcock, on the other hand, are excellent examples of Foucault’s specific intellectual; they are women who own farmland themselves, they are professional advocates for other WFOs, and they have other ties and allegiances among various governmental and community
groups in agriculture where they have a voice to affect the farming discourse and potentially benefit their constituency of women in farming. I would like to conduct further research with advocates like Eells and Adcock framed in the “specific intellectual” model.

Another research focus worth pursuing is how the traditional farming aesthetic of manicured fields with razor-sharp rows of weed-free corn and soybeans is an indelible part of the conventional agriculture ideology. Many of the WFOs in my research are passionate about the beauty and orderliness of a well-tended farm. Furthermore, Peterson’s description of “careful husbandry” in the “yeoman” myth is illustrated in the participants’ almost uniform insistence on the traditional farming aesthetic (300). However, it is largely due to the use of herbicides and fertilizers that this aesthetic is achieved and maintained. In contrast, farms with stronger conservation practices, such as no-till fields that are not plowed as frequently, have a less uniform and more disheveled look. It would be interesting to research in Learning Circle events whether demonstrating to WFOs that a less orderly, no-tilled field is a healthier field would change the women’s ideal farming aesthetic.

The possibilities to extend this research are endless. As the land owned by the WFOs in this project is passed down to future heirs, it would be interesting to interview the WFOs’ children about their conservation practices. I would also like to interview additional WFOs and turn the dissertation into a book in the next two years.

But this project must conclude for now. I have learned that countless external factors affect agency and can lead to questions about the human being’s responsibility as a decision maker. Yet even within the intersection of multiple constraints and opportunities in which agency exists, the human agent is left with the consequences of decisions,
whether positive or negative. While both devastating and wonderful external events happen to shape our lives, humans are constantly struggling “to construct the concrete realities of their lives,” as Grossberg aptly observed. Those concrete realities are formed by ideologies, and it is imperative for an agent who wants to make a positive difference in her life to be mindful of her interpellations as well as vigilant in questioning and moving them forward.
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“Supporting Iowa’s Women, Land, and Legacy.” Women, Land, and Legacy. Women,


APPENDIX

Proposed letter of invitation and consent for participants to take part in my study:

Dear ___________________________ [Farm Land Owner]:

My name is Rachel Wolford, and I am an English PhD student in the Rhetoric and Professional Communication program at Iowa State University. I am beginning to write my dissertation about women who own farmland in Iowa, and I would very much like to talk to you about the history of your farm, how your land is farmed, and what you would like to do with your land in the future while you still own it. My goal is to interview approximately ten women farmland owners, and talking to you would help me greatly as I collect research for my dissertation.

If you grant permission, I would like you to be a participant in my research. What I want most to learn from you is:

- how you as a woman farmland owner think and talk about your roles and responsibilities to your land.
- what changes you would like to make regarding how you farm while you still own the land.
- how women-centered events such as the Learning Circles meetings might affect your attitude and decision-making related to how your land is farmed.

This study will be based on conducting at least one recorded interview with you and collecting papers or photos you want to show me to help me understand your farmland and your relationship to it. The interviews would likely be conducted in the fall and winter of 2009-2010 and scheduled at your convenience. I will also attend women farmland owner events during this research endeavor, including Learning Circles meetings in various Iowa counties. At these meetings I will seek out opportunities to talk with and learn more from as many women farmland owners as I can.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and all materials concerning our conversation will be confidential. I would like permission to record this conversation so that I can have an accurate record of what you tell me. I will have the only access to these recordings and the transcripts of them. And I will not identify you or any other participant by name in public documents. Furthermore, I will share with you a copy of any transcript of our conversation and any interpretation I make of your comments. Your information will be compiled together with the responses from all other participants into the final research report; no individual information will be identifiable.

There are no foreseeable risks at this time from participating in this study. I hope that you consider this opportunity to share your insights about women farmland ownership in Iowa. Although you will not benefit directly from participating in the study, your views and experience as a woman farmland owner are highly appreciated and valued and will contribute to the understanding and promotion of the women’s goals and impact as farmland owners on agricultural practices in Iowa.
If you have further questions and/or concerns about this study and/or your participation the project, please contact me, Rachel Wolford, 515-508-1862, rwolford@iastate.edu. In addition, if you have any questions about the rights of research subjects, please contact the IRB (Human Subjects) Administrator, 515-294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, Office of Research Assurances, 515-294-3115, 1138 Pearson Hall, Ames, IA 50011.

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Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been answered satisfactorily.

__________________________
Participant’s Name (printed)

__________________________ (Participant’s Signature)   ______________________ (Date)

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of his or her questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, and benefits, and the procedures that will be followed in this study, and has agreed voluntarily to participate.

__________________________ (Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent)   ______________________ (Date)