WHO DRIVES THE TRACTOR: HOW TECHNOLOGY INFLUENCES WOMEN’S FARMS IN THE NETHERLANDS
Senior Thesis

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by
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Prevalent notions of farming associate men working with technology and women working with their hands. Agribusiness has contributed to advancing agricultural technology such that most farmers engage in some kind of machine work, regardless of gender, in order to stay in business. In this presentation I examine how women’s agricultural work reveals gendered tool ideologies. I ask how do Dutch gender norms manifest through female farmers’ use of tractors and other farming machinery? Agricultural technology has both perpetuated some gender norms while challenging others. This paper is based on informal interviews with eight female farm owners in the Netherlands during seven months of fieldwork; in these interviews they explained that the productivity that tractors can offer does not seem limited by gender but by one’s ability to transcend gender. Although there is substantial existing research on rural women’s historical roles in farming, I add additional layers to this work through the analysis of gender technological ideologies, kinship, and relationships to nature among a small sample of women farmers in contemporary Netherlands. This research furthers our understanding of the relationships among power, economics, and gender. In attempting to balance traditional roles of labor and domesticity, the woman farmer actively challenges normative gender roles through her technological use of tractors and other machinery, her motherhood duties, and the pastoral ideal.

Keywords: Agriculture, Gender, Eco-feminism, Technology
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

As gender norms shift to allow for greater autonomy among women on farms, the established division of labor in the agricultural sector is becoming more dynamic and relatively more flexible. With the popularization of the sustainable and local food movement, more young progressives want to grow and, in some cases, distribute, their own food. Women who now work on farms may no longer have a fixed lifestyle based on traditional gender roles, with responsibilities limited to agriculture and domestic duties. They are, moreover, no longer as strongly linked to familial patterns of ownership.

In this thesis I argue that, in attempting to balance agricultural labor with domestic work, this new generation of female farmers actively challenges the gender binary through their cultivation of alternative farm duties and work values. In my fieldwork, conducted in the Fall of 2011 and the Summer of 2012, I focused on female farm-owners located in the Netherlands. Contrary to the stereotypes of female farmers as poor, domestic wives/servants in rural environments, the women with whom I worked and spoke tended to be academically, politically, and ecologically informed. Unlike a farmer’s wife who marries into the farm life and works for her spouse, my interlocutors have either sole or part ownership over their farm. They make decisions about the everyday actions and operations on the farm (Brandth, 1994: 131). They actively, not passively, chose to farm.¹

I conducted research to understand these women’s past experiences, their future aspirations, and their current (and increasing) autonomy and prestige within small-scale agriculture. While my analysis is not necessarily generalizable to the experiences of every female

¹ The women’s decisions to work on their farms and live rurally on a traditional, family farm should be distinguished from the more American, urban “back to land” movement that builds on an idealistic pastoral life.
farmer in the country, the stories I collected do promote a greater understanding of the women who produce a portion of the nation’s food. In so doing, this research can contribute to a greater understanding between producers and consumers. I also hope to contribute to the creation of a community for Dutch female farmers, women who may read these few testimonies and find solace that they are not alone in this kind of lifestyle and work. The eight women in my study speak to such diversity within a single niche of society (van der Burg 1994:125). Although most of the women with whom I spoke would not overtly acknowledge their role in pushing feminist political ecology forward, this research strives to illuminate their perceptions of themselves as female farmers in a traditionally masculine field, as well as their implicitly feminist stances towards this structure of power.

Through writing about these women’s stories and building relationships with them, I cultivate a greater understanding of femininity in the context of the agricultural sector. This thesis considers the lived experiences of female farmers within the hegemonic construction of the male Dutch farmer in the Netherlands, also considering the ways in which their roles may have shifted through the years. Anthropologist Janet McIntosh’s definition of hegemony is quite useful here, for she builds on the world of John and Jean Comaroff by arguing that hegemony “consists of the signs and practices that typically serve the interest of the dominant group by reflecting or justifying particular relations of power and that come to be ‘taken-for-granted [by all social groups] as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it’” (McIntosh 2009: 23). These women reconstruct femininity in relation to hegemonic views of the male Dutch Farmer through their desire to deviate from norms and thus recreate norms of both the female and the male farmer. Through the use and symbols of farm machines, farm men
and women recreate roles and develop a new understanding of both the male and female role in an agricultural context.

Most of the women struggled to maintain social and economic support when they were starting their farms. Indeed, farming is an industry that has been historically dominated by men, particularly in the Netherlands. In 2011, the Central Bureau for Statistics in the Netherlands calculated that less than ten years ago, there were well over twice as many men as women working on farms (CBS 2011: 38). Now, women average slightly more than one-third of the farming workforce. Technological developments tend to perpetuate such a gender dichotomy in the agricultural field. The industrial tractor was designed _by and for_ men. It is the tool that re-engineered the way in which farmers conducted work and the levers and pedals are often too far away for most women to be able to adequately maneuver the machine (Stephanie Fisher 2010: 10 _originally from_ Ann Rosenfeld, 1985: 23).

The tractor becomes both an object and a gendered category for the nature of my interlocutors’ experiences as women farmers. Every woman mentioned that one of her greatest challenges in farming is driving the tractor. It might seem that the heavy usage of machinery in conventional agriculture is a main reason why women’s farms are typically smaller than that of the average male-owned farm in the Netherlands. According to a 2007 study by the European Commission, _Eurostat_, regarding the labor force by the size of farms in the Netherlands, women account for 2.4% of the total sole owners of farms larger than 100 hectares versus their 7.5% ownership of farms smaller than twenty hectares. According to Anouk and Anne, the most frequently asked question posed to them from people _in_ agricultural businesses is, “Who drives the tractor? Do you hire a man for the tractor work?” The only reason why I knew to scoff at this
question is because a few hours earlier, I had watched Anouk step into her industrial tractor and flawlessly drive it along the barn to feed their cows. In this instance, the tractor work was clearly failing to keep these women inside the home.

Hegemonic ideas, which could be reified by technological limitations like the tractor design, perpetuate a gender dichotomy while also encouraging women to disregard their own gender. Looking to Sherry Ortner’s seminal work (1974), my interlocutors use machines to mediate the way in which culture categorizes women, the feminine, as closer to nature and, thus, opposite from culture. Women are increasingly using tractors, but as the women purchase more second-hand tractors, the men are investing in more high-tech machinery that maintain a masculine ideal of dominating nature. Although many aspects of farming are becoming more gender-neutral, these women’s experiences show a vivid dichotomy in the endowed power of women and men on farms.
CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY

This thesis is the result of an intensive one-month ethnographic research study about the life stories of eight women who were sole or part-owners of their farms throughout the Netherlands. I conducted interviews in English that were semi-structured and open-ended, which allowed me to follow the leads of my interlocutors. They lasted between one and three hours, depending on the interlocutor. During these preliminary interviews, all of the women noted their tractors as a charged symbol on their farm. Six months later, I returned to the same farmers with the intent to understand better the women’s relationships with machinery and technology.

My later data are based on informal interviews during participant observation, while watching and listening to the women work. The women tended to recoil at my proposals for formal interviews because it seemed that once we built a relationship, they expected us to speak casually. Working with the women on the farm gave me a chance to know and learn from them in their homes and work spaces. Spending more time with my interlocutors during their work allowed them to express their lives and opinions to me in an informal setting. When I returned, I stayed overnight at each farm, my visits ranging from two to three days. I used the snowball method of recruitment and began my recruitment through local agricultural advocacy organizations. Engaging my interlocutors from such advocacy organizations led to all of the women in my study running small-scale farms.

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2 Initially, I traveled to the Netherlands to study gender and sexuality with the School of International Training. Shortly after arriving, I began working with Dutch agricultural advocacy organizations such as ASEED and Farming the City.

3 With the addition of one woman, Liell, who became a partner on Iris’s farm after I left from my first visit. As such, this thesis includes the experiences of eight women farmers in the Netherlands.
CHAPTER 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

While there has been literature published about farm women, much of it highlights the rural female and, more specifically, women who participate in agriculture as the only means to obtain a reliable food source. These subjects tend to live in developing regions, unlike my interlocutors who farm as a business in the Netherlands. Other scholarly texts about Western women on farms highlight the socio-cultural, historical, and legislatively shift of farm women’s roles. These pieces contextualize much of my interlocutors’ narratives. The few studies that explore current, Western farm women resonate with the perceptions of my own interlocutors in terms of female identities, technological use, and relationships with men.

Since my analysis will be prefaced by definitions of certain terms, I will reference Alenka Verbole’s article in The New Challenge of Womens’ Role in Rural Europe Conference Proceedings (2001), *Farm and Rural Women in the New Europe*. There, she addresses the definitions and variations in farm and rural women. Verbole explains the distinction in that farm and rural women “differ not only in their involvement with agricultural production and lifestyle, but also in their level of participation in public and political spheres. ... ‘[R]ural women’ refers to all women living in rural areas (open countryside and small settlements), while the term ‘farm women’ is used to refer to women who are actively involved in agricultural production...” (2001: 29-30, *originally from* Barbic: 1994; Verbole: 1997).” For my research, I will not discuss rural women but will use Verbole’s definition of farm women. While I may not look at this binary, social implications of labeling oneself as a “farmer” tends to connote rurality, as well. My interlocutors’ experiences complicate the identity of rural women because although their professional work might be typical for rural life, they integrate themselves into urban life and
even farm next to highways. Verbole also generalized Dutch female farmers in terms of motivation and educational background. She explains that “gender relations, especially those which determine that women are mainly responsible for domestic work and child care and have lower levels of education and skills, are working to farm women’s detriment both in the short- and-long term, making them more vulnerable to poverty (2001: 30, originally from Tyran, 2000).

Historically, women who farm in a partnership would be subordinate to their male partner, creating tasks along stereotypical gender lines. The woman would thus be financially dependent on her male partner. The women whom I interviewed truly defied this in every sense. I recently spoke to young, urban Dutch folks who were stunned that most of the farmers whom I interviewed were highly educated and intellectually sophisticated. All of these women made an active decision to begin their farms, making themselves agricultural entrepreneurs.

Before beginning their farms, the women understood the arduous nature of farm work. They did not fall victim to the rural ideal that Raymond Williams and Leo Marx elucidate in their books about the urban-rural divide, *The Country and the City* (1973) and *The Machine and the Garden* (1964), respectively. Williams discusses the persistence of the idyllic countryside trope, juxtaposing it against the arduous nature of rural, agricultural work. From the perspective of a privileged urbanite, the rural is the site of a utopia. My interlocutors uphold this ideal through their emphasis on “handcrafted” production versus industrial processing. In essence, we will return to the earth in a way that we have been estranged from it. The difficulty of culture, he argues, is the constant struggle to return to the past. Marx develops the complex relationships between technology and the pastoral ideal in America. Historically, America has been known for its abundance of land such that it should remain a rural sanctuary. He contrasts this expectation
for rurality in America with the manufacturing that had already developed in Europe (1964: 124, 128, 137). Perhaps, Europe’s longer experience with industry mitigates my interlocutors seeing their agricultural vocation as their plight to fulfill this rural fantasy. Thus, they are not explicitly seeking refuge in this idealized pasture. Marx and Williams debunk myths about the rural fantasy while also unpacking the romance of nature.

Farming does not have a gender preference; it is always going to be time-consuming and laborious. Bettina Bock explains the Dutch obsession with part-time work in her article *The Problem, Prospects and Promises of Female Employment in Rural Areas* (2001). The Netherlands has one of the highest rates of part-time work in all of Europe because “Women often prefer part-time employment as it helps them to reconcile work and the raising of small children. On the other hand part-time employment prevents women from being economically independent” (2001: 80). In 1999, 55% of women worked part-time while only 12% of men did so. My interviewees are in the minority since their work is not only full-time but farmers have emphasized time and again that there is little distinction between home and work life. Working on a farm makes it hard to differentiate between personal and professional life whereas there is a discrete line when working in an office. Bock then cites data about women’s varying investment in labor. While the EU’s percentage of female entrepreneurs in agriculture was 24% in 1993, the Netherlands only had 11% of women; this is less than half of the female entrepreneurs in service in the Netherlands. On the other hand, there were 83% of female family workers involved in agriculture in the Netherlands, over 10% higher than the EU average (2001: 83). This corroborates the historical data that women would work on the farm, but not more than the time they spent mothering and maintaining the home, leaving these women economically dependent.
on their husbands. As such, their work in the field would be overshadowed by their time spent on domestic labor. My research highlights the intensity of full-time labor and the determination that these women must have to maintain a lucrative farming business and, in some cases, a family, as well.

Men have dominated the agricultural sector because Dutch legislation positively reinforced women staying in the home with policies like “The Breadwinner’s Principle.” Anjo Geluk-Geluk explains this principle in *The Position of Farm Women in the Netherlands* through women’s shifting position on the farm over the years. She explores the notion of women vying for more economic independence through policy change and off-farm occupations. She explains how gendered tasks are so ingrained in farm life with the distinctly Dutch ‘Breadwinner’s Principal’ in which one partner brings in the money as the breadwinner while the other, usually the woman, takes care of the family and home. Because the woman has no income of her own, the family receives social benefits and tax deductions (1994: 17). This policy perpetuated women’s work as invisible and insignificant. Geluk-Geluk then explains the varying labels associated with the roles of women on farms, depending upon their tasks. For instance, the *housewife* would be completely economically dependent on her partner while the *supporting spouse* may receive some form of income. More popular now is the *man/woman-partnership* in which the woman is more of an entrepreneur and, most autonomous, the *independent entrepreneur*. The latter woman has complete ownership of her farm, which is typically handed down from her father. I will use these terms address the historical shift from farm woman as wife to farm woman as boss. Moreover, my discussions with Dutch female farmers reify these concepts.
Women’s lives off the farm have greatly shifted, too. Margreet van der Burg outlines the history of farm women’s pursuit for education in her article *From Categories to Dimensions of Identity*. Van der Burg acknowledges the variation among the category of farm women: “[they] can have a different age, marital status, religion, education level, ethnic background and set of values” (1994: 125). She then uses certain socio-cultural dimensions—economic, gender and geographic dimension—as a lens to examine women’s fight for education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There was a constant political and social struggle for education among rural and farm women’s transition into the classroom through the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet, this does not particularly apply to my research since the oral histories that I will convey narrate the lives of women who had access to education and, in almost every instance, took advantage of such an opportunity. To connect Verbole’s distinct differentiation between rural and farm women, van der Burg notes the cultural or mainstream association that automatically connects farm women with a rural life. She explains that society tends to look at farm women as dichotomous to urban women, which made rationalizing a formal education even more difficult, especially politically. Although most of the women in my research may have grown up on farms themselves, they were neither academically nor otherwise oppressed as a result of their rurality. This is most likely the result of modernization since my informants grew up after the middle of the twentieth century.

Similar to my own research, Berit Brandth looked at a small sample of Norwegian farm women who actively chose to become farmers. Through focus groups and interviews, she seeks to better understand better their roles, self-perceptions, and identities in the agricultural community. She analyzed their perceptions about farm work and technology through kinship and
femininity in *Changing Femininity: The Social Construction of Women Farmers in Norway* (1994). A year later, Brandth sought to research women in advertisements for farm equipment, but having found no women in the ads, she focused on the depiction of men in these advertisements. In *Rural Masculinity in Transition: Gender Images in Tractor Advertisements* (1995), Brandth asserts that the farmers express themselves through the gendered symbolism of the tools that they use. Furthermore, the mere semantics that the advertisers use to describe these machines imbue them with a gendered identity that is then transferred onto the operator. In other words, they perform their gender by using certain farm equipment. In *On the Relationship between Feminism and Farm Women* (2002), Brandth distinguishes women’s roles in the agricultural sector as separate from those of urban women. The political identities of women as farmers illuminate a nuance in the same dominant/subordination gender dichotomy. Brandth’s analyses resonate with my experiences in a similar research context, as I interpret the gendered meaning of women farmer’s tools.

I will employ the foregoing scholarly texts to demonstrate the varying identities of the farm women based on their use of technology. These few women’s narratives may also be a commentary about socio-cultural meanings around agriculture, technology, and feminism.
CHAPTER 4. MEET THE FARMERS

ANNE, 45 & ANOUK, 42

Anne and Anouk, life partners who only recently started cohabiting, live on the conventional milk farm they started about three years ago along with forty cows, all of whom have names. The two explained that even though they are unique as lesbian farmers, they do not want to be identified only by their sexuality because it is not a defining part of their identity. When Anouk was married to her ex-husband, they owned a farm together and when Anouk left to live with Anne, people whom she thought were her friends never interacted with her again. These people started rumors that she had taken a lot of money out of the farm, which she had with her ex-husband. In reality, she had already invested in thirty of their cows so she brought them with her to start her new farm with Anne. They were able to expand by using the money that Anne makes in her communications business. As much as Anouk feels fulfilled with her farm and love life, she still expresses sadness that she doesn’t get to see her children more often. Anne told me, “We should have asked for the kids for more time because Anouk’s ex-husband’s new girlfriend is terrible and it’s not normal for the mom to have the kids for a half of a week and the father to have them for one and a half weeks!”

Anne and Anouk’s experiences with farm work vary. Anouk has been farming, milking and feeding the cows and calves, since she was a young child on her grandfather’s dairy farm and then worked on more dairy farms in Michigan and the Netherlands. Anne, on the other hand, is a relative novice. Though both had grandparents who were farmers, neither Anne nor Anouk grew up on a farm. They remember only their grandfathers driving tractors and teaching them as
young girls. Anouk recalls her parents worrying about having lost her and soon found her sitting amidst the neighbor’s herd of cattle. She was very close to this neighbor who acted more as a father to her. During her childhood, she spent more time at his farm than at her home because she felt like the black sheep in her family. Her pursuit of farming was met by her mother’s constant discouragement and disapproval. Her father was rarely home to respond to her dreams because he was often working. Anne believes that Anouk’s mother is always pushing Anouk to be “an ideal woman” who focuses on solely on domestic work and her physical feminine appearance. Anouk’s sister, a farmer’s wife, does everything that her mother wants but is on prescribed anti-depressant medication to find any happiness in her life. Anouk’s poor relationship with her mother further drove her to Michigan to work on a large dairy farm for four months. Anne’s parents have been influential as support for her dream to start a farm. She feels that they constantly stimulated her and allowed her to be “free of mind and spirit.” Anne and Anouk’s different experiences with kin relations bring them together.

They live in a rural farming village, among many other farms. Their quaint, two-story home attaches to the barn and sits next to the quiet road. They are surrounded by scattered cows that sit in the pastures adjacent and across the street. A small windmill and patch of flowers adorns their narrow front lawn. Typically, Anne and Anouk wake up at 4 a.m. to milk the cows then leave their soiled rubber boots and overalls in the garage to take out toast or cereal for breakfast. Anne retreats to her office next to the kitchen to begin her communication work and often travels to other farms to speak with farmers in the afternoon. If Anouk doesn’t have parent-teacher conferences, which she did during one of my visits, then she will be maintaining the barn or fields. They eat their hot meal in the afternoon, often a mixture of vegetables, meats, and
potatoes. They work more on their respective tasks and milk the cows again in the early evening. They smoke a celebratory cigarette as they finish their final tasks, hosing down their milking parlor or feeding the calves a little powdered milk. When they undress from their farming clothes, they prepare a simple dinner of bread, cheese, and sliced meats as the radio hums contemporary pop. If Anne doesn’t have more work to do on the computer then they sit on the couch together with a glass of cola and watch whatever is on television.

While Anne’s most challenging part of farming is the time commitment and for Anouk, the animals are both the challenge and the reward. They own an old, rusted tractor that their neighbor had left for them. They each told me, on separate occasions, that “farming is a way of life...it is in our blood.”

TJARDA, 53

When Tjarda and I first met, she told me her history and that of the farm as she walked me through her five hectares of land, filled with potatoes, kale, and broccoli. Tjarda owns the only organic crop farm in Amsterdam. Growing up near her grandfather’s farm, which is now her farm, Tjarda has had a long-standing connection to the land. Her mother, who worked in the city since she was a girl, only moved to the farm when she married Tjarda’s father. Tjarda believes that she got her “city-wisdom” from her mother and her love of the land from her father, who she describes as too good for this world. “I tried to tell my family that inheritance isn’t just about money,” Tjarda said in explaining that her father endowed her with a love of nature. As a child, she says that her experience with
agriculture entailed “bringing the workers coffee or milk and playing on the farm. In the summer, they told us to weed and I would run to find something else to do.” Her uncle and father maintained farm until she took it over in 1996. Before she re-started the farm, Tjarda had various jobs, ranging from social work to viticulture [grape cultivation]. When Trijnje took the opportunity to start an alternative agriculture business, her extended family was adamantly against her decision and even brought the case to court to prevent her from using her grandfather’s land. After she received her diploma from agriculture school, she squatted in Amsterdam until her aunt gave her a tractor for her birthday and she thought, “Now we must start!” This aunt was Tjarda’s only familial ally in her ambitions for farming and, in giving her a tractor; she not only symbolizes her support for farming but also breaking the barrier into a masculine domain. Some of her family has since become more supportive, her sister buys food from her every week but her brother never visits. Although her mother lived on the farm with her in her last years of life, she minimally worked on the farm.

Since starting the farm, Tjarda renovated the old farmhouse into both her home and a co-operative farm shop. The large, open room holds crates of fresh produce, shelves full of grains, and coolers of cheese. Behind that, table tennis, chairs and bookshelves await groups of school children who often visit the farm. When we were not doing farm work and chatting, Tjarda and I would talk at the large table that stands next the shop, in the kitchen. This table was often the beacon of social life on the farm, where Tjarda begins her days with a coffee and cigarettes and ends her day with a non-alcoholic beer and cigarettes. The window at the end of the table looks out on to her fields so that she can check the weather to assess the day’s tasks. Often, she stays with the vegetable field, sowing, weeding, and harvesting by hand. There, I witnessed her take
each of the hundreds of slugs that accumulate all over her vegetables and place them in the woods, away from the crops. Her volunteers told me that she does this everyday, whereas they grab the intruders and throw them as far as they can. During the afternoon break or at the end of the day, she challenges her volunteers, friends, and guests to chess games at the table. After I lost embarrassingly quickly during our chess game in my first visit, I promised to practice and yet Tjarda still beat me with ease during my next stay. Tjarda currently lives with Daan, her current life and business partner who adamantly assures me that Tjarda is “the boss.”

The local government, the city of Amsterdam, constantly threatens to take her vegetable and fruit farm to convert it into a business park, due to the farm’s proximity to the city. As Amsterdam becomes a larger hub for manufacturing, Tjarda’s land could bring more money to the city if a corporation purchases and uses the land to build more office buildings. As she and I stood overlooking the land, the farm stood in stark contrast to the highway, smoke stacks, and buildings just behind it. Through an email correspondence with Daan, he explained that the national government, however, has no part in these plans and thus there is no conflict of interest in Tjarda receiving government subsidies. Tjarda runs a rehabilitation or “care” farm – in other words, the government provides her extra funds for taking on individuals who need extra supervision in their work (this might be due to intellectual impairment, addiction, or other disabilities). Daan elaborated in his email:

*As long as we are an established farm and comply to European Union legal agricultural demands then they will pay our subsidy. Care farm payments are not always done by the (local) government. These are payments by healthcare insurance companies where every Dutch citizen has insurance. This includes a wide range of care. Physical, psychological, you name it. Everyone has at least a basic insurance. Our average client has a drug problem and has seen a jail from the inside. They receive social security and can be placed on a care farm to prepare*
them to re-socialize. In the end, this payment is from the national government because they determine the budget for all local governments.

With organic certifications costing 600 euros per month, most organic farms could not maintain their land without these subsidies. Tjarda must complete paperwork, which she detests, to ensure her compensation from the government and private sponsors.\(^4\) This source of income has no connection to the government’s attempts to seize the land. Although the volunteers might require extra supervision and guidance, many of these volunteers are now her close friends. While Tjarda took her first vacation in ten years, one of her volunteers took full responsibility over all of the tasks on the farm. This volunteer told me that Tjarda is like a big sister because she knows so much about farming and takes such care for the land and crops. As long as she can protect the farm, Tjarda’s ideal future is to continue farming. She owns a relatively high-tech tractor, but she typically leaves the machine work to her partner or volunteers. Tjarda finds the most joy from using her hands.

KIM, 37

Although we talked at her new house, which is a few kilometers away from the farm, Kim gave me a virtual tour with a framed photo of the farm. Kim and her husband, Henk, have taken over her parents’ conventional dairy farm with 80 cows and 500 goats, typically with only one farm hand’s help. Her great-grandfather started the farm and forced her grandfather to maintain it even though Kim thinks that he did not want to farm. He did not speak about other career options, but Kim feels

that farming was not his vocation. Luckily, he had many children so one out of his four sons was intent on farming. This was Kim’s father. Watching her grandfather and father farming as a young girl, Kim knew she wanted to continue farming.

She told me how much she used to enjoy going to parties and pubs, where she met her husband, but her focus is now on motherhood and the farm. Kim initially pursued higher education but decided that she wanted to work with her hands. The farm only had cows until Kim decided that she wanted goats because she could maintain them on her own and it would allow her alone time on the farm so that she was not constantly working with Henk. With two infants, she still milks the goats everyday with the help of her mother-in-law who often watches the children. Since having children, Kim spends less time on the tractor and more time filling out paperwork, which she does not enjoy.

A typical day for Kim entails waking up at 5:30 a.m. to milk the goats at the stable. Meanwhile, the milking robot milks the cows and Henk feeds the goats and cows. By 9 a.m., they are done with the morning work and go home for breakfast. During the ensuing free time, someone usually comes to talk about the animals or to drink a cup of coffee. They return to the stables to feed the animals again and milk them by 5 p.m. Kim explains that although the work is arduous, she plans and organizes everything herself. She is not working through the entire day and has time between tending to the animals to rest and play with her children.

Her family is very important to her and she brought up her sorrow concerning her parents’ recent divorce, her close relationship with her brothers, and her immense admiration for her mother. Her immediate family lives so close together that a few minutes before I left her house, Kim’s brother came over for a surprise visit. She assured me that this was quite common.
Kim has a hard time thinking about the future because her parents are heavily invested in the farm and the effects of their imminent divorce remain unclear. They have so much money in the farm that their divorce might make it impossible to allocate the necessary funds to ensure the farm’s future existence. Kim hopes to remain a farmer until she is either physically or economically restricted from doing so.

THE VEGGIE GIRLS (IRIS, ANKE, AND LIELL)

The three women who make up the Veggie Girls, Iris, Anke and Liell, all grew up in non-farming families. The community named them the “Veggie Girls” because they were all relatively young women running a farm. Liell’s reaction was that

On one hand, we want to be seen as the Vegetable Girls because it’s nice and cute but, on the other hand, it’s also a business and we want to make money and we have to find the balance between “nice and cute” and serious. We are really producing for quite some sum of people so it’s not for a hobby.

They certainly provide vegetables for many people on their two hectares of land. Each week, they bring their produce to a few biological food shops in the area and they prepare between 250 and 290 vegetable boxes for families in the surrounding villages. They include the in-season vegetables, which are, in the summer, lettuce, corn, beans, and chicory. In the winter, they grow brussel sprouts and cabbage. In their boxes, they also include a newsletter about what is happening on the farm to ensure that the consumers feel like a co-producer, engaging in a reciprocal rather than passive relationship with their producers. This also adds to the social aspect of their farm life. Even with their eight volunteers, they make sure to spend time outside of their farming tasks, celebrating holidays and meals together, to create a familial atmosphere.
with their helpers. Initially, they had difficulty getting the funds but now they work ten hours per day and the eight volunteers in order to maintain their land. Their volunteers come from the surrounding villages as well as through their “care farm” program, similar to that of Tjarda’s farm.

Anke and Iris started their organic crop farm two years ago with the goal of nourishing their community in a sustainable way to ensure the well being of their neighbors. Their farm is on an estate so one man owns all of the land and rents it to people. As such, the town is picturesque with its uniform hedgerows and architecture. Small, country homes are interspersed around the perimeter of the fields. Urban dwellers and the elderly tend to retreat to the village for a quiet vacation. Tree canopies line the village roads that tractors and bikes occupy more than cars. The women’s new farm shed is not on their fields so they need to drive their tractor along these roads for about one kilometer, past a pond surrounded by manicured lawns and over which hangs weeping willows. The women live a few kilometers away from the farm so they drive or bicycle to the field every morning.

Rob, the biological farmer who has been both a teacher and a business partner to the women, rents 100 hectares from the estate owner and then rents two hectares of land to the Veggie Girls. His family has farmed on that land for generations and he now lives with his wife, who works outside the house one day per week and stay home with their two little girls for the rest of the week in a traditional-looking, brown farm house. To get to the farm sheds, one must pass by Rob’s house. His farm shed, separated only by a few meters, is twice as large as the women’s new shed, which stores their farm equipment, machines, rinsing room, and storage/
cooling facilities. A picnic table under a large tree sits in between their shed and Rob’s playground behind his house.

At this table, the three women sit with Rob for their first coffee break at 8 a.m. after they have worked the fields for an hour. At this point, most volunteers will arrive to work for a few hours before they retreat back to the picnic table for a lunch of breads, jams, and cheeses. They go back out to the fields until their afternoon coffee break, when most volunteers leave and the three women continue to harvest, sow, or till for another few hours. Liell specified that the exact tasks:

*Depends on the season and the weather, of course. In summer, a typical day is harvesting in the morning when it is fresh. If it’s sunny then we take all the weeds out with the machines. When it’s dry weather, it’s better. When it’s very wet, it’s impossible to go with the tractor on the field. Dry days, it’s typical do go with the machine to take out all the weeds. On a rainy day, for example, we take out the big weeds by hand.*

Rob rents 100 hectares so he must employ high-tech combines and tractors in order to harvest his land. His practices have influenced the Veggie Girls to favor their older, second-hand machinery because it is more efficient than farming by hand. As such, they make a point of purchasing one piece of equipment every year, most of which is second-hand.

*Iris (& Anke), 34*

Having grown up in both the suburbs and the city with her parents and older brother, Iris has experienced agriculture from an advocacy and production perspective. She studied environmental studies at university and quickly became enthralled
with biological farming. Iris and Anke were spontaneously inspired to start their own farm upon completing an internship. After struggling for support and funds, the two young women started their biological vegetable farm. Now, Anke’s father even helps in the fields once per week. I didn’t have a chance to speak with Anke very much but when I spoke to her separately, she seemed to convey very similar sentiments about farming, mentorship, and aspirations to those of Iris. Anke highlighted the importance of autonomy in the fields. Iris and Anke have been dating their boyfriends for almost ten years and they are very proud of them for starting their farm. Anke contrasted her autonomy and her boyfriend’s pride with her financial dependence on him.

*It’s the opposite of history in that they don’t do it for the money, at all. Historically, the wives stayed with the husband to have sufficient income through her husband’s work. Her parents had to give her the starting costs. That was hard.*

During my first trip, Iris labored with a subtly pregnant stomach. We talked as she walked me over the stream next their farm shed, to one of their fields. She lives in a modest home by one of the her fields. In her backyard, she has a few plum trees that she harvests only for herself and her friends. She told me that the only kind of farm on which she would work is a biological farm because biological farms improve the environment for future generations. On my second trip, Iris had her baby so she now works three and a half days per week. Her boyfriend also works three days per week so someone can always be home with the baby. His mother, however, is moving to their village so that she can take care of her granddaughter while Iris and her boyfriend work more. Neither Iris nor Anke is sure what the future will bring but they know that it will have something to do with agriculture. Because Iris cannot work full-time anymore, she and Anke hired a third partner, Liell.
Liell, 25
Liell is the youngest farmer with whom I spoke and became a partner on the farm after my initial research when she was farming with Iris and Anke as an intern. Having grown up in a poor area of the Netherlands, her parents would travel elsewhere to bring home biological foods because there were no farms in the area. She is the youngest of three with an older brother and sister. Her parents support her farming career now but “it was a bit hard for them when I switched from University to this other study because you have these levels and it’s really two levels down because it’s practical and not academic.” She continued:

*I just told my boyfriend that I am quitting university and he agreed that I hadn’t found my place there so it’s not so surprising. Then, it was my own search for what to do. I was thinking that if I quit university then what else will I do? That’s why I volunteered in the farm at the university. I had a friend and she had been working there also as a volunteer just to do something nice, something practical. She told me about this woman who was in charge of the farm and I thought that sounded nice. The woman was tiny but powerful because she didn’t come from a farming family either. She was my inspiration because I realized that if she could do it then it was possible for me to do this farming thing too. For me, it was also strange to switch completely to this practical because I thought that of course I would go to university. My parents did it, my sister, my brother, yeah. Then I would find a job and get money. But now, I have a lot of vegetables and some money.*

She now lives with her boyfriend, who is finishing his study, in a temporary house that has been converted from a train station. The train still stops right behind her house and her windows even look on to the train tracks so she has to keep sheets over them. Liell and I had a lot of time to talk because she took me with her on her delivery trips to the shops and then I spent the night at her house. When she took me back from the farm, we
took two kittens that were just old enough to leave the litter at the farm for the first time. After we set up their new home, I looked around her abode and noticed the plethora of wine bottles. Her father, whose avocation is finding cheap, good wines, often send her these bottles.

The greatest challenge for Liell is “to get more people involved in farming and to connect them more with their food” so she enjoys the publicity aspects of the farm. She was particularly drawn to them because it was a small, biological farm on which they were also use machinery.

STEPHANIE, 60

When I returned to Stephanie’s farm, she rushed me into the house, flustered, as she finishes a phone call. She shuffled me into the kitchen, hung up the phone and made me a cup of coffee, whipping the milk by hand, despite my protests that the coffee itself was not even necessary. This was my first handmade cappuccino. She had cooked for a dinner party/fundraiser for biological agriculture the night before and the host still has her pots so Stephanie can’t make her herbs for the cheese, which messes up her cycle.

Stephanie grew up on a farm with her parents and five siblings. Despite her mother’s disappointment, Stephanie attended university and, like her two daughters’ current sentiments, wanted nothing to do with farming. She then spent time in Chile for agriculturally based social justice work and returned to the Netherlands to settle in Amsterdam. There, she worked as a lawyer’s assistant then a social worker. She decided that she wanted a job in which she could
truly see the results of her labor. She realized her deep-seated adoration for cheese making and returned to school for organic farming. Ten years after Stephanie was making cheese, Sam was constantly encouraging her to return to his farm in the south of the Netherlands with him. Eventually, she went to his farm, they married, and then took over his parents’ cheese farm.

Sam’s parents had traditional roles on the farm so his mother made the cheese while his father tended to the other aspects of the farm. Stephanie believes that every cheese has part of its maker in it and “because Sam’s mother was too stand-offish and strong, her cheese was also too strong.” Stephanie was never very close with her mother-in-law although both of Sam’s parents were a valuable support system, taking care of her daughters so that Stephanie could continue working on the farm. Stephanie prioritizes family unity, conveying nostalgic sentiments in her remembrance of family meals and traditions. When Stephanie and I picked strawberries in her garden, she became nostalgic for the days when she picked strawberries as a young girl with her mother, and then her daughters picked then with her. Wishing that she spent more time with her daughters and Sam, together, Stephanie recalled her frustration with their busy schedules. As a young girl in a farming village, she always arrived home in time to eat with her family and help with farm work. By the time her daughters arrive from high school, Stephanie and Sam are busy milking the cows so they never eat together. She agreed with my own father’s view: a family that eats together, stays together. Stephanie remains close with her mother, whose bout with cancer moved her to live with Stephanie on the farm. This opportunity was a way for Stephanie to care for her mother because she had cared for Stephanie all her life.

After Stephanie and Sam had owned Sam’s parents farm for many years, the city offered them a large sum for their land around their 400-year-old farm in order to build a bridge. They
refused the offer so the government then took legal action to seize the land and compensate them far less than the government had initially offered. As a result, Stephanie and her husband were forced to rebuild their business and biological farm elsewhere. They no longer live in a historic farmhouse or an area that the government intends to develop. Public transportation is virtually nonexistent near their farm so I was lucky that an older man offered his assistance in driving me the last few kilometers. As such, they do not fear government incursion. When they moved, they built a Gaudí-style home on their land because Stephanie did not want a “typical farm house.” The house seems so atypical for a farmhouse that the only signal of farming is the barn attached and the cows roaming.

Their cheese room, attached to the cheese-making room, is a chilled, almost sterile, space lined with hundreds of one-kilogram wheels of differently aged cheeses. When I helped Stephanie make cheese, I watched her flip each wheel onto her forearm and then back on to the cheese rack. She taught me how to do this but my arm gave out after flipping three. It was hard to imagine that she had probably flipped at least 80% of the wheels in her cheese room. Flipping cheese and cleaning every inch of the cheese room and tank for hours gave me a taste of farmers’ fatigue.6

In the main house, windows and doors are often ajar, welcoming the flies that buzz around granite countertops and newly furnished wood cabinets that form odd angles around the rhombus-shaped windows. In front of their home, Stephanie tends to the chicken coop and small garden. In the back of the house, cows graze one of their three fields, depending on the field

5 Stephanie deliberately modeled her home after the works of Antoni Gaudí because his style reflected the organic shapes of nature.
6 Stephanie might spend more time cleaning than actually making the cheese because she uses raw milk and no preservatives.
rotation. They own 65 cows and two horses, the latter of which was mainly for their daughters but they have since stopped riding them. Stephanie relies on her customers – school children who tour the farm, watch her make cheese, and consume her products – to garner support in her daily life. While Stephanie makes the cheese three times per week and wants to focus more on publicity, Sam does most of the machine and milking work. They own mostly second-hand machines that are still relatively new. Stephanie says that she is still looking for her path within her farming life.
CHAPTER 5. INITIAL PURCHASES

FIRST TRACTORS

Buying your first tractor might be a finite occurrence but the implications are vast. I asked my interlocutors how a tractor salesperson would respond to my inquiring about purchasing a tractor. The consensus: the seller would laugh. In discussing tractor purchases, the women enter the conversation in a material way. They need to purchase a machine to sustain their farm.

During my preliminary fieldwork in the Netherlands, I found the most interesting part of their narrative to be that the women all faced adversity in starting their farm and buying their tractors. Most informants recounted experiences in which the salesmen refused to sell tractors to their female patrons. All of the salespeople with whom my interlocutors interacted were men. Are these salesmen threatened? These men must know of women on farms. As such, the salesmen seem to categorize certain farm work as male and, in turn, reveal lingering sexism, which is distinct from other forms of prejudice. This sexism is marked by deep ambivalence, rather than a uniform antipathy, toward women (Glick, 491: 1996). I saw this form of sexism in my first visits to the farms and heard variations on the following story with all of my interlocutors:

The Veggie Girls’ tractor on their field
I remember there was a knock on the door and the man said, ‘is the farmer home? Where’s the farmer?’ I told him, ‘Here I am!’ And he said ‘I mean the man of the house’. And I said, ‘we don’t have a man here.’ So he turned around and walked away. We never saw him again.

Stephanie explained “In the beginning, I always had the power to fight but then I got so tired. I tell them that we have the farm together but they don’t care.” Another salesman did not understand that the women’s hands do not work on the farm, calling such a relationships “completely strange.”

The women seem to take for granted their denigration as female customers. “Of course that is going to happen,” Iris said. Salespeople respond to a potential buyer not only based on the buyer’s gender but also by their ostensible knowledge and experience with machinery, which often seem connected in the eyes of the salespeople. When Iris and Anke initially went to a farm machine fair to buy their tractor, they had trouble even finding a salesman who would speak to them. Once they finally engaged a seller, they realized that they were completely ill prepared as buyers. They did not even know what kinds of questions to ask. Their gender, compounded with their lack of preparation, allowed salesmen to pigeonhole them as inadequate and frivolous. The Veggie Girls recall, “Some people just didn’t know what to say to us. They just said nothing. They think we’re bringing them tea of coffee. They didn’t know how to react to women wanting to buy a tractor.” Assuming I would venture to a tractor shop, myself, I asked what kinds of questions they were supposed to ask: “You talk about size, horsepower, wheel size. You do not ask for the color of the tractor.” Laughing in their admonishment, they implied that because they were women, the salesmen would assume that they would ask for a pink tractor.

The farmers’ advice about proper questions was reinforced by theories of gendered speech patterns. Although a simple model of gendered speech might neglect culture, context, and
individuality, theorists hypothesize that men tend to use more aggressive and dogmatic speech patterns (Tannen, 1990). In the case of farm semantics, Norwegian farmers and found that ads often use words like horsepower, supreme engine power, hydraulic power and pull power, great capacity, position control, reaction control, driving control and that the keywords are power, precision, and control (Brandth, 1995: 126). The use of this language in agricultural discourse shows that differences in language emerges from and maintains male dominance and female subordination, especially in farm life (Zimmerman et al., 1973). The salesmen only took the women seriously when the women asked the proper questions and when the salesmen remembered that the women had already purchased equipment from them before.

Initially, Brandth sought to understand how women were portrayed in these advertisements but she soon realized that not one woman was pictured in the ads. In agreement with my findings, Brandth concluded “As only a small minority of women in agriculture have daily responsibility for the operation of machinery, this tells us that the advertising business also regards women as irrelevant as buyers and users of tractors” (Brandth, 1995: 126). This disregard reinforces that the sexism women face on farmers is not so much rooted in animosity so much as apathy toward and uncertainty about women. The enduring discrimination toward women poses a lasting gender and power barrier that limits access to what is becoming necessary farm equipment in order for a farmer to succeed. Interactions with salesmen support women’s apprehension with subscribing to the label of “women farmer” because such an identity may create additional barriers in an already challenging profession. In other words, agricultural machinery advertising neglects women as buyers, augmenting the discrimination faced by women who need such machinery to operate a successful farm.
MAINTENANCE

Women’s knowledge about machines allows them to gain respect as buyers, yet they must balance this with potentially transgressing normative gender boundaries once they own and use their tractor. Brandth found that women’s *use* of tractors is not a threat so much as their knowledge about it. Technological knowledge, represented by one’s ability to repair and maintain machines, is still a masculine area in which women “are not as good as men, because they do not master all the machines or operations. They do not have the technical knowledge of the machine functions, and important aspects of the decisions are still an area of male provenance” (1994: 145, 147). Men might have more opportunities to work with machinery because the farming community is more accepting of boys using machines while growing up on farms or in their four-year schools. However, women are increasingly gaining access and encouraged to gain knowledge about machines. In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Labor calculated that women’s representation in industrial truck and tractor equipment operators increased by four percent from 1985 to 1995.  

My interlocutors’ positive experiences with salesmen reinforce the claim that knowledge is crucial in acceptance as a woman farmer. Such instances, in which members of the agricultural community value women’s comprehension of tractors, complicates the notion that knowledge threatens more

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than application and usage. Learning this language becomes a “masculinization” of the former feminized state of “nature” ( Ortner, 1974). In the end, are my interlocutor’s expanding the limits of femininity or are they subtly creating a new gendered category that mediates between “nature” and “culture”? 

Some women use their female identity not to engage in repair work. Although these women face many challenges as a result of their gender, they also find benefits. When the Veggie Girls need to fix their equipment, the mechanic will often fix the machines free of charge but “he doesn’t do this for anyone else,” according to Liell. These women alluded to a common chivalry they felt from men in agriculture. The women do not act differently, or particularly helpless, yet the men’s perceptions of the women’s needs prompted their good will that might not be available to men. Although the Veggie Girls may find ways around participating in repair work, Liell notes that they still act as mechanics with their old, rusted tractor, which constantly needs “fiddling with” in order to plant and till properly:

*You always have to fine-tune the machines. For example, Rob, when he’s on his tractor and he also has to fine-tune for like two hours but then he can go the whole day planting seeds and he can read a book on his tractor because it’s on GPS. I wouldn’t really like that though because it’s not really with your hands anymore. We have to jump off all the time to check.*

Often, they must bring their machines to the mechanic because they did not attend a four-year school where you would learn those skills, according to Iris. The Veggie Girls seem to uphold this masculine hegemony when they capitalize on their femininity and bring the tractor to the mechanic at no cost.

Other women challenge the notion that they should not understand farm equipment maintenance solely based on their gender. Like most of the other women who own farms, the machinery is not their priority and thus they will purchase an older, used tractor. They can save
money by getting older equipment. Whereas finances perpetuate the Veggie Girls bringing machines to their mechanic at no cost, saving money and independence motivate women to teach themselves about their machines. Apart from an intensive check-up every two years, Anne and Anouk taught themselves to fix their equipment so that they do not need to pay nor be dependent upon the good will of the mechanic. In this sense, knowledge is their avenue for autonomy. Anne and Anouk learned to fix their own machines because it makes them more complete farmers and because “ringing the mechanic for every single thing would be very expensive.” Anne explained:

Now, we are farming here three years and we notice that there are not many mechanical secrets in our business. In the beginning, of course, we didn’t know how things work and if they were broken, how we would fix it. Now, if something is broken, we know how to fix it and we also know that if we can’t fix it then we have to bring it to the mechanic.

They believe that any work that a man can do on a tractor, they can also do. Further, they learn and educate themselves about mechanics to gain agency. When the burden is on the women to educate themselves, they may jeopardize their female identity by being adept with their machines; a specific proficiency that Brandth deems exclusively male. By being more assertive and calling the machinery company or yelling after the salesmen who walked away, they call more attention to their gender and thus their difference. In a community where distinction is detrimental, one must balance her identity as a woman with her skills and knowledge as a farmer in order to gain respect.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE TRACTOR

There seems to be so much power imbued in farm machinery such that women either harness it or shy away from it. Although the women’s sentiments toward the tractor weren’t
overtly *gendered*, they certainly varied based on years of experience with the tractor and the farmer’s age. Although my interlocutors do not view tractor driving as a transgression of their female identities, they did not believe it was the norm for women either.

**APPREHENSION**

Some women are insecure about driving tractors because they threaten their safety, comfort, and ideals of pastoral serenity. There seems to be a nervousness or discomfort associated with using a machine that largely stems from the agricultural community. Stephanie least likes that she feels the need to be particularly cautious when working the tractor. She agreed with her farmhand in being self conscious and needing to compensate as a woman working with machinery. The women’s views of a tractor also stems from the amount of power that is initially imbued in the tractor; a power that my interlocutors often compared to other loud machines like trucks or buses. “They [onlookers] will watch, in shock, if they see a woman on a tractor but it is the same if you see a female bus or truck driver. They’re not used to a girl on those things,” Kim said. Professor Margreet Van der Berg, who researches the history of Dutch female farmers at the University of Wageningen, referred to these positions as male jobs. It takes a process, she continued, in order for women to take on these roles. In the eighties, she was shocked but now she thinks nothing of seeing a woman drive through her village on a tractor. Some of my interlocutors are still pleasantly surprised to see another woman on a tractor. They derive anxiety from societal ambiguity and pressures, yet the natural environment may also contribute to their concerns.

The weather and soil conditions hold a common threat for all farmers. Recall that Brandth found advertisers using words like power, precision, and control. These women often
feel like they are losing control. Similar to most farming technique, using a tractor depends on the weather. When the soil is wet, “it is impossible to use the tractor,” Liell explained. Tjarda fears that the tractor might fall into a ditch while driving it. Her father, a mentor for her farming, also did not enjoy working with machines, upholding Brandth’s theory that “women who choose professions that are non-traditional in terms of gender have had fathers who motivated them to take this decision” (134; Kvande: 1982). Not only was Tjarda’s father a farmer but she also took on his specific ideals and techniques surrounding farming, noting that she doesn’t even have technology like a cell phone while she is in the field. Although she lives next to one of Amsterdam’s industrial parks, Tjarda most upholds the ideal of the countryside (Williams, 1973).

This apprehension with machinery may also be ingrained from the agricultural education system. Iris remembered that the women in her farming school were passive when interacting with the tractors. The men would ask to drive the tractor whereas the women had to be asked and, even then, they would respond with apprehension. She admitted to being scared, “I didn’t even have a driving license so I did not know what all these machines were.” Anouk went to a conventional agriculture school so she was a minority as a woman, whereas in organic schools, women tend to be the majority. This, however, is another dimension to the male hegemony within the farming community. In Anouk’s class one day, each student had to plow a piece of land. Anouk told me that, being the only woman in the class:

All the boys were saying “oh, let Anouk do it first.” They thought they could have a laugh, you know? But, then I start plowing and they were stunned because all the guys thought, “okay I have to do better than the girl and I’m not gonna. I’m not better.”

Men seem to lower their expectations for women, reinforcing the stereotype that women are less capable of manual labor. Gendered expectations tend to subside, when women obscure their
female identity and do men’s work, thus increasing their status as farmers (Brandth, 1994: 139). Iris admitted that she still has to look twice when she sees a woman driving a tractor. Growing up, Tjarda lived across the street from a farmer whose wife loved the tractor and everyone in the town would talk about it. “I think they found it crazy but they couldn’t stop her.” When asked if she felt similarly, she responded, “Did I howl with the wolves in the bush? No, I don’t think so. But, I’m glad that we had women because it made things easier.” Daan, Tjarda’s business and current life partner, believes that Dutch society is as unsettled to see women on tractors as they are when they see women drive cars. Tjarda interjected, “that was in the olden days!” Tjarda shows that women have been paving the way for the next generations to be less inhibited by traditional gender roles.

**TOY VERSUS TOOL**

The younger women who began farming in the past ten years tended to feel powerful as tractor-drivers, transferring the tractor’s imbued power onto themselves. Professor Van der Berg hypothesized that women who grew up on farms are likely to continue farming, whereas “newcomers are strange on a farm.” My data shows that such newcomers seem to bring different skills, experiences, and ambitions to the agriculture scene. This is particularly true when it comes to...
to operating machinery. Liell, who did not start farming or driving the tractor until her twenties, enjoys driving tractors because she feels particularly powerful. Iris believes that the manifestation of this power comes from her being able to accomplish tasks more efficiently. She compared the tractor to a big brother, “it’s strong and helps you!” This comment emphasizes the importance of kinship in tractor use, especially because Iris has very little contact with her older brother who works in the oil industry. For her, perhaps the tractor is a substitute for her real brother. Describing the tractor as a brother expresses the usefulness of both family and the tractor, implying the deep, familial, bond between the farmer and her tractor. The women all said that they would continue to integrate the tractor into their family vis-à-vis teaching their children to drive the tractor. Anouk noted that even though her son has many truck toys and her daughter likes having toy horses, they would both learn to drive a tractor. Without having confirmed this with Rob, Iris told me that he would rather have women working on his farm because they tend to be more precise and accurate with the machinery, seeing it as a tool versus a toy. Whereas my interlocutors talked about their tractors as an extension of their own bodies and a means to the end, the young boys utilize the tractor as the end. The machine exists more as an isolated tool, ignoring integral use in the holistic farming process. Many of the women felt proud as a result of driving the tractor because of the way it transforms her farm. In maintaining the connection between tractors and other motor vehicles, these young women found driving a tractor more fun than driving a car.
Once a farmer has become accustomed to these large machines, the power and energy originally imbued in them seems to wane and become as normalized as driving a car, Anne explained, “I just put diesel in it, I put oil in it and hopefully it works. If it doesn’t start then I’m gonna swear at it. You need it to go from point A to point B.” Like a car, you become better at driving the tractor the more you practice. In any case, a woman’s preference to use a car or any other machine does not symbolize her emancipation as a woman.

Anouk also thinks that her age has something to do with her apathy toward others’ views of her driving a tractor. She and Anne agree that they cared much more when they were in their twenties and thirties. The women who started driving tractors thirty years ago now simply view it as a part of farm work like any other. Starting at five years old, Stephanie drove tractors. She saw them as a “big boy toy, which made it very cool.” Anne remembered that driving a tractor was fun as a “wild and crazy” twenty-year-old. Anouk said that the “the best thing you can do in your wild and crazy twenties is drive a tractor around!” However, that initial eagerness that the men in Iris’ school also experienced quickly dissipated. All of the women who began driving tractors as children now see it as a chore, a task that is part of the job. Anouk and Anne believe:

*It’s necessary. That’s why I do it. But, it’s no fun for me. Or, sometimes it’s fun. I like to cut the grass one day but if you’re sitting on that damn tractor for 12 hours then you get so tired of it. You don’t like it then. ...It’s work so I don’t have any feelings on it. ... we just need it. You need it. It’s work so you need the machine. I just do the work with it and I don’t care really what somebody else is thinking.*

If it is more normalized for a man to drive the tractor then he will have more experience with driving one and be better than a female counterpart. Kim mentioned her experience of socially constructed barriers when “people say ‘a woman can also do that.’ But, you see when you’ve got
children that you can’t do it on your own.” Motherhood inhibited Kim from performing certain arduous tasks like machine work. This perpetuates the assumption that women are too fragile to employ machinery. Their mere identities as women fuel the social barriers that contribute to my interlocutors’ challenges. Rosaldo explains that “womanhood is an ascribed status; a woman is seen as ‘naturally’ what she is” (1974: 28). However, the women were also adamant that men do not have any inherent skills that make them better equipped to work with machines. Anouk explains, “I don’t think a man is better with machines. If he starts working on the farm then he also has to drive the tractor. He does it everyday. He’s used to driving it everyday like a car. If women just drive sometimes then she never gets the experience like a man does.” Society merely makes it easier for them to practice more. The same is true for truck and bus drivers, they agreed. Anne and Anouk fed off of each other’s beliefs in explaining that it gets easier to not care what others think: “it’s my life, it’s my tractor, it’s my farm so fuck you.” If Anne truly felt this way then she probably would not have to assert herself in this way. After all of the barriers that she and Anouk have overcome in order to maintain their farm, this might be a relative sentiment compared to how much anxiety they had while first gaining status in the business.
CHAPTER 6. DISTINCTION

DIFFERENTIATING FARMERS

A conventional, non-biological farm tends to see rural nature as an obstacle to overcome; utilizing scientific, technological and genetic advancements to maximize profit through continued scale enlargement. Non-biological farmers typically use hormones, antibiotics, pesticides and herbicides on their farms (Sonnino 2008: 30). Biological farms, by contrast, tend to practice a more holistic approach that maximizes farm-derived renewable resources, coordinating with the natural systems that consider the social and ecological impacts of the production cycle (Acs 2004: 2-3). In the Netherlands, Tjarda pays 600 euros per month for a certification. Tjarda’s believes:

*If a male farmer wants to change from conventional to biological then it's usually the woman, the wife, who is behind it. Women are more sensitive to the questions raised about how food is produced and the culture in which it is produced because, in lots of cases, they're also a mother. Their child they wore inside themselves. I think that when a mother has an unborn child and she reads in the paper a report from the national food security watch dog that certain supermarkets sell grapes that have too much chemical residue, I think the mother thinks “oh shit! I’m not going to buy these grapes for my child.” But, I think a man doesn't have those feelings. I think he can have those feelings. But not as a woman can have with her child.*

There is no data to back up Tjarda’s belief because biological farming is still relatively uncommon in the Netherlands. Her perception about women’s involvement in unadulterated nature reflects Ortner’s (1974) point that, even in utilizing machinery and engaging in culture, women have a greater role in negotiating closer relationships with “nature.” Biological farms do not get additional subsidies but Liell told me that the Veggie Girls do pay less in taxes because they own a smaller farm and “they want to support the smaller companies, I think. Otherwise, you earn a little bit of money and then you have to pay one-third taxes and you have nothing.”
Having been the world’s major port for centuries, the Netherlands plays a leading role in manufacturing and processing produce and meats with extremely intensive cultivation methods. According to a 2007 Eurostat press release, 2.5% of Dutch farmland was certified biological in 2005. Carolyn Steel stipulates the differentiation in that “modern agribusiness is all to do with the short-term profit and nothing to do with stewardship of the land” (Steel: 43). Even as small-scale farmers who prioritize their land and livestock, my interlocutors view machinery, which is commonly associated with agribusiness, as more help than harm.

As a result of these various views of tractor driving, farmers use their machines in different capacities and with different intentions. Since my population of farmers was all small-scale farmers, their decision to farm organically or conventionally did not seem to influence the way in which they used machines. That being said, the Veggie Girls, who have an organic farm, recognized that the rest of the organic farming community tends to see machine work as mutually exclusive with organic farming practices. When farmers defer their handiwork to machines, agricultural production often seems more industrial. Iris mentioned attending organic farm conferences, where she and Anke were often alone in support of machines on the farm: “there is this idea that technology and nature clash. People who have little organic farms just like mowing and weeding by hand and don’t like tractors, both men and women. I cannot say if it is gender-related. I just noticed that on small, organic farms, there are a lot of people who don’t like to use machines.” Although Iris did not see a connection between gender and organic farming, my informal conversations with current and past students of both the conventional and biological farm school experienced a higher percentage of women attending Warmonderhof, the biological

8 See: http://www.ota.com/organic/mt/export_3_4.html
farm school, versus a higher percentage of men attending Dronten University, the neighboring conventional farm school. Tjarda and Stephanie were sure that women often decide to farm organically. Even if the man runs the farm, the woman on the farm is the one to plant the seed for them to shift to more sustainable practices. They believed that this comes from a motherly instinct of women wanting to provide the healthiest environment for their children.

In an ideal world, technology would not exist on an organic farm because of the inherent notion that technology is the opposite of machines (Marx, 1964: 162) is inherently connected to pollution. Technology seems to be tied to artificial growth agents and pesticides. Small-scale farming idealizes working directly with one’s hands. Thus, machines threaten the ideal farming technique and the rural utopian image. My interlocutors utilize machines only to more quickly accomplish the tasks that they would otherwise perform by hand, an instrument to improve their work (Marx, 1964: 183). They isolate the machines, their tractors, as individual agents to create efficiency. Marx explains their views in that “machines merely bring out powers latent in the environment” (1964: 158). Small-scale, often organic, farmers might choose to farm in a “handcrafted” manner as opposed to the historical necessity of farming in such a way. This “handcrafted” approach may also be a deliberate decision to distinguish themselves and their farming techniques from those of large-scale agribusiness. If one begins utilizing technology then the line blurs between organic and agribusiness farms. This detestation of agribusiness stems from its connection to manufacturing and factory life. Marx elaborates on this distinction in that “the machine is a token of that liberation of the human spirit...[and] the factory system, on the other hand, is but feudal oppression in a slightly modified form” (1964: 150). Unlike Marx’s description of the ideal farm life, my interlocutors have anxiety about their land, their business,
and their livelihood (1964: 98). Thus, they strive to eliminate this contradiction between machines and the rural life by “humanizing” the machines.

NATURE VERSUS INDUSTRY

For these eight women, nature, the plants or animals, seemed to be the main impetus for farming. Men tend to be associated with industry to the extent that women might be actively pushed away from large-scale agriculture, as farmers invest more in the technological processing of natural products. Therefore, a woman’s ostensibly intrinsic detachment from culture manifests in Anne’s defensive reaction to my suggesting that her farm was industrialized after seeing her milking parlor that is lined with mechanical milking machines:

*I think our dairy farm is not an industry. This is a family farm. And, all animals have a name. This is very different from industry. But, the sound of industry...it doesn’t feel like that. Not for us. It’s a craftsmanship, that’s important. I think that if you produce food and*
you use animals for that--chickens, pigs, cows--you should start at the bottom. What does a
chicken, cow or pig need have a really nice life? Start there. Make sure the animal gets
everything he needs and then make the cost price.

Anne shows us that the natural condition of her farm and the animals is most important. Anne
and Anouk do not see their femininity as informing their focus on the natural. They refused to
consider their farm part of an industry simply because they did not have biological certifications
nor use particularly ecological practices. Thus, these women’s self-identifications with nature
might give their roles as farmers normalcy, empower them by carving out a niche sphere or,
conversely, disable them by limiting their ability to transcend different spheres on the farm.

The women value farming as a *craftsmanship*, which is becoming a more “boutique”
market in the face of industry. In capitalist societies, such craftsmanship in agricultural
production seems neither sustainable nor economical when consumers see little more than the
price tag of the farmers’ products. The resulting modern production techniques are, in general,
easier and more straightforward than craftsmanship processes but tend to alienate farmers from
their products, as we see in gendered ways. Here, alienation signifies a passive interaction with
the world around in which one is separated as the subject from the object (Marx, 1964: 177). Even
though her work might be rooted in industrial production techniques, Anne’s focus on
craftsmanship strives to resist industry’s transformation of the worker as a commodity in the
labor market. These women seem to find meaning by resisting mainstream life through their
participation in a male-dominated profession.

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9 To their credit, the only noticeable technology on their farm was the milking machines, albeit there certainly was a
tractor.

10 For the development of the Marxian concept of alienation see his economic and philosophical manuscripts of
1844.
Conventional understanding seems to separate technology from nature and the pastoral ideal. Using machines is not necessarily industrial farming. These women do not see farming from an industrial point of view and yet they utilize farm machinery everyday. One might say that they uphold a stereotype because they feel closer to nature and explain their motivations for farming in terms such as, “I just love animals and always wanted to be part of nature.” As Anne and Anouk comment that farming is in their blood, they complicate the inherence of farming because neither woman actually grew up on a farm and yet they evoke a natural, unquestionable connection to farming. Stephanie, a biological cheese farmer, believes that the cheese has some of its maker in the cheese, asserting her and her mother-in-law’s relationships to the products of their labor as natural. The biological connection to the land resonated more with the women who owned biological farms. On her certified biological farm, Liell sees machines as a way to help produce more of the food that is good for the community and the earth because she can work faster. Thus, my interlocutors use the feminine to mediate between the polarity of “nature” and “culture.” In defining culture, Ortner explains “we may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature” (1974: 72). In this definition, Ortner interprets technology as a representation of culture, which fundamentally exists to dominate nature. This does not account for my interlocutors’ view that technology simply helps them to cultivate nature. In the instance when one applies machinery specifically to nature, the machine “is redeemed by contact with ‘nature’ and the rural way of life” (Marx, 1964: 159). The machine takes on a new role that does not entail conquest
because the nature transforms the machine, in itself. Perhaps, the definition of nature is too ambiguous in that nature may be the crops or the soil.

Stephanie inadvertently critiques Ortner when she elucidates, “as long as you use technology to work with nature and not to challenge it as an obstacle.” My interlocutors re-define and re-apply the common notions of technology. Ortner reminds us “the culture/nature distinction is itself a product of culture, culture being minimally defined as the transcendence, by means of systems of thought and technology of the natural givens of existence” (1974: 84).

These women don’t seem to see farming from an industrial point of view but technology is not necessarily mutually exclusive with their vision of organic practices. At the same time, a shift in farming techniques toward a greater reliance on technology and innovation might be “a process that becomes significant in contingent and specific ways with variable and unpredictable ecological outcomes [such that] gender relations need to be analyzed as both a fundamental cause and a consequence of environmental issues” (Nightingale 2006: 170). Nightingale’s point illuminates a catch-22 in which gendered labor roles stem from and rely on ecological and technological circumstances. But, does their love for nature or animals truly relate to their gender? Michelle Rosaldo proposes that if women do not enter the men’s world then they should create a public world of their own (1974: 35). Perhaps, this is a reason for women like the Veggie Girls to start their own farms in a time when female subordination in the field still exists.

When talking with my interlocutors, they all alluded to their closeness to nature or their animals as reasons for loving their job.11 Other researchers have noted the alignment of industrial farming with gender dichotomies. The use of more technology in agriculture is viewed as a

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11 Only the two milk farmers (who were, coincidentally, the only non-biological farmers) mentioned their future desire to increase in size.
symbol of the increasingly distinct gendering of agriculture. For example, Storm-van der Chijs notes “a transfer of dairying from the farm to the factory implied a shift to the other gender’s domain” (van der Burg 1994: 128). Given this, when the raw product becomes processed by technological innovation and industry, women often become more detached from the agricultural product. In this study, the sample of women, all of whom owned small-scale farms, seemed to indicate a lack of desire to connect with large-scale industry, perhaps because of a perceived alienation.12

HIGH-TECH VERSUS SECOND-HAND

Women seem to distinguish themselves by using second-hand tractors versus those who use high-tech tractors. It was a difference of interaction with both nature and the other farmers. Similar to a car carrying a certain status for its owner, tractors can represent the farm and farmer in certain ways. Possessions and material objects are often means of acquiring and maintaining identity (Brandth, 1995: 125). For some, this manifests in investments of large and expensive equipment with GPS and radios. Furthermore, they prioritize their machines over other aspects of the farm. My interlocutors all had smaller farms and had little desire to invest in anything but a second-hand tractor. They saw this “machine farmer,” this identity and label seemed commonly known among my interlocutors, as less idealistic than those who value their land or animals over their machines. They farm because they enjoy watching something grow or being with their animals. It seems that “closely tied to the work [that] men and women do, are the tools and the machinery they use to perform their work. Such tools become symbols, and can be studied as

12 It is unclear, however, whether their aversion to industry is socially prescribed or internally created.
gendered objects. They are coded as either masculine or feminine and they help mark individuals as gendered subjects” (Brandth, 1995: 125). None of my interlocutors would prioritize their machines and this might also be a result of their choosing to become farmers. Many men still feel impelled to continue their family’s farm and, as a result, farm more to earn money and get to the end result. My interlocutors, on the other hand, prioritize the process. Unlike Kim’s grandfather, whom she believes would rather have not been a farmer, Kim made an active decision to sustain the farm when her brothers pursued other professions. Anne and Anouk, only regard machinery as important because it ensures the manicured appearance of their farm, which is necessary in order for them to continue working with their cows. In other words, the farmers who inherit the business out of necessity or family pressure seem to value machinery more than those who have actively and independently decided to farm.

Actively choosing to farm may play a large role in farmer’s use of farm tools. Although most of my interlocutors grew up in rural areas, the women who ventured to the city then felt an inclination to flee from urbanity. Tjarda and Stephanie were “urban refugees,” giving up careers in Amsterdam to pursue farming. However, these women also grew up on farms so they were, in a sense, completing their life cycle. In Tjarda’s case, her decision was so active that she took legal action against her family in order to maintain her rights to the land. Williams describes Tjarda’s inclination of yearning for the pastoral life as the “structure of feeling” when he contrasts urban life with the rural myth:

“in which the transition from a rural to an industrial society is seen as a kind of fall, the true cause and origin of our social suffering and disorder. ...It is a main source for the structure of feeling which we began examining: the perpetual retrospect to an ‘organic’ and ‘natural’ society. But it is also a main source for that last protecting illusion in the crisis of our own time: that it is not capitalism which is injuring us, but the more isolable, more evident system of urban industrialism” (Williams, 1973: 96).
The “structure of feeling” seeks to understand the origin of a constant desire to retreat to nature. There seems to be a minute moment when one can begin to identify a feeling, a movement to change that didn't exist before. The two women, in particular, who followed the path from urban to rural made an active decision to farm. As a result, their farming practices were also the most staunchly organic, telling me and then showing me that agriculture is a holistic cycle. Stephanie, for instance, did not begin farming for financial reasons, in the least. A few women explained that they probably would not last if they did not increase the size of their farm each year:

*Our object is that this cycle is going well. Our animals are healthy. That we make good, tasteful milk. Good cheese. That we can then sell more good cheese if it’s good enough. But, it is not important to be the biggest or the best farmer. We just want to earn enough money that our farm in not going broke.*

Even though some of the women had ties to family farms, they were rarely expected to take on the farm. They could participate not merely to make a living but for the sake of farming. For instance, Anne and Anouk speculate that Anouk’s ex-husband farms because all of the men in his family had done this. If he had the choice, they said, he probably would not have been a farmer, “but he would never, ever admit that.” Family obligations and expectations seem to inhibit a man’s desire to venture out of the family business. While mainstream notions of the rural farmer conflict with what it means to be a “modern man,” this patriarchal system might become problematic for the farmer’s masculinity. As such, these men might be more inclined to become modern and they can fulfill this through the use of high-tech machinery. Investing in new farm equipment might also “mirror a changing masculinity in farming--towards a less manual, more white-collar image... With the new biotechnology farming is even in the process of disconnecting from nature” (Brandth, 1995: 130). When the women take an active stance to farm, they are often
not as motivated to become the “modern woman” through their use of older machinery. According to Brandth, “Jane Adams’s research (1993) has shown that in 19th century America, when urban women became “modern” through the “cult of domesticity” and the distinct separation between public and private spheres, farm women did not adopt this form of femininity but tended to retain an identity as producers” (2002: 110). My interlocutors uphold women’s connection to “nature” as they simultaneously reproduce normative perceptions about femininity and modernity.

Breaking down machinery into second-hand and high-tech complicates further complicates Ortner’s nature/culture theory. In response to the aforementioned uncertainty around the meaning of nature, Ortner further theorizes that:

The distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can under most circumstances transcend natural conditions and turn them to its purposes. Thus culture (i.e. every culture) at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform—to “socialize” and “culturalize”—nature (1974: 73).

In this regard, my interlocutors are not utilizing technology as a means to alter nature, but to support it. High-tech farmers, on the other hand, do not seek to dominate nature so much as completely disconnect from the natural world. My interlocutors re-shape machines as more “natural,” unfolding new meaning in the feminine connection to nature with women’s high value of technology.

COLLABORATION

The difference between male and female farmers is no longer if the farmer uses machines but which machines to use. Driving a high-tech tractor limits the social aspect of farming, which is important to many farmers who value the aspect of collaboration. The women’s priority of
collaboration allowed them to differentiate themselves in a man’s world by emphasizing men’s perceived narrow focus on values and themes like competition and material success. This is significant because agricultural identities shift more slowly in agriculture than elsewhere in society in terms of equality. The construction of farming as a masculine endeavor has proved highly resilient (Brandth, 1994: 139; Pini, 2005: 7). Liell chose to work with the Veggie Girls because they have organic practice, but they also work with machines. As I sat on top of the tractor wheel while Liell drove, Anouk ran up to me as we stopped in the field. She smirked, held up an imaginary microphone, and asked, “so tell us, how does it feel to be on a tractor,” making fun of my constant questions around what they see as such a normal task. Yet, Liell specifically explained why this seemingly normalized chore might bring her such stimulation and satisfaction:

*You still have to jump on and off the tractor. You always have to change the machines because it’s never exactly the same. If you go to another field then the distances are a little bit different and you have to be like a mechanic and change the machine completely sometimes. So, you’re still doing a lot with your hands. Then, you have to check if the seeds are going deep enough. You’re walking all the time between the tractor and the plants.*

This bodily connectedness with machines and the land illustrates the way in which my interlocutors view machinery as part of the food system that they cultivate. Tench Coxe upholds
machine’s integration into nature when he is “So far from conceding that there might be anything alien or ‘artificial’ about mechanization, he insists that it is inherent in ‘nature,’ both geographic and human” (Marx, 1964: 161). The machine may even allow for a closer connection between the farmer and the land, as well as among farmers. Even as I watched Liell sow the seeds, she constantly communicated with Anke, who carefully watched the seeds drop to the designated hole in the dirt. Liell sees cooperation between working with one’s hands and working with machines. She loves to look back from the tractor and see a perfectly straight row of veggies that, in her view, looks much better than when farmers work exclusively with their hands. The tractor becomes the farmer’s “mechanized peasant.”

This manicured appearance is important when that is the basis for judgment by the greater community, agricultural or otherwise. Anne felt the same way. While Anouk tends to the cows during the day, Anne works in communications interviewing dairy farmers, so the whole community knows her and she has a reputation to uphold. She explained “people will think less of me if they drive by my farm and see that my land is poorly maintained. I have to present myself farm well in order for people to take me seriously in my other business.” Her communication business, their source of income that allows them to continue farming, might be in jeopardy if she does not maintain her farm. A farmer’s presentation seems just as important as production; it is the basis of her success as a farmer. The community and the farmer are in a symbiotic relationship in which the farmer provides for them while the community members oversee the process. In other words, one’s intent to provide for the community must balance with a professional reputation by virtue of using tractors.
The generational distinction that my interlocutors described in their conceptions of the tractor resurfaces with a gendered lens. As Anne noted, “when you’re younger you’re more eager to drive the tractor.” Anouk agreed, “then, you think it’s fun.” For that reason, Rob tended to have teenage boys drive his large tractors. They wore headphones and worked alone. Tjarda compared that the latter work to autism because the farmer does not communicate with the outsiders world, “you’re unable to hear the birds!” Brandth (1995) explores this kind of machine work in terms of “the lonely rider” masculine identity that tractor advertisements often portray because:

[Contemporary farming has become a lonely occupation. There are...no women in the ads, nor do we see men working together with, or relating to other people. Families working together, as was common in the heyday of the family farm, are not pictured as a part of today’s industrialized farming in which the tractor and attached machinery are dominant parts. It is only man and his machine against nature! (Brandth, 1995: 128)

My interlocutors objected to using technology just because such machine work is often solitary and monotonous. Whereas high-tech machines estrange one farmer from the other, Karl Marx recognizes the necessity of human interaction in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844. He explains that human nature reveals “the extent to which man’s need has become a human need; the extent to which, therefore, the other person as a person has become for him a need--the extent to which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being” (84). Marx later implies that to be human is, in fact, to be social (85). Taking this as a given, my interlocutors seem particularly concerned with any potential alienation in their work and having to re-forge bonds of social solidarity. Furthermore, this isolation prevents farmers from working in teams. Tjarda recounts:

I had always wanted to do grape picking! I like wine and you get to work with nice people. So, I thought, maybe I’ll be a wine farmer for a little while. You learned how work in teams. It’s not a
competition. You have to work together when gathering the grapes and working the fields. Lots of people can’t handle it. I like it.

Linguistically this gendered focus on group cohesion and collaboration is also marked. For example, Stephanie alluded to normative male/female speech ideologies by saying “when the women speak, they say we do this but when the men speak then they say I do this.” She then continued to say that it is much more effective to speak about tasks and priorities in terms of “we.” In other words, the women concentrate on collectivity in their farm work, achieving this through both words and actions, which is otherwise inhibited by high-tech machines (Turesky, 89: 2013). Tjarda’s ideals around group dynamics and the Veggie Girls’ approach to farm work show my interlocutors’ different value orientations as distinct from that of a farmer who orients specifically around the tractor.

Iris and Anke taste the cider that the local fermenter made using their leftover apples. As Iris expresses, the taste was not altogether palatable.
CHAPTER 7. INVISIBILITY

“Gender neutrality is the ideal, but masculinity is the standard” (Brandth, 1991: 137).

A NEW GENDER

Women’s contributions to the farm have long been hidden because of normative gender roles and public policies to support them. The role of Dutch women working on farms has shifted through the generations. Historically, Dutch women were key business partners in their husbands’ farming enterprises, but their roles and efforts were largely undervalued and under-recognized. Currently, women engaged in farming have responsibilities ranging from balancing work in the field with domestic duties inside of the home as part of a farming partnership, to complete ownership of the farm. Historically, women who owned farms were typically, although not always, the daughters of farmers and were continuing the tradition of the family farm. Female ownership, however, has never been as common as male ownership because women have often been stifled by economic and political reform that kept them dependent on a male partner. Although both husband and wife often worked on the farm together, the wife’s farm tasks were often undocumented because of the “Breadwinner’s Principle.” This meant that as long as the government had no record of the wife’s hourly contributions, the family only had one spousal income, which allowed them to receive social benefits and tax deductions (Geluk-Geluk 1994: 17).

Paralleling Dutch legislation and work standard, Rachel Rosenfield’s analysis of the 1980 American Farm Women’s Survey shows that most women’s contribution [to the farm] was considered as part of the ‘unpaid family labor’ because of the way that society constructed a definition of legitimate work” (36). This is true in the Netherlands where the government would not compensate women’s work unless they clocked in over twenty hours per week, none of
which could be considered domestic labor (Geluk-Geluk, 1994: 125). Additionally, the
government further deters women from laboring in the field because “social security system does
not pay out for replacing women in the farm labour if they get handicapped” (van der Berg,
1994: 126). Therefore, a woman in a male/female partnership tended to become a supporting
wife because she would take on domestic burdens and thus could not be duly compensated for
her work in the field.

Although technology has and continues to symbolize the machine’s domination over
nature as a feminist critique of masculinity, the farm women in my study assert that technology
can and should be used to work with nature, not to challenge it as an obstacle. Marx notes the
long history of the inherent contradiction in reconciling machinery with nature, as the pastoral
ideal “enabled the nation to continue defining its purpose as the pursuit of rural happiness while
devoting itself to productivity...” (1964: 226). My interlocutors certainly strive to reconcile the
disconnect between the rural utopian and mechanic intervention. In Ortner’s claim that women
are closer to nature and men to technology vis-a-vis culture, my interlocutors reproduce their
gendered connection to tools because they remake their gendered identities when they do not
entirely reject a masculinized position. This was clear when Kim asserted that she is no different
from a male farmer and that Stephanie felt accepted when her mother-in-law called her “a man of
sorts.” Yet, technology as a symbol for masculinity “does not fit [the farm women’s] own image
of themselves, and it is not how they want to represent themselves in relation to others. …Their
conclusion is that they are not so tough at all; they are just themselves. In fact, they added: ‘it is
not so tough, either, this occupation, as machine work has made it much easier’” (Brandth, 1994:
142). If physical strength is the main difference between men versus women’s capabilities on the
farm then machines can actually mitigate this gender difference. Anouk used her tractor to pick
up the bales of hay and straw while Stephanie operated a mechanical cheese rack to soak ten rounds of cheese in salt water at once. The women on these small-scale farms don’t distinguish themselves as women in a male-dominated profession because they are still performing tasks seen as normatively male. This shows their perception of neutrality as they constantly tell me, “I’m not your typical farmer’s wife” or “I’m not a typical farm woman…I am just me.” This neutrality is also a political statement because they understand themselves as an exception to the norm. They are able to gain leverage by neither “succumbing” to a female identity that might lead to subordination, nor seeking a masculine identity, but rather straddling a position between the two.

NEUTRALITY THROUGH BUSINESS

By seeing a farm as a business, my interlocutors are able to create a new identity for themselves. Anne and Anouk are privileged to have worked out their system such that they can maintain the farm as a productive avocation, of sorts. For Kim, her farm is her source of income, which poses the greatest challenge and threatens her role as an independent business owner:

Some years you make a lot of money and some you make nothing. That’s the farming life. You have to always put something aside for difficult years. That’s when you’re your own boss. Every
year, you don’t have the same amount of money. ...If we don’t earn enough money then we don’t farm anymore. And, it’s over and out.

Kim points to the constant impending turmoil of working in agriculture. Yet, more nuanced, she calls herself her own “boss.” Using this label might show a different outlook on farming altogether: the farm is a business. Semantics like “manger” or “partner” “has become the favored means by which women involved in on-farm physical work negotiate involvement in a role deemed masculine and retain a feminine identity” (Brandth, 2005: 8). Liell sees the use of such identifications as a sign of a farm’s industrialization: “there are big farms and everything is programmed and a lot of people are working for them so then the farmer is more like a manager.” Pini believes that such labeling offers “little or no significant challenge to the gendered construction of farming as a male enterprise. In fact, they reinforce and sustain such a construction” (2005: 8). In agreement with Brandth, this strategy rings true especially for my interlocutors who all told me that they were not the typical “farm women” or “farm wife.” More neutral identities allow women to transcend a potentially necessary enhancement of the female identity through labeling.

FEMINIST INVISIBILITY

My interlocutors consistently express their aversion to labels such as “feminist,” “leader,” or even simply “woman” because, in part, there is a potential that such labels might impede men’s willingness to work with them. Anne told me that if a man can do it then she and Anouk could do it. They do not consider themselves feminists but simply “strong women. That’s different.” Anne continued, “For me, there’s no need for feminism. You are just a normal person like everybody else.” Well, this ordinariness did not ring true during their interactions with
salesmen who did not interact with them solely because of their gender. Andrea Nightingale, however, echoes Anne’s sentiments in terms of:

> [E]ssentialist understandings of women and their ‘natural’ connection to the land. This kind of essentialism masks a variety of political-economic, cultural, and symbolic processes by which gender is produced by environmental issues as well as being implicated in the construction of the ‘issue’ itself. In short, what is not sufficiently highlighted is a clear understanding of how gender has come to be relevant in these contexts at all... But, if gender is a process that becomes significant in contingent and specific ways with variable and unpredictable ecological outcomes then gender relations need to be analysed as both a fundamental cause and a consequence of environmental issues (169, 170).

Nightingale critiques the necessity to differentiate individuals based on gender, first and foremost. Categorization based on gender or public/private spheres creates an unnecessary separation. Nightingale seems to argue that perhaps gender does not necessarily arise from distinction, by what a woman is *not* (i.e. a man). In fact, seeking to involve gender in the conversation of agriculture merely perpetuates the hierarchical dichotomy.

The blurring of public and private spheres becomes more complex when experienced by the farmers themselves. It would seem that a woman would gain more prestige by being outside of the home and working with the machines, a typically masculine chore. However, this does not ring true for the agricultural perspective in every case. Similar to the women in Brandth’s study, my interlocutors also “do not want to be identified as a housewife. They seem to feel that if they can rid themselves of the housewife label, they will also get rid of the suppression inherent in this role” (Brandth, 1994: 138). Stephanie, who graduated from university and supported herself in Amsterdam for much of her life, left her urban life when she married Sam and took over his parents’ farm with him. When Stephanie’s mother-in-law, who made the cheese on her and her husband’s farm for over 40 years, saw Stephanie shoveling the manure and working the
machines, she said, “she’s just like a man!” When I asked Stephanie what her reaction was to that, she responded: I felt accepted. She explains her initial farm roles:

_There were many things that I was doing. I was up at four to milk [the cows] in the morning. I made the cheese. I put the shit away. I did all that! That is why I didn’t mind doing less. When my daughter was sick, nothing else interested me._

Her interests and priorities shifted. She no longer needed to work with the cows or the tractors to feel fulfilled. Like Keyes’ mother, she spends entire days making cheese. She would rather work with customers, taking school children and families around her farm. What attracts Stephanie, the more domestic work of cooking and publicity, seems subordinate to her husband’s more physical labor in the fields. However, as Brandth acknowledges in her later work on feminism (2002), men and women’s work does not necessitate power norms on the farm. Most women who are sole or part-owners of their farms will use a tractor; yet, as Barbara Pini (2005) writes in her study of women on Australian sugar cane farms, “while these women may have trespassed into a domain of masculinity by undertaking tractor work, they could define a clear boundary between themselves and men through their focus on domestic duties” (6). The subsequent distinct gender roles that Stephanie and her husband have do not necessitate a power structure because the farm, as a business, requires inter-personal work as much as technical work.

Replacing productive labor with domestic labor was not necessarily the “natural” course for the women on the farm but, for those who did have children, like Stephanie, she preferred to work less with the cows and more with the customers. Stephanie’s work in the kitchen might appear as oppressive to the urban, white woman but “women being understood as a single, uniform category” might be an essentialist notion in and of itself (Brandth, 2002: 112). Right now, there appears immense difficulty in maintaining one’s femininity while working on a farm.
Women’s occupation and location give rise to their understanding of power norms in their context. Thus, seeing farm work from a farm woman’s perspective is a necessity in order to understand their motives, ideologies, and actions.

Those in a lesbian relationship did not seek to distinguish themselves from a heterosexual couple when they said, “We just live like men and women together. Only, we are two women. We don’t like that shit. I don’t like that. We don’t publicize...we don’t want to be seen as a lesbian [but] as a woman, as a person.” They amended their statement for their ultimate desire to be seen not as a woman but as “a person.” Furthermore, it makes sense that farm women do not often associate with the feminist movement. Although they might be disadvantaged in a hegemonically masculine and hetero-normative world of farming, their reasoning for avoiding feminism may manifest in the way “popular conceptions of feminism have been regarded as destabilizing and as a threat to many of the social relationships that are valued in rural life” (2001: 108). The women do not want to risk their partnerships with the men who work with them, particularly if she is married to one or he helps her to start her farm, as is the case with Stephanie and the Veggie Girls, respectively. The women do not need another reason for the men to alienate them.
GENDER INVISIBILITY
*I am a sort of man! --Tjarda*

Women seem less vocal than men about their ability to drive the tractors. As long as one can keep her femininity largely invisible then she is acceptable in the farming community. Brandth explains that farm women’s reluctance to distinguish themselves from men in expressing that “if there is too much emphasis on the fact that they are women, their respect as farmers may be damaged. They did not particularly want to talk about themselves being women and therefore special” (1994: 136-7). This corresponded to my interlocutors’ denial of their female identity, noting “I don’t see myself as different from a male farmer. No! It’s not that I have to prove myself,” or “I am a sort of man! I can’t get excited about clothes or anything.” Simultaneously constructing normative ideals about femininity while also neglecting gendered differences highlights tensions and ambiguities that gendered ideologies play in farm life. In defining femininity in specifically farm-based ways these women still maintain, contradictorily, that women are equal and therefore indistinct from men. However, the women’s identification of gendered labor became more apparent and concrete when they were able to speak in terms of a specific topic (i.e. technology).

Recent feminist political ecology research like the work of Nightingale (2006) asks whether gender even matters. Nightingale complicates women’s essentialist connection to the agricultural land by addressing the necessity of looking at “political-economic, cultural, and symbolic processes by which gender is produced by environmental issues. ...In short, what is still not sufficiently highlighted is a clear understanding of how gender has come to be relevant in these contexts at all” (169). Taking up this absence in scholarship, I found that the women in my research often denied seeing their gender as playing a significant part in their life experiences on
the farm. This denial might also be meaningful in that admitting gender difference would be an admission of weakness and deficiency. A woman’s gender appears so invisible because not only does technology contribute to the social construction of gender; gender contributes to the process of giving social meaning to technology (Berg, 1990; Brandth and Bolsoe, 1994; Cockburn, 1993; Wajcman, 1991) (125).

The construction of gendered identities appeared virtually invisible to the women in their first responses to my questions. Upon further probing, a few of my interlocutors became more introspective about it. Iris notes the advantage of being a woman in such a situation because they have no shame in asking for help and, in turn, other farmers enjoy giving assistance. Men might feel that their asking for help runs against acceptable cultural or social norms for farm men. Kim expressed:

*I think that there are qualities that women have more than men. When you are a woman and you do this job, you can’t do anything on your own. You have to ask for help. I think a woman asks sooner for help than a man. Male farmers always think that they can do everything on their own. We have to ask for help, you can’t do everything on your own. Things are too heavy or animals are too big.*

Iris proved Kim’s candid view about women’s physical limits when she hurt her back while lifting crops during the summer months. Naturally, men are not exempt from injury while laboring on the farm. Kim and Iris note the advantage of being a woman in such a situation because they have no shame in asking for help and, in turn, other farmers enjoy giving assistance. Brandth (1992) found this to be the case with her sample of farm women in Norway, as well. When women felt apprehensive or overly cautious with driving a tractor, they also recalled feeling that if a man makes a mistake with tractor work then his supervisor will show
him how to do the work correctly whereas the supervisor would likely take over the entire task if
the woman makes the mistake. Iris complicates this experience:

> From a man you can ask for help more easily. For a man, he usually wants to help a
woman. If I was another man then he would say, ‘just help yourself, you’re a man.’ That’s
just what I think. When we say, ‘can you help me with a machine?’ then a lot of people
would help us and explain everything to us. But, another group of men just won’t take us
seriously.

Stephanie recalled that men will go to one of two extremes in observing women struggling with
farm equipment: he will either quickly become impatient and take over the task, or he will be
even more patient than with men. One of Pini’s interlocutor’s recollected that her offer of “giving
a hand” to the men on her farm was met with the comment, “I don’t bloody think so” (2005: 5-6).
This experience certainly depends on the men, but the women’s feelings that this would happen
speaks to their discomfort and feelings of discouragement from others in the farming community.

Iris’ perception of farm men’s interaction seems based on competition in that this group
of men do not see women farmers as their competition. Thus, while the men are adversarial in
their farming or their performance of masculinity, they are less threatened and more willing to
work with and help women. A woman helping a man may threaten his masculinity, reversing
gender norms as the man becomes the archetypal “damsel in distress.” Despite Iris’ injury, she
did not ask for help as soon as needed. This instance illustrates the anthropological truism that
what we say is not necessarily how we act. Although women might ask for help more readily in
some instances, anyone can make the mistake of over-estimating their physical strength. The last
part of Iris’ statement subtly points to Anouk’s experience with conservative farmers who feel
that farming should remain in men’s hands. My population of women farmers seem to position
themselves as different enough to benefit from their perceived feminine traits yet sufficiently
similar to male farmers to maintain a commonplace role in the their male- dominated farming community. In other words, female farmers appear to strive to balance their distinction with invisibility.

Iris harvesting crops by hand while Liell and Anouk use the tractor on the field.
CHAPTER 8. ECONOMICS

AVOIDING POVERTY

Profit and labor are driving factors in increasing machinery. Just as the dishwasher and laundry machine gave housewives more free time, combines and tractors allow farmers to spend more time to diversify their daily routines (Marx, 1964: 181). Stephanie can spend two days per week making cheese and the rest of the week publicizing the cheese and establishing a farm shop, which increases their income and incentive for guests to come to the farm. Labor and profit are not necessarily correlated because profit is also dependent on price fluctuations that are external to the farm. This is not necessarily based on how hard the farmer works. If the price that the milk processor to which Anne and Anouk send their milk is low then their returns will also be small.

Even with a set price for their product, my interlocutors who were dairy farmers invested in mechanized milking tanks. I assumed that if they were a small farm then they would milk their cows by hand, just as I had experienced my county fair over ten years ago. The dairy farmers with whom I spoke all assured me that a farmer would go out of business in a few weeks should they seek to milk their cows by hand. To my surprise, their milking parlor housed twelve stations and from each station dangled four mechanical suctions that would vacuum to an udder and suck the cow’s milk into a 35-liter tank. The milk then automatically collects in a larger, heated tank that is connected to the national processor’s milk tanks. This system allows them to milk twelve cows at one time with efficiency that does not compare to milking by hand. This mechanical process still takes about ten minutes per cow, depending on how quickly the milk flows out of the udder and the number of times it kicks off the suction devices that suck the milk. Hearing the
vacuuming, sucking, clicking and pressurizing of the machines made me question my own rural fantasy. This was the only way to have a functioning dairy farm.

As much as Anne and Anouk prioritize their interactions with and the well-being of their cows, Anne explained the arduous nature of their work in that “fewer and fewer people want to work in the dairy business because it’s long hours, dirty work. In Holland, we have more automation to feed and milk cows.” The “automation” to which she refers is called a “milking robot,” which would replace anyone needing to be in the milking parlor to physically milk the cows. This piece of equipment, which Kim has and has allowed her to expand her farm, costs thousands of dollars but, as Anne confesses, “we could have a normal, social life with more freedom and vacations. The time commitment is the greatest challenge.” Their friend has a milking robot so they excitedly asked, “will you come back another weekend to see it? We can bring you there!” Sadly, I did not have the opportunity to see one but, perhaps when I return to their farm, I they will have purchased one. The robot would not directly increase their profits but would not demand the same kind of labor of the farmer and would allow them to expand, produce more milk, and thus make more. However, the cow, not the profit, is not their priority. A website for a milking robot targets farmers who prioritize their cows by including an entire section called “the cow is key.”¹³ This seems like a sales tactic to mitigate guilt that a cow farmer, who prioritizes the cows, might have because there would be much less interactions with the cows. The robot would simply require someone to herd the cows into the parlor and then the robot would finish the work. For a farmer, whose job is 365 days long, the technology allows the farmer to be with the cow without such a physical burden.

Technology often allows for more independence. Unlike the economically dependent wife of the farmer, women are now relatively financially independent in starting and maintaining their own farms. Anne and Anouk have balanced the financial burden such that they can have a relatively small farm and still maintain economic stability.

*Anne:* *We have two legs under the chair. It’s my business and it’s the farm. That makes the farm easier. The one goes better or the other goes better then it helps.*

*Anouk:* *Anne brings in the money and I spend it like crazy [on equipment for the farm], you know?

Their first year helped them to get the rest of the farm going solely from selling the embryos of their most prized cow, Lucky, who was the 2008 cow champion of Holland. Lucky currently lounges in her own pen and is the first one to be milked every morning and every evening.

Unlike parents who often refuse to pick favorites, Lucky is unquestionably the chosen one. After our interview, Anouk even went into the office, returning to the kitchen with an album of Lucky standing erectly in a charming, Dutch meadow. Anne tells me that it is most important for the cows to have a happy life.

*First, we make sure the animals get everything they need and then we make the cost price. If you buy a liter of mineral water in the supermarket, it’s 1.50 euros but a liter of milk is 50 cents. It’s incredible. For that liter of milk, you have to put the cow to work, as well. It’s a shame.*

Because of the open market, milk prices fluctuate with the shifting economy. In Britain, the average dairy farmer loses money for every liter of milk (Steel, 2009: 95-96). Even with the milk processor paying farmers extra for keeping cows in the fields versus the barn, this economy makes it particularly difficult for dairy farmers to succeed, no matter how hard people may work. With consumers’ reluctance to spend money on food, farmers are working harder for less money and leaving them verging on poverty.
LABOR NOT LUXURY

This anxiety around farm work depicts the realities of farm work not simply as a refuge from urbanity and disciplined labor (Marx, 1964: 87). Even “by the mid seventeenth century, more than half the Dutch lived in towns, and the land (much of which had been reclaimed from the sea) was working overtime to feed the population” (Steele, 2009: 25). Two-hundred years ago, urbanites were already the norm, relying on the rural dwellers to provide their food. This immense burden stands in contrast to the urban ideal of the farming as undisciplined, simple work. The countryside does not entail Stephanie cleaning her cheese tank for hours, Tjarda on her knees to pick every weed for half the day, or Kim milking her 500 goats twice per day. The countryside still holds a seductive quality, dangerous for visitors who might be “ravished by the beauties of naked nature” (Marx, 1964: 86). Raymond Williams challenges this pastoral ideal in his book, *The City and The Country* when he quotes *The Thresher’s Labor*: 

Anne working the milking parlor.
“...No respite from our Labour can be found;  
Like Sisyphus, our capital work is never done:  
Continually rolls back the restless Stone.  
New growing Labours still succeed the past;  
And growing always new, must always last.”

This portion of the poem addresses the urban romanticizations of the countryside and its natural beauty. The endless labor becomes an object of nostalgia, as though one might become more pure by exuding physical energy unlike that of labor in a factory. Although farmers might be slaves to the crops and cattle, tending to them everyday, this connection to “pure moral nature [shows] true dignity of soul and character” (Marx, 1964: 188). In a growing financially competitive climate, larger farms bring in more income because they can lower their prices and compete with industries (Steele, 61). Liell explained that it “feels a little strange that I’m working the same--maybe even more hours--and there is such a big difference [in wages]. We could try to get bigger and sell more but I think it would be more fair if the prices were also a little more normal.” This means that farmers are more inclined to use mechanical assistance to expand their farms.

Although my interlocutors all have small or medium-sized farms, most of them aspire to increase in size because it will give them more financial security. As Liell explained, having machinery on a one-hectare farm is not necessary but with two hectares or more, the need for technical equipment becomes increasingly necessary. This high-stakes, economic battle supports Williams’s dispute of The Village, which reads “Ye gentle souls, who dream of rural ease.” Williams elaborates on this misguided description, commenting that “the arraignment rests on what is in effect a pastoral assumption: health is the ‘fair child’ of labor; it ‘languishes’ with wealth. This is more than an observation of the simple dependence of health on exercise; it is a
slanted association of health with labor and then of sickness with wealth, that in any real world is naïve” (88, 92-93). As evident with Iris hurting her back upon striving to carry more than her capacity, labor does not correlate with improved health. Stephanie’s husband’s silence during dinner reminded her of the stereotype of farmers tending to be very quiet in social situations and joked that the reason was because they were always worn down from their arduous work on the farm. He, like Anouk, wakes at 4 a.m. and goes to sleep at 9 p.m. because their cows need milking in the early morning and in the evening. Thus, their work requires this lifestyle but makes them no more pure than another. According to Daniel Miller in his philosophical ethnography, Stuff, this “depth ontology” assumes that who we are is located deep within ourselves and is opposite to our surface demeanor. Thus, an urban dweller might be shallow while a farmer is a saint. He argues that “the true core to the self is relatively constant and unchanging and also unresponsive to mere circumstance. We have to look deep inside ourselves to find ourselves. But these are all metaphors. Deep inside ourselves is blood and bile, not philosophical certainty” (2010: 16-17). This belief expresses that one’s demeanor, work, or residence does not in fact make them any more or less simple, moral or superior. As my interlocutors said in regards to gender: I am just me.

Liell and Iris carrying their leeks to the truck after the harvest.
TECHNOLOGY AS A THREAT

Technology can also threaten the profit of the farm. With assistance from these computerized processes, Stephanie has more time to do what she enjoys: publicizing the cheese, establishing their farm shop, and keeping her family together. Stephanie’s priority is the biological nature of her farm and yet her entire cheese room is relatively mechanical. In her old farmhouse, her cheese tank was 400 years old, as old as the house itself, wooden, and capable of making 1,200 liters of cheese at once. Now, she can make 4,000 liters of cheese at once from her stainless steel tank that is equipped with temperature adjustment features and mechanical churning properties. The downside to this seemingly improved efficiency is that the cheese maker will lose that much more product and profit if he/she makes a mistake. Stephanie continued, “It makes you want to cry. You pretty much die if you screw up because it makes about 40 kilograms of cheese and losing that much is too much.” The threat of technology is perilous for the farmer’s business but, moreover, for the consumer. If a farmer neglects safety measures on a large farm with the intent to profit, then consumers are in danger. A Stanford University study suggested that contamination with botulinum toxin of one of the 50,000-gallon milk silos that feed American consumers could kill 250,000 before the contamination was even discovered14(Steel, 2008: 102). When farmers use technology to expand their farms then the machines may pose a risk and no longer function as a way to “bring out powers latent in the environment” and rather disconnect from the farm as a holistic system (Marx, 158: 1964).

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CONTRACTORS

A farmer’s hindrance of the utopian isolation and independence of a rural farm life is best exemplified by contracting farm work to companies or individuals who have specialized equipment. This was a way for my interlocutors to focus on the parts of farm work that they enjoyed most, maintaining a sort of specialization and delegation aspect within farming duties. Women who own their own farms in the Netherlands do not necessarily fulfill an ideal of the completely independent farmer, subsiding only on her own crops and working her land on her old rusted tractor. That being said, I have yet to meet a farmer who can survive with such work ethics. With the foregoing economic challenges, such independence is a myth that would seem virtually impossible to maintain.

The rurality of farm life might seem inherently associated with solitariness in one’s work, yet economic realities make it more productive for farmers to outsource tasks like tilling or hoeing. With consumers separated from their producers, they are unwilling to pay more than a few dollars for any given crop, forcing farmers to exert more effort and receive less profit. As a result, “morality is separated from the social relationships which breed poverty and indifference. ...[Thus,] a pastoral vision, of simplicity and independence, [is] made bitter and desperate by scenes in which it is continually denied: the neglect of the poor, the excess of the rich” (Williams: 92, 93). The farmers must find help elsewhere if purchasing their own

Stephanie’s cheese room.
machinery is not financially feasible. Whereas a field might take Anouk an entire day to till, the contractors could turn the same amount of land in only few hours with their specialized equipment. A working farm must be productive and, in order to function, one might need to seek external assistance.

Similar to the farming sales people, contractors also tend to be men. This group of agricultural workers reinstates classic gender. Ten kilometers up the road from Anne and Anouk’s farm, two brothers own a contracting business to help farmers in their area. This particular contracting company is family-owned with five workers and helping hands from farm boys in the area. According to their website, Loonbedrijt Zweir fertilizes, harvests grass and corn, and tills.\(^\text{15}\) As Anne explained, “it’s like a dairy business, but with machinery. If I call them this morning, they can be here in half an hour.” According to Anne, contractors are common in Holland. They are available in every farming city such that the distances to the farms are not far. According to Anne, “[the contractors] work faster and better, they are reliable which is very important, and they have the same goal as us: good quality feed, the best use of our minerals (manure) and on-time harvesting, for example.” The women pay a fee 55 to 200 euros per hour, depending on the machinery that the men bring to use. This way, Anne and Anouk do not need to invest in costly equipment but can outsource the tasks instead. As a result, Anne can work at her publicity job and Anouk can do other necessary tasks with the cows.

Anne was the only woman to who worked with a contractor when she was a student. The tractor brand was named after the founding family, Fendt. However, pronouncing the word in Dutch sounds like the Dutch word “vent,” which is a colloquial term for “man.” The men with

\(^{15}\) See [http://www.loonbedrijfzwier.nl/](http://www.loonbedrijfzwier.nl/)
whom she worked put a new plate on her tractor that said “girl” to make her more comfortable and as a practical joke. Although Anne does not like driving a tractor anymore, she found the contracting work “very fun” during college. The tractor work is just one more chore that the women must complete in order to maintain their farms. When asked how it felt to drive a tractor, Anne said that it is work and so she has no feeling on the tractor. Hiring a contractor relieves what most of the women see as a chore. Women will still use their tractors almost daily. The contractor offers services that would take a farmer an entire day of tilling or hoeing. Often, the contractor will send a young boy because the younger ones still see tractor work as novel and exciting. The boy who works their land then gets a share of the wage that the women pay to the contracting company. As the women exhibited in their varying years of experience with tractors, those who have spent more time with tractors saw it as more mundane than those to whom it was a novel activity.

For cattle farmers like Anne and Anouk, they did not look at their fields and see a natural cycle of seeds germinating. Instead, they saw their fields as a necessity habitat in order for their cows, their priority, to live happily. As such, contractors are their way of spending time on the farm work that they care most about; that is, working with the cows and not twelve hours of tilling land. This allowed the women to continue working within their limits of what was ideal farm work.
SUBCONTRACTING AND INTERDEPENDENCE

For many young farmers in America, moving “back to the land” is a fantasy in which the messiness of farm work might not be fully taken into account. A farm is a business and, like every business, there is monetary value at stake. Thus, the owners must make decisions based on the consequences of the farm’s future. This means that one must often engage in their community and not remain secluded and solitary as the rural ideal might express. Marx explains this challenge in that “an essential isolation and silence and loneliness have become the only carriers of nature and community against the rigours, the cold abstinence, the selfish ease of ordinary society” (1964: 131). Here, he asserts the infeasible option to sustain a general independence” in farming (1964: 101). There seems to be a subtle paternalism with most women on their farms. Anne told me that she and Anouk are known in the town because they are the only women farmers in the area. She said, “Everybody around us knows what we do so they keep an eye on us. I hate it.” As these women strive for independence in their work and lives, they still sense a constant surveillance from those around them. This might stem from those around them feeling threatened or that the women are incapable of working on their own. Brandth believes that women’s subordination still exists in agriculture but has transformed: “Masculine superiority has changed from being a most visible and legitimate patriarchal power to a more covert form of male dominance” (1994: 147). Some of the women embrace such paternalism as the Veggie Girls have done in partnering with Rob. Although it seems to be a partnership, they are still the new ones on the land and seek constant guidance and assistance from Andre. However, such an observation might, in itself, imbue gender with power (Nightingale, 2004: 171).
The Veggie Girls own their farm but they rent the land on which they grow their crops. I had not heard of other farmers doing this but many farmers did speak out about rising land prices in the Netherlands to the extent that Dutch farming students planned to purchase land in Germany in order to start their farms. They rent land from an estate that one man owns. As such, he has the authority to limit what the farmers build based on his aesthetic opinion. Liell explains the specific community:

_We always have to ask this one guy who is on top of everything. He can say that the glass greenhouse doesn’t fit with the landscape so we can’t build it. So, the municipality has no say. Just the committee. We can’t buy the land from them. Even Andre has to rent all his land. 100 hectares. He rents from the estate and we rent from him. To buy it would be impossible. In Holland, it’s almost impossible. Everything is very expensive. It’s possible if you have nice, big cows. They would tell us to borrow money from the bank. For us, it’s quite nice to rent it. It’s easier to start up your company. If you have to buy it first then you have to pay back the money in several years. It’s harder to start with a business._

Rob not only rents the land to the Veggie Girls but he has also mentored them to achieve their current success in organic agriculture. Liell explains their personal and professional relationship with Rob in that “we always drink coffee together but we don’t exchange work everyday.” When I sowed a field of leeks with them, Liell slowly drove the tractor down the row where the crops would grow. She was jumping on and off the tractor to help Anouk who walked behind the tractor. The two of them were constantly checking that the seeds were going deep enough in the soil and that there is the right amount of space between the seeds. When they go to each different field, they have to make the proper adjustments again because the measurements are never the same. Although Liell enjoys driving the second-hand tractor and using her hands even with the tractor, she knows that such practices cannot fill their 280 vegetable boxes every week. It is
simply not efficient enough. As such, they work with Rob, who also uses organic operations with his crops but on a larger scale. Liell explains the partnership:

For example, this year, Andre is growing some crops that he will give to us like broccoli. For us, it’s nice but he likes it as well. Last year, he grew broccoli and he had to harvest 15 tons at one time and then the wholesaler didn’t want it. Now he has four amounts every week or every two weeks. For us, it’s really nice that he planted it every week so we get it all the time. For him it’s nice because he can sell everything. This kind of working together would be great in other ways and if we could do it more. He has the machines and everything and—well, I guess we also have the machines, but we have contact with the shops, the communication. We could build what we have now and improve that system. In the end, he also likes to see his product ending up in the region and not wherever.

Rob has to fine-tune his tractors for a few hours but then he can spend the entire day planting seeds. Since the women moved into Rob’s crop shed a few months ago, they work more together. According to Liell, Rob’s machines are more precise with the planting and hoeing so the growing is more uniform and the crops are about the same size. Large machines are not affordable for farmers who only have two hectares, like the Veggie Girls. The women help Rob when he literally needs more hands. Liell recollected, “the one time I worked on Saturday was when Rob asked if we could help for a couple of hours to harvest broccoli, for example. I really like it so I said yes because I didn’t have anything for the Saturday morning so I thought it would be nice.” The women will help pick the crops that the machines cannot collect.

Herding cows into Stephanie’s barn
I did not see this on other farms but there is certainly a community around farming in which one farmer will help a neighbor. That being said, this is an advantageous partnership but not necessary to succeed as a female farmer. Even without an established partnership, farmers are not typically completely alone with their fields. Liell said that they “always drink coffee [with Rob] but we don’t exchange work everyday.” Nonetheless, this exchange of labor allows the women to focus on their small plots of land and the production of organic crops. Feeding the world with more nutritious sustenance was the women’s original motivation for starting the farm. Their relationship with Jan makes it so that they don’t have to worry if one of their machines breaks down and they lack the welding skills to fix it. Rob has that expertise.

This partnership and the Veggie Girls’ lack of profit motivation seems to contradict traditional, historical views of farming as the rural utopia. Farmers have neither complete independence nor financial stability. This partnership reifies both aspects of farming. The economic stability of farming is not such an issue for Iris:

*The profit is important because it’s difficult to have enough profit to live. It’s quite difficult actually to live from this. For me, [profit] is not so important actually. That’s why I can live from only very little money. [But], it is one problem with farming.*

In the past, wives stayed with the husband to have sufficient income through her husband’s work. However, parents now have to supply start-up costs to assist young people with their farms. This is very different from the historical perception of farming as a great source of economic independence. Anna Maria Storm-van der Chijs, a Dutch feminist in the 1860s, encouraged women to expand their tasks on the farm but to limit themselves to jobs that were not too arduous such that they were capable of achieving. She told women to focus on work close to the home: gardening, milking, cheese making, and bookkeeping for instance. She believed that
women’s agricultural labor was implicitly farmwomen’s labor and thus strived to widen participation among more social niches such that more women would be economically independent and self-sustaining (van der Burg, 1994: 127).

DELEGATION

Tjarda, on the other hand, has the best of both worlds. She moved out of the city to take over her family’s land for reasons similar to that of the Veggie Girls. As the owner of the only organic crop farms in Amsterdam, most of Tjarda’s farm work revolves around using her hands to cultivate her five hectares, which is exactly how she would prefer it. She spends 600 euros per year to certify her farm, which ends up being a large part of her annual income. According to Tjarda, many farmers in the Netherlands “only get the certification because they lie and use poisons.” Nonetheless, she speaks fervently about her support and publicizing certified organic farms. I found that the women in my study who had trained in organic farming all know one another through school or community events. There tends to be a close network for farmers who have these particular practices. Because Tjarda is so averse to machinery, her favorite part of farming is harvesting potatoes because “it’s like digging for gold.” In order for Tjarda to maintain working on the part of the farm that most energizes her, she delegates the machine work to her colleagues. Furthermore, she feels that she is not good at any sort of technological work.
Her life partner, Daan, does both the tractor work and the computer work. Tjarda does not even like to drive cars because of her grave fear of technology.

Even though these women all overcame adversity in starting and maintaining their farms, they still acknowledge that they cannot do it all alone. Farming, for them, is not so much about doing every aspect of maintenance on their own so much as pursuing the part of farming that fueled their passion to start farming in the first place. Contrary to the urban myth of what the farming life entails, complete autonomy does not truly seem to exist in farming. In short, no woman seems to regret this lack of complete autonomy because she is too busy pursuing the farm work that she enjoys most.
CONCLUSION

These eight women interviewed are all in very different positions in both their gendered and agricultural identities. In some cases, the women surprised themselves in their reactions and responses to discussions regarding their role on farms and, particularly, as they interact with machinery. Our discussions allowed them to express themselves in a thoughtful way that served for both my research and their own self-awareness. Each woman told me that she was not the “typical woman farmer,” as if to warn me against extrapolating from her experiences. This highlights ambiguities and unresolvedness concerning the identities of modern female farmers. Perhaps, an increase in women’s agency on the farm gives rise to the obsolescence of a formulaic lifestyle for women who own farms.

My limited sample size does not warrant generalizations about every female farmer in the country. Unlike the women farmers who tend to stay on their own land and rarely interact with farmers who are not neighbors, I was able to move within these different circles to connect their shared positions through the lens of technology. These women live on land that an Elizabethan painter or poet might consider a true rural utopia. Yet, they must engage in their community in order to survive as farmers. Looking at the greater food system, one of my main aims was to more closely connect producers and consumers and, after experiencing the minimal connection that women farmers have with one another, to connect these producers with one another even simply on an emotional level. Through stories about engaging with their tractors, my interlocutors conveyed underlying sexism that might unfold more overtly if they spoke in a group.
With the tractor as a charged symbol, my interlocutors expressed the necessity of technological proficiency, mechanically and semantically, in order to succeed as a farmer today. Yet, their rejection of industrialization contributes to eco-feminist discussions as a way of playing out a normative femininity, which might be better expressed by their natural farming techniques, their work ethic, and the farm tools that they employ. Their initial struggle to distinguish themselves from men on the farm highlights their introspective learning as our discussions progressed to exhibit more of a binary than they anticipated. Further research might be pursued focusing on how women’s experiences play out in a larger setting because it should not be presumed that each woman exists in a microcosm.

The female farmers I have written about spent hours walking me through their farms, cooking food for me, and playing chess with me. All of these activities helped me to understand these women in a more intimate way. They did not seem to act out of the ordinary simply because I was a guest. In fact, I was able to connect on such a personal level because I was not seen as a guest. In many cases, I was their apprentice, witnessing their teaching methods and engaging in their arduous labor. My field research allowed me to be seen less as a researcher and more as their student and admirer. Stereotypical views about farmers’ identities range from the “bourgeois middle classes [and] their so-called lack of refinement [as] connected to being not civilized, rough, backward and traditional. In contrast, romanticists describe the same persons as balanced, honest, industrious and reliable” (van der Berg, 1994: 126). I experienced the latter when talking with these motivated women. As my relationship deepened with the farmers, I was able to understand better the personal relationship that the women have with their work. Each of
the eight women talked with me about and showed me how she lives each day with innate passion and commitment to nurture and sustain her farm.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


INTERVIEW GUIDE

Past
• What did you want to be when you were growing up?
  • What were you academic/professional/personal ambitions?
• Who were your role models? Who inspired you?
• What kind of community did you grow up in?
• Were you involved in food and/or agriculture when growing up?

Current
• How has your position as a farmer shifted since you began your work?
• What is farming to you?
• Are there other farmers with whom you are in touch? Female farmers, specifically?
• What are your academic/professional/personal ambitions now?
• What or who influenced you to go into farming?
• How did you get here?
• Are you proud of your job? Of your work?
  • If so, what makes you proud?
• What kind of support do you need and from where/whom do you get it?

Future
• What do you envision for your own future?
  • In the next ten years?
    • Why?
• What is your ideal future?

Gender
• What is the greatest challenge for you as a woman farming in today’s society?
• Do you see yourself as having specific qualities as a female farmer that a man may generally not possess?
• Do you think it’s normal for women to drive tractors?
• Do you know other women who drive tractors? How do you perceive them? Female farmers who do not drive tractors?
• Do you think you are a role model to other women farmers?

Family
• How might women’s experiences with tractors shifted over time? If your mother or grandmother worked on a farm, what was their perception of the tractor and did they use one?
• If you have a daughter, why would or wouldn’t you teach her to drive a tractor?
• How would your (grand)parents/siblings react to your driving a tractor?

Tractor as Technology
• At what age did you first start driving tractors?
• How does Dutch society and, particularly the agricultural field, view tractors?
• How do you feel about your tractor? When you drive it? (e.g. strong, must compensate, embarrassed)
• Are you comfortable around tractors?
• Do you have a specific relationship with your tractor?
• What do you like/dislike when working with tractors?
• What is your least/most favorite part about the tractor?
• Do you feel like you are challenging any gender norms by driving your tractor?
• How might driving your tractor be a form of resistance to culture or a way to express your agency?

**Funding and Urban Farming**
• How do you feel about urban farming?
• How do you feel about urban farmers getting grant funding?
• Partnering with urban farmers?