

AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN OREGON'S WILLAMETTE VALLEY:
A HISTORICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis is an evaluation of the constraints and opportunities for agroecological transformation in Oregon's Willamette Valley, in attempt to find what can be learned from the particularities of this context. Using a historical and ethnographic case study approach, I evaluate the strategies of food systems allies in the Oregon Community Food Systems Network. I explore how agroecology is being translated to contribute to socially just and ecologically sustainable agri-food systems. The case study is situated historically, through the frame of territory, to illuminate the particularities of place that enable and constrain transformation, beginning with settler colonization. Allies are contributing to transformation through a network approach, where they are able to facilitate transformative encounters between the grassroots and the regime, and build trust-based relationships amongst themselves to undo systemic lock-ins.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

In February of 2023, Oregon State University held its first Small Farms Conference in person since the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In a nod to the pandemic that took hold in the early months of 2020, and to ongoing struggle for racial equity that came to a head in the summer of 2020 with the murder of George Floyd, the conference kicked-off with a plenary panel that raised questions about the role of local food systems and small farms in contributing to social justice and ecological resilience. The panelists, four women, including an Indigenous farmer and a Black mycologist, spoke to the challenges and joys of being committed to local food systems. For one, the pandemic deeply challenged translocal food supply chains (Pujawan & Bah, 2022), as we may have all experienced in the empty aisles of grocery stores. But the panelists painted a picture of local food being ‘nimble’ in face of shocks, such as a global pandemic. Small farms developed new direct linkages with consumers, making it possible to continue their operations, while at the same time seeding an appreciation of local food and small farms throughout their consumer communities. Consumers had discovered the blessings of local food, which had a ripple effect on the whole food system: small farms were able to raise wages and the food market was becoming more diverse. However, as we re-emerge from the pandemic into a ‘new normal,’ commitment to and interest in local food is on the decline again. So, what are small farmers to do?

Around the world, small farmers, and the social movements they inspire, are mobilizing around agroecology – a collection of alternatives to industrial agriculture and global commodity markets – in the struggle to defend their ways of life. Agroecology has also been gaining recognition amongst activists and scholars, and in more mainstream institutions, like nonprofit organizations, government institutions, and international institutions, such as the United Nations

Food and Agriculture Organization. The growing interest in agroecology as a strategy to address intersecting issues, like climate change, food insecurity, rural poverty, and global health (Amoak et al., 2022; Montenegro de Wit, 2021; Suárez-Torres et al., 2017) reflects the urgency of finding new pathways into an uncertain future. Broadly understood, agroecology is a holistic, transdisciplinary approach to agriculture and food production (Bezner Kerr et al., 2023) that is actor-oriented and centers the agency of marginalized farmers, and is guided by a set of values that serve as a framework for transforming social and ecological relations through the food system (Méndez et al., 2013). In this way, agroecology is differentiated by its proponents from other proposed solutions for agri-food systems sustainability, like climate-smart or organic agriculture; rather than following the more dominant, technologically focused paradigm of change, agroecology centers on socio-political systems of power as the primary object of change (Pimbert, 2015; Pimbert, 2018).

Due to the globalized nature of most food systems today, transitions in agri-food systems require significant changes in technologies, markets, socio-cultural practices, policy to address the complexity and scale of socio-economic inequality and ecological degradation in food systems. The complexity of transitions is reinforced by the various lock-ins of existing agri-food systems, such as “sunk investments, behavioural patterns, vested interests, infrastructure, favourable subsidies and regulations” (Geels, 2010). Geels (2004) describes agroecological transitions as socio-technical transitions, given the transdisciplinary nature of agri-food systems, as they intersect with and inform culture, ecology, technological innovation and political-economic systems. Anderson et al. (2019) build upon this conceptualization of agri-food systems transition, making an important distinction between transition and *transformation*. While both transition and transformation denote the need for change, a transformation recognizes that an

alternative paradigm is needed. As an alternative paradigm, agroecology “acknowledges that a range of ‘lock ins’ to unsustainable regimes will only be addressed by shifts in political-economic power” (Anderson et al., 2019), and therefore centers democratic governance and power dynamics between agri-food systems actors in its demands for change. Agroecological transformation, as opposed to transition, articulates that the root cause of the myriad problems in the food system, from malnutrition to low wages, are the uneven power dynamics between food systems actors. Thus, to change the conditions in the food system – and beyond – requires not only a transition to ecological and equitable practices, but a transformation of the local and global systems of power that create unsustainable and inequitable food systems in the first place. The need to transform power is clearly articulated by the grassroots social movements that are mobilizing agroecology, but can be overlooked or pushed aside within dominant institutions. From my position in a dominant academic and research institution, I find it necessary to articulate my own commitment to *transformation*.

Despite the promise of agroecology as a guiding framework for the future of agri-food systems globally, the process of actualizing its application in the real world is messy, and significant questions still exist about how agroecology is being adapted in different contexts (Anderson et al., 2019). Understanding the specific opportunities and constraints that determine how agri-food systems transition to agroecology can help to cobble together a global puzzle of how agroecology can become the alternative paradigm to global industrial, commodity-based agri-food systems, despite the constraints.

Territory is a useful scale for thinking about agroecological transformations, and is increasingly used in agroecology scholarship and practice (González De Molina & Lopez-Garcia, 2021; McCune & Sánchez, 2019; Wezel et al., 2016). The territorial scale is bounded

enough for strategies for social change to be attuned to the particularities of place, while still encompassing a scale large enough to account for the various interactions that mediate social and ecological processes. While agroecological transition can occur at the farm level, broader agroecological transformation occurs by linking the farm scale to community, regional and other relevant institutions. Territories are situated somewhere in between the household or farm level and the national level (Anderson et al., 2021). According to Anderson et al. (2021):

A territorial approach to agroecology thus allows for holistic perspectives that take into account interlinkages between the three dimensions of sustainable development— social, economic and environmental—and the possible tensions and trade-offs between these dimensions and between different sectors. In other words: in the territory, farm-level land-use decisions that involve ecosystem functions (i.e. pollination and watershed management) are connected with dynamics at a landscape or territorial level (Wilson 2009). Key to the potential for agroecological transformation is thus interaction and collaboration between food producers and other land users in a territory.

At this scale, citizens' needs can be taken into account through democratic processes, mediating top-down governance processes by the state, and articulating interventions, policies and support systems that are “tailored to the specificities of place” (Anderson et al., 2021), yet may still speak to the global systems that influence the local scale. As an alternative paradigm, agroecology transformations must take into account the spatial and temporal dimensions that the global food regime does not; in other words, the “place-based (although not place-bound) models of culture, identity, nature, and economy” (Escobar, 2008). Escobar (2008: 25) describes territories as ‘territories of difference,’ noting that “any territory is a territory of difference, in that it entails unique place making and region making, ecologically, culturally, and socially. In cases where different ontologies are involved, the theoretical and political treatment of difference becomes even more important.” Thus, in the context of globalization, including the globalization of food production, markets and consumption, more local scales become important engage with,

where difference is more visible amongst finer pixels. Under global regimes, change is assumed to take place largely at a global scale, diminishing the agency of local actors that engage in strategies for change at different scales. Escobar (2008: 30) writes:

Debates [about globalization] have been characterized by a pervasive asymmetry by which the global is equated with space, capital, and the capacity to transform while the local is associated with place, labor, tradition, and hence with what will inevitably give way to more powerful forces. This marginalization of place has profound consequences for our understanding of culture, nature, and economy. Place continues to be important in the lives of most people, if by place we mean the engagement with and experience of a particular location with some measure of groundedness (however unstable), boundaries (however permeable), and connections to everyday life, even if its identity is constructed and never fixed.

At the scale of territory, where environmental and social relations are co-constitutive, the potential for endogenous development is strengthened, by recognizing the agency and sovereignty of local actors, and consequently supporting bottom-up processes for sustainability and equity. It is at this scale and through these processes that food systems become ‘nimble’ enough to meet the particularities and complexities of agroecological transformations.

This thesis is an evaluation of the constraints and opportunities for agroecological transformation in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, in attempt to find what can be learned from the particularities of transformation in this context. Agroecological transformations are a global phenomenon, as grassroots and local food movements around the world are responding to the impacts of a globalized food system. These localized movements may respond to global forces differently, based on the particular historical and cultural context they emerge from. Despite these differences, they may share common challenges and have overlapping strategies that can be learned from across particular contexts. In other words, amidst the uniqueness of specific cases, it is possible to find overarching themes that can be contributed to the toolbox for agroecological transformation. I like to think that a sense of global solidarity amongst the diverse movements

for agroecology might emerge from this, which provides a fertile starting point for building the collective power needed to overcome deeply entrenched globalized political-economic systems.

The intent of this research project is to uncover the particularities of agroecological transformation in the Willamette Valley, and what can be learned from this particular case study that could contribute to a better understanding of agroecological transformation around the world. To do so, I use an ethnographic case study approach to explore the opportunities and challenges faced by food systems activists and nonprofit staff, whom I will refer to as ‘allies’ throughout this thesis. This case study focuses on the allies that I encountered through my participation in the Oregon Community Food Systems Network (OCFSN), a state-wide network organization working to reduce barriers to social justice and ecological resilience in Oregon’s food system, by building connections and relationships between the folks working on these issues and the organizations they represent. Through my investigation, I focus on how the practices and values of agroecology are being translated to overcome the specific challenges faced by food movements, focusing on the potential of agroecology to contribute to socially just and ecologically sustainable agri-food systems in Oregon’s Willamette Valley. I use the frame of territory to uncover the particularities of the case, and its transformation over time, to inform what changes are needed for social justice and ecological sustainability. A territorial analysis will provide the historical context for contemporary questions, struggles and tensions in the food system, linking past, present and future. By tying these threads across time, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of why contemporary challenges exist, and simultaneously problematize the kinds of solutions that are being promoted to address these challenges. Ultimately, a territorial approach contributes to understanding how power relations between historical actors emerged and transformed, and how these actors engaged in claim-making to shape the territory.

Understanding how territory is created and contested by different social actors over time can uncover how power mediates territorial transformations.

Through this process, I begin to unravel the complex systemic and structural constraints that agroecology must attend to, to replace industrial, commodity-based agri-food systems. Some of these threads are relevant across a number of contexts, and the learning processes through which food movements in Oregon are adapting their strategies can contribute to the development of general strategies that various movements for agroecology can adapt to their specific contexts.

The rest of this chapter will focus on elaborating the context of the case study. I begin by providing an overview of the issues that will be explored throughout this thesis, establishing the background needed to understand my analysis, including key concepts. This is followed by an overview of my aims for this research, including my specific research questions. Then I move on to situating myself within the research project, where I describe my motivations for undertaking this project. Finally, I provide a roadmap for what is to come in the rest of the chapters that lay before you.

Background: Key Concepts and Issues in Oregon's Willamette Valley

Agriculture is part of the Willamette Valley's cultural and economic fabric, but it is a highly contested industry. In Oregon, agriculture accounts for \$5 billion annually, contributing 13% to the state's gross product (Oregon State Board of Agriculture, 2021). Half of this is contributed by producers in the Willamette Valley, at \$2.3 billion annually (Oregon State Board of Agriculture, 2021). The Willamette Valley is home to a robust local food system (Brekken et al., 2017). Local food systems, identified in name as an alternative to global food systems, are a means to shorten food supply chains and return food production and consumption to a smaller

scale, resulting in an array of purported benefits, from improved access to nutritious and tasty food (Feenstra, 2002) and ecological health (Henderson, 1998), to strengthened local economies (Henderson, 1998) that support improved labor conditions (Feenstra, 2002). Movements for local food include a variety of alternative projects, from community food security, civic agriculture and alternative food networks (Feagan, 2007). The Willamette Valley's local food movement is characterized by a steady growth in farmers markets (Giombolini et al., 2011), which across Oregon amount to \$63 million in sales annually (Oregon Farmers Market Association 2020); an above average growth rate of small farms, as compared to the national average (Census of Agriculture, 2017); an increasing shift away from commodity crop production, like grass seed, towards local food production (Giombolini et al., 2011), including "labor-intensive fruit and vegetable industries located in proximity to urban markets" (Korsunsky, 2020). Some of the social innovations that contribute to and strengthen local food in the Willamette Valley include farmer-to-farmer networks, like Women in Agriculture, known colloquially as 'Waggies;' food purchasing programs for low-income families that can be used at farmers markets, termed 'Double Up Food Bucks;' budding Indigenous cultural food programs, a wide range of farm-to-school programs, legislation to support cottage food industries, and community organizing for local food systems, like Oregon Food Bank's FEAST program (Maille, 2022).

While the number of small farms in the state are steadily increasing, there has been a simultaneous and significant loss of mid-sized farms, which range from 50-999 acres. Between 2012 and 2017, the most significant loss was in farms between 50-179 acres, with 881 farms lost, out of 1,217 in the mid-sized range. At the same time, there has been a growth of large-scale farms, notably those over 2,000 acres, with 21 new farms added over this size between 2012-2017 (Sorte et al., 2021). Commercial agriculture contributes significantly to Oregon's economy,

making up \$2.57 billion worth of agricultural exports annually (Oregon State Board of Agriculture, 2021), a 25% increase since 2015 (Sorte et al., 2021). A 2021 economic analysis of Oregon's agricultural industry notes that: "The rise in very large farms likely reflects consolidation as a means to attain economies of scale in production, and ultimately the ability to compete in a marketplace with intense price competition" (Sorte et al., 2021). Despite shifts to local food production, export-oriented crops, such as hay, straw and grass seed, are still grown on 36% of the state's harvested lands (Giombolini et al., 2011). And, as pressures to scale up farm operations continues to increase, more and more farmers may turn to commercial and industrial agriculture (Minkoff-Zern, 2019). The continued dominance of global food systems, and the resulting coercion of farmers and state-level political-economies to participate in commercial agriculture into the state's economy, creates significant barriers for small farms and local food systems to stabilize. This is happening in industrialized food systems across the world, from the United States (Korsunsky, 2020; Minkoff-Zern, 2019) to Europe (Guzmán et al., 2022).

Besides these external pressures for local food systems to engage in commercial agriculture and contribute to global commodity chains, the Willamette Valley's local food movement is increasingly facing up to internal tensions that problematize the inherent goodness of local food. The various projects that fall under the banner of local food are "less alternative than is often claimed" (Korsunsky, 2020), often reinforcing the same problems, or new mutations of those problems, that characterize industrial agriculture. Rather than restructuring the harmful dynamics of global food systems, which enforce a "politics of sameness" (Escobar, 2008b), local food systems can tend towards "militant particularism" (Harvey, 1996), as power dynamics at the local level are assumed to be even, and experiences in the agri-food system are assumed to be universal with those of the dominant socio-economic group. These patterns are seen in local food

systems across the United States, where local food movements assume color-blind and, to a lesser extent, class-blind discourse and practices by universalizing the benefits of local food institutions, like farmers markets and community supported agriculture (Guthman, 2008a). This has the two-fold effect of 1) failing to build autonomy in local food markets, like those for organic food, from global economic systems, and 2) reinforcing racial inequities in food consumption and production. The various attempts to develop alternatives have largely been co-opted, from organic production (Kauffman, 2018), to farmers markets and urban gardening (Alkon & Mares, 2012). In the Willamette Valley, these broad patterns have manifested in the failure of the organic movement to significantly restructure agricultural production or reduce cost barriers to accessing local foods (Alkon & Guthman, 2017). Another local manifestation is seen in the disproportionately high rates of food insecurity amongst farmworkers, despite the fact that they grow and harvest most of our food (Korsunsky, 2020). These tensions are characteristic of what Bennett (2019) terms the “local-industrial dichotomy,” in which labor exploitation and inequitable food access, amongst other issues, are only perceived as a problem of industrial food production, assumed to be absent from local food systems.

Food regimes theory may help to situate the limitations of local food in the context of dominant global food systems, and the challenges this creates for sustainability and equity at the local scale. For starters, McMichael (2009) writes of the “foundational divide between environmentally catastrophic agro-industrialisation and alternative agro-ecological practices.” The inherent tension between agro-industries of the global food regime and the agro-ecology of local food systems are better understood within the context of the development of global capitalism as the dominant political-economic structure regulating much of the agri-food systems development happening around the world. Food regimes analysis was first developed by Harriet

Friedmann (1987), and later adapted by Friedman and Philip McMichael (1989), as a framework to explain the central function that agriculture played in the development of global capitalism.

The first food regime (1870-1930s) was characterized by the outsourcing of staple food production from colonizing nation-states, like Britain, to the various colonies they occupied, compromising the natural resources and food security in those colonies. As a result of this outsourcing, settler states, like the United States, would establish industrial agriculture as a primary national industrial sector. This would later fuel the development of national agriculture sectors around the world as the model for modernization (Akram-Lodhi et al., 2021). The second food regime (1950s-1970s) was heavily influenced by Cold War conflicts over the loyalties of various states that had recently been ‘decolonized.’ The primary flow of staple food production was flipped, as food aid markets brought surplus food from the United States to those recently decolonized states, who were compelled to develop specialized national agro-industries that could be linked into global commodity complexes. These developments transformed rural landscapes through land reform for industrialization, which would lead many people engaged in small-holder agriculture to leave for urban areas and established industrial agriculture based on agribusiness technologies. The third, current, food regime (1980s-present), has deepened these processes, as the predominance of a global food complex continues to consolidate food production, intensifying the loss of small-holder agriculture and local food production. Decision-making in global agri-food systems is led by agribusiness corporations, thus lending this food regime its name: the corporate food regime. The recent developments of the corporate food regime have had disastrous effects on ecological sustainability, food security, rural and urban livelihoods, and public health. It is largely from these developments that the present-day complex food systems crisis has emerged (McMichael, 2009b).

The integration into global neoliberal food systems had impacts around the world, as the political economy of food created a system of specialized national agro-industries that were consolidated into a network of global commodity markets. The neoliberalization of food systems after the 1980s dissolved the national boundaries of agro-industries, replacing national governance of food systems with market governance by transnational agribusiness. The institutions of the corporate food regime incentivized cheap production at all costs. In the United States, the effects were especially seen in the displacement of small farms with consolidated mega-farms, the artificial cheapening of agricultural products, the replacement of local food production with cheaper imports, all significantly suppressing the development of local food systems (Akram-Lodhi et al., 2021).

Closely intertwined with the development and the ills of each of these food regimes is the persistence of racialization of exploitable ‘others.’ The development of these food regimes required significant amounts of land and cheap labor, and the social concept of race was used to create this supply (Perrey, 2013). Paraphrasing Ruth Wilson Gilmore, one of the most prominent scholars to adapt the concept of racial capitalism in the contemporary context, Jodi Melamed (2015: 78) characterizes racial capitalism as “a dialectic in which forms of humanity are separated (made ‘distinct’) so that they may be ‘interconnected’ in terms that feed capital.” In the United States, racialization for agricultural development manifested in the theft of Indigenous lands and the import of temporary labor. In the Willamette Valley, the legacy of racialized capitalist food regimes is still seen today in the fact that just 1% of farmland in Lane County is owned by Black, Indigenous, Latine and Asian folks (USDA, 2017), and the majority of farm labor is carried out by migrant laborers, especially from Mexico and other Central and South American countries (Sifuentez, 2016).

Although the term ‘agroecology’ has been used since the early twentieth century to refer narrowly to the disciplinary intersection between agronomy and ecology (Wezel et al., 2009a), rural social movements began using the term to mobilize an alternative paradigm to global food regimes. Agroecology was first used by social movements beginning in the 1980s in Mexico, in resistance against the expansion of commercial and industrial agriculture as the hegemonic systems in global agri-food regimes (Astier et al., 2017). By the start of the twenty-first century, agroecology was being conceptualized and employed by social movements across Latin America as a radical critique of, and alternative to, Green Revolution technologies and policies being incentivized by the global food regime. These included farmer-to-farmer movements in Cuba that emerged to rebuild agriculture in the wake of disinvestment by the Soviet Union and the United States (Funes, 2002), grassroots resistance to the ecological destruction of agribusiness in Brazil (Da Costa et al., 2017), and the repeasantization movements across Latin America, as the urban population returned to rural communities to build agroecological alternatives to poverty and pollution (Altieri & Toledo, 2011). The developments by these social movements have contributed greatly to the disciplinary evolution of ‘agroecology,’ whose has evolved to describe 1) a set of on-farm practices, or the “ecology of agriculture,” 2) principles for food systems design, and 3) the various social movements that support the implementation of these practices and principles (Wezel et al., 2009a).

Agroecology has significant overlaps with the ideals of local food systems, but can also contribute important political framing around the issues of local food. The “ecology of agriculture” concerns itself with on-farm practices that reduce external inputs through intercropping, pasture rotation, integrated crop and animal systems and cover cropping (Bezner Kerr et al., 2023; Gliessman, 2015; Wezel et al., 2009b). At the level of the food system,

agroecology contributes to socio-economic and socio-political strategies for the co-creation of knowledge for food systems design, building local economies and communities through the principles of social justice and ecological sustainability (Bezner Kerr et al., 2023; Gliessman, 2015; M. P. Pimbert, 2018; Wezel et al., 2009b). These strategies have been articulated as principles or elements (Wezel et al., 2020), which are used to assess various alternatives to the corporate food regime.

At the foundation of agroecological transformation are conflicts around epistemologies and ontologies, described as the politics of knowledge (Global Alliance for the Future of Food, 2021). Transformative agroecology contributes to the “dialogue between different forms of traditional knowledge,” especially amongst the protagonists of social movements, like small-scale farmers, peasants and Indigenous peoples (Toledo, 2022).

Research Questions

The goal of this research is to examine the socio-historical context for agroecological transformations in the Willamette Valley, as well as the opportunities and constraints various stakeholders face in actualizing these transformations. I do so by further engaging with the debates around agroecology transformation (Anderson et al., 2021; Giraldo & Rosset, 2018; Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al., 2018), as well the systemic and structural barriers to transformation (Dale, 2021; Giraldo & Rosset, 2022; Montenegro de Wit, 2021). In order to understand the relevance of an agroecological transformation in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, I have developed the following research questions:

R1. How have cultural, political, economic and social dynamics in Oregon shaped the food system over time and informed the existing alternative food movement?

- R2. How does the existing alternative food movement reflect the process of agroecological transformation?
- a. What barriers and opportunities do stakeholders identify to achieving transformation?
 - b. What mechanisms do stakeholders use to achieve transformation?
- R3. What role do network organizations play in achieving an agroecological transformation?

Locating the Researcher

I write this thesis as someone who believes that agroecology is one of the most transformative tools we have to address a plethora of entangled concerns, from the climate crisis and environmental destruction to malnutrition and poverty. Some of this comes from the social and ecological farming practices that characterize agroecology as a practice, but I am especially hopeful about the lessons that social movements for agroecology can teach us about how to be in the world with each other.

What I have written on these pages is deeply influenced by my own personal transformations and the journey that led me to agroecology. I can't exactly pinpoint the moment I first fell in love with the promises of local food, but I remember a time when I was engrossed in the world of permaculture design and environmental policy, splitting my time between studying pollinator health and guiding clumsy toddlers to push seeds into the ground and care for delicate sprouts. At the time, I thought that was about all there was to it. A few years later, I would arrive in a small farming village of fifteen households, in the far west of Nepal. I had been sent there to teach farmers how to farm, the irony of which was not lost on me. Although I was very familiar with gardens and food forests, I had never farmed a day in my life, especially not for subsistence. In my efforts to be of some use, to find my role, I learned more than I taught, and was transformed in the process. Not only did I learn about the joys and burdens of life and labor on ecological farms, but I also learned about the complex relationships between modernity and tradition, as they played out in a smallholder farming community.

I lived amongst families who were, in many ways, reaching for the promises of modernity and Development: to send their children to schools in urban centers, so that they would not be predestined for poverty; to afford technologies that would make the back-breaking work of household labor easier; to purchase food or hybrid seeds that would ensure their families would not go hungry. And yet, they despaired at many of the symptoms of modernity, as their families were spread across the country and the world in search of something different. In those that stayed long enough for me to know them, I recognized something between pride and comfort in the practices of their daily lives. I also encountered a political will and a clarity with which they resisted imposed change or a dominating vision of the good life, navigating their way between modernity and tradition and everything in between. I began to realize that I, the men and women I lived with, and the agribusiness extension agents that came to test hybrid corn and sell the newest, bluest fertilizer, were all bound up in a system that had brought us together; a system that linked us long before I ever arrived.

It is from these experiences that I stumbled into agroecology. I came to agroecology to learn from it as an “alternative to development” (Pimbert, 2015), as an alternative paradigm to universalizing worldviews. This is the frame through which I have carried out this research project.

Looking Forward: Thesis Roadmap

In the following chapter (Chapter 2), I provide an overview of my research methodology. Each subsequent chapter explores one of my three research questions. In Chapter 3, I draw upon and analyze literature on the Willamette Valley’s history to illuminate key historical factors that shaped contemporary agrarian possibilities, and the constraints and opportunities of an

agroecological transformation In Chapter 4, my analysis focuses on the contemporary food movement in the territory, the significant barriers they identify to food systems transformation, and the strategies they have developed to overcome those barriers. Given this context, I evaluate the ways in which agroecology is and could be applied to the efforts for transformation. Chapter 5 explores the role of OCFSN in contributing to an agroecological transformation, focusing especially on the co-learning processes that deepen the politics of transformation. Finally, in Chapter 6, I conclude with some final reflections.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This research project was first conceptualized as a contribution to a case study for the *Agroecological Transitions for Territorial Food Systems* (ATTER) project, a network of research and civil society institutions that are contributing to a collection of case studies on agroecological transformation at the territorial scale. The goal of the network is to develop key insights into transformation across a variety of territories, that participants can learn from and adapt to their specific territorial contexts. Across all of these case studies, researchers are engaging in a socio-historical analysis of agroecological transformations. What sounds like a mouthful of technical terms, is really a research methodology for understanding the territorial histories that shape how agroecology is being applied within a territory and its potential to transform the territory into the future. The ATTER case study framework includes three primary pieces: 1) a long-term socio-historical analysis, 2) a short-term socio-historical analysis, and 3) touchstones and narratives of present and future pathways. Despite having been through many iterations, these three pieces are all present in the current version of the case study.

In this case study, I took an ethnographic approach, which is driven by “a theoretical, ethical, political, and at times moral orientation to research, which guides the decisions one makes, including choices about research methods” (Harrison, 2014, p. 225). I regularly attended virtual meetings and in-person gatherings that OCFSN hosted over the span of one year, between April 2022 and April 2023. When I first began attending these meetings, I was not set on OCFSN as the case study I wanted to use for my research. In fact, I did not shift towards OCFSN as the focus of this research project until October 2022, when, after my first few interviews, I repeatedly encountered OCFSN’s name in the interviews I was collecting with food systems activists throughout the Willamette Valley. When I first set out on this research project, my goal

was to independently interview food producers and food systems activists across the Willamette Valley, to learn about the state of agroecology in the region. After some regular involvement with OCFSN and numerous conversations about food systems transformation with network organizers, I realized that OCFSN was playing an interesting role in building linkages in the movement that I felt would be important to explore further. I allowed my research to be shaped by the food systems activists that I worked alongside. This resulted in a reframing of my research questions and my interview guide, which was co-designed with OCFSN to be a more effective tool for understanding the reality and potential of the network as a transformative space. Pivoting from the position of a network participant to a participant-researcher was likely made easier by the fact that I had already begun building relationships with many of the folks that I would later interview.

The outcome of my methodological toolbox is a thick description of the efforts of food movement actors in the Willamette Valley who are networked through the Oregon Community Food Systems Network. Thick descriptions use description and interpretation to understand the relevance and meanings behind the situations that are being described (Geertz, 1973). The interpretation of this case study comes largely from the socio-historical analysis I provide in Chapter 3, as well as from the ethnographic methods and analysis I use throughout Chapters 4 and 5 to describe and interpret the narratives of food systems transformation that I encountered in my research.

My commitment to supporting agroecological transformations has deeply informed my research methodology. I am inspired by examples of critical, participatory and transformative research in food systems, which design research processes from the bottom-up, for the communities in question, thus contributing to the democratization of knowledge systems. As a

master's student in a 2-year program, I was faced with rigid time constraints to complete this research project, and my use of a transformative research methodology is not as robust as I would have liked. However, I maintained my political commitment to agroecology transformations throughout the research process. Transformative research is driven by a political agenda and centers questions of structural and systemic power (Mertens, 2021). My political agenda is to translate agroecology and contribute my abilities to changing uneven power dynamics in the food system. In this way, I hope to actively and meaningfully contribute to agroecological transformation in the Willamette Valley through this research project.

Data Collection and Analysis

Historical Literature Review

The goal of this research was to situate the contemporary concerns and issues in agri-food systems in the Willamette Valley within a socio-historical context. The socio-historical context provides important information that contributes to a deeper understanding of the emerging issues and questions. Using a narrative literature review method, I draw upon and analyze academic and grey literature to illuminate key historical factors that shaped contemporary agrarian possibilities, and the constraints and opportunities of an agroecological transformation. Considering agroecology's historical evolution to encompass a variety of approaches from different disciplines to describe the science, integrated practice and social movement (Wezel et al., 2009a), agroecology is best understood as a "hybrid discipline" (Rivera-Núñez et al., 2020). As part of the more recent disciplinary additions to the study of agroecology, methods and frameworks from geography, anthropology and archaeology have been adapted to the study of

agroecology to contribute to the territorial dimension of transformation (Rivera-Núñez et al., 2020).

When I began the historic literature review, I already had a basic understanding of some of the key moments that had influenced Oregon's land and labor relations from courses and public talks that I had attended. Using these concepts as a starting point, I researched other key moments, policies and patterns that emerged as a significant factor in the changes to the Willamette Valley's food systems. My principal data source were several digital catalogues that offer a critical perspective of historical events, such as *The Quartux Journal* and the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*. Analyzing these sources, I searched for relevant articles, using the terms "agriculture," "food system," "foodways," and "food lifeways," in combination with a number of key terms that signified socio-political relations in agrarian development, like "settler," "farmworker," and "land ownership." After exploring those sources, I expanded my search to Google Scholar, searching for information that would further contextualize my findings, using new terms that I had encountered in my initial search, such as "whiteness," "settler colonial," and "settler agrarian," in combination with "Oregon" or "Willamette Valley." I analyzed each source for policies, events and patterns that led to a shift in land and labor relations. From these themes, I generated a narrative timeline that connects key moments in the Willamette Valley's agrarian development to global patterns, while focusing on the particularities of the Willamette Valley.

Semi-structured Interviews

I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with food systems professionals and activists over a five-month period. Most, but not all, of these interviews were with individuals that participate in OCFSN's Farming for the Future (F4tF) working group. I primarily recruited

participants through my participation in the F4tF working group, via email. Considering the busy schedules that many non-profit professionals have, I used a convenience sampling method, casting a broad net for interviews and going ahead with those that had the capacity to do an interview.

The interviews were designed to capture three broad categories of inquiry: 1) what participants envision for the future of food and farming, 2) what strategies they use to achieve these visions, and 3) what challenges and/or achievements they have found in the process. My interview guide served as a starting point for different themes to touch on, however, I intended for the interviews to be semi-structured, and thus allowed participants to delve into topics that I did not necessarily ask about. If the participant led the conversation in a way that I thought was interesting for understanding power dynamics or agroecology, I would prompt them to explain in further detail, or connect the idea to further questions I had.

Each interview lasted between 40 and 70 minutes. I recorded interviews in audio format on my personal laptop computer. I had a mix of in-person and virtual interviews, which made for a variety of interactions with my interview participants. With some, I shared a hot beverage in a busy cafe; others, I met online in between meetings on a packed workday. The various food systems professionals and activists that I interviewed were engaging in OCFSN at different stages and with varying interests in the network. Some were new to the network, others had been participating to some degree since the network's original inception. My interview participants had expertise in a variety of topics, ranging from farmland succession, food sovereignty, farm business planning, horticulture and climate policy. The range of knowledge and experience helps to demonstrate the diversity needed to build an alternative food system. The common experience

amongst my interview participants was their participation in OCFSN's Farming for the Future working group.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process I used for this research project follows grounded theory, as described by Charmaz (2014). Grounded theory was a useful tool in this research project, since grounded theory is “appropriate when there is little known about a phenomena” (Chun Tie et al., 2019), as is the case with the presence of an agroecological transformation in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Grounded theory involves an iterative research process, which can be useful for understanding complexities of research participants narratives and practices. Using grounded theory to analyze the qualitative data I gathered, I was able to develop a new, subjective perspective on agroecological transformation, for example, my place-based understanding of the role of allies in agroecological transformation. My overall research methodology is inspired by transformative approaches to generate theory and action through participatory and decolonizing methods (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015), which sees “the potential for both theory and action to result from this critical grounded theory methodology” (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015) as the *transformational* piece of this research approach. I incorporate some elements of this research approach, including a “critical analysis of the context in which research is occurring” (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015), which is elaborated in the next section. In practice, however, my process for data analysis aligns more closely with a constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2014).

I coded the data I gathered from interviews using thematic content analysis, to uncover key elements or themes in participants' narratives. Following an iterative process of data coding

and theme identification, I gained a close understanding of the challenges my participants were struggling with in their work to transform food systems, how these challenges informed the strategies they employed, and how different motivations and ideologies/logic were helping them to understand and contextualize these challenges and strategic approaches. I took notes during each interview, to capture any interesting ideas that had not been mentioned before, as well as reoccurring themes, and narratives that were directly addressing my research questions. I made an effort to transcribe and code each interview after it was completed, to inform any adjustments I needed to make to my interview guide to better understand my research questions. I began the coding process by reading through each interview transcript line-by-line to discern themes that could either speak to my research questions, were recurring responses to my interview questions, or they provided me with an unexpected perspective on the questions I was asking. Using my interview notes and the interview transcripts, I was able to iteratively discern thematic codes, using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once I had completed all of my interviews and coded the transcripts, I completed a second round of coding, using an axial coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), that was more focused on identifying important sub-themes and understanding the connections between the thematic codes I had developed. By using a grounded theory approach, I was able to generate an understanding of my research topic that was *grounded* in the data (Charmaz, 2014), and therefore, contributes to a place-based understanding of agroecological transformation.

Research Scope and Limitations

This research presents a number of methodological limitations, both self-imposed limitations that I used to aid my timely completion of this project in the scope of a two-year

master's program, and external limitations that influenced the scope of this project in ways I could not necessarily control. Although I am proud of what I have been able to accomplish since presenting my research proposal just under one year ago, I would like to discuss these limitations here, in an effort to contextualize for the readers why my research focus is what it is, and to inform any future research projects that I develop in the future.

First, my research largely includes interviews from, what I have been calling, food systems 'allies.' These are staff of nonprofit organizations or other institutions that have a commitment to changing the conditions that food producers, farmers, farmworkers face in growing our food. My research does not include the perspectives of farmers themselves, which are critical to studies of agroecological transformation. This gap more likely a reflection of the limitations of my recruitment design, as I had every intention to interview food producers when I first set out on this project. However, as I began to shift the focus of my research to a case study of OCFSN, interviewing food producers became a secondary element to my research design. This focus has turned out to provide me with some interesting insight into the role of allies in food movements. If I had more time to develop this project further, I would want to include a more robust analysis of the experiences of food producers themselves, and how they are different from those of allies. It has been helpful that, although many of my participants identify professionally as nonprofit staff working as allies for food systems transformation, many, if not all, are engaged consumers and have at some point been food producers themselves. As one of my participants said, there is a "closeness" in the network to what it is like to be a farmer.

Second, the participants that I interviewed are not a representative sample of all of OCFSN's members. By using a convenience sampling method, I did not intentionally incorporate a representative view of the ideologies and strategies present within the network. My

participation in OCFSN as a non-researcher prior to beginning this project has been helpful in getting to know what ideas and knowledge exists broadly in the network, and I would guess that the ideas and knowledge that I represent in this research is not far from the range present amongst all network members. My research includes what I would characterize as both ends of that range, including a staff member of the Oregon Department of Agriculture that facilitates global export contracts for commercial farmers at one end, and farmer-activists that openly speak about liberation and ‘land back’ at the other end.

Third, I chose to limit my research scope to 15 interviews, so that I could spend more of my limited time understanding the data I had collected and working through the complexities found within each interview. By gathering empirically rich data, I have been able to make conclusions that draw on these complexities and lend to a dynamic understanding of agroecological transformation in Oregon’s Willamette Valley.

Chapter 3: Histories of Agrarian Transformation: From Settler Colonization to the Corporate Food Regime in Oregon's Willamette Valley

*The people long ago all said a Great Shaman had a vision.
He saw this land was black in his dream.
He told the people "I saw all the earth was black in the dream."
Maybe he did not know what (the dream meant).
The Americans came and they ploughed the earth.
Then the people all said this is what the Shaman saw long ago in his vision.*

A Santiam Kalapuya prophecy, translated by Dr. David G. Lewis in 2014.

The Santiam Kalapuyans were one of the many Indigenous bands that lived in what is known today as the Willamette Valley. When "the Americans came and they ploughed the earth," they made their homes on the traditional homelands of western Oregon's Indigenous peoples. The white American's plows are symbolic of the agrarian visions they brought, and were an essential tool used in the transformation of the landscape and the social, cultural and political institutions that created what people experience today as the Willamette Valley. The Santiam Kalapuya foretold the territorial transformations that occurred during the mid-nineteenth century and continue to shape the territory today.

In this investigation, I use the frame of territory to describe the socio-cultural and political-economic construction of the Willamette Valley by a variety of actors throughout its history. Territories encompass both a spatial and a temporal dimension. The spatial dimension describes how a geographic area, or space, is constructed through social relations (Fernandes, 2022). In other words, territory describes a place according to its human and non-human features, and the social interactions between them. A territory is spatially bounded by its geological and biological features, but only achieves its significance as a place through the socio-

historical interactions between humans and the natural world (Escobar, 2008). These historical processes are what lend the territory its temporal dimension, transforming the spatial dimension over time. As Shattuck and Peluso write: “social relations are what differentiate territory from space.” Neighborhoods, cities or regions are not neutral physical spaces that autonomously became important; they hold meaning for the people that interact with them and are claimed by those people. Claim-making occurs through historical processes that may include “violence, communication, administration, enclosure, dwelling, movement and imagination,” processes that I will explore in detail in this chapter (Shattuck & Peluso, 2021).

This historical literature review is driven by a curiosity around how we have arrived at the current set of practices and discourses that drive alternative food movements in the Willamette Valley, and the strengths and limitations of these movements. Therefore, my lens is focused on socio-historical practices and particular moments in time that inform how we got to the present moment. In 2021, the Oregon State Board of Agriculture reported that out of Oregon’s 67,595 agricultural producers, just over 4,000 identified as Black, Indigenous or people of color (Oregon State Board of Agriculture, 2021). White farmers own almost all farmland in the Willamette Valley and represent a majority of agricultural producers, shaping the discourse and political-economic structures that promote family farming and local food. My intention is to critically engage with the Willamette Valley’s agrarian past, in an attempt to answer my first research question: “How have cultural, political, economic and social dynamics in Oregon shaped the food system over time and informed the existing alternative food movement?” This literature review will not attempt to make definitive conclusions, but rather open space for critical inquiry around existing and possible strategies for agrarian transformation that achieves the goals of equity and sustainability in agriculture. This chapter will provide the historical

context that situates the current alternative food movement in time and space, using Escobar's (2008) framework to describe the territory.

In his analysis of the Pacific region, Escobar (2008) weaves together a narrative of place using six “distinct, although interrelated, historical processes” (p. 31 or 32) that contribute to a multidimensional (scale) and analytically complex (ecological, human, social, political, institutional, power) understanding of the territory. These six historical processes include: (1) the biological and geological history of the region, including organic and non-organic processes, (2) anthropological accounts of Indigenous lifeways and the contributions of Indigenous peoples to the development of past and present “socionatural worlds”, (3) the influence of local and global capital accumulation and (4) the associated incorporation of the region into nation-state governance processes, and finally (5) the cultural and political practices of place-making by social movements, as they interact with and resist capital and the state. These processes build a dynamic understanding of territory. The analysis that I construct in this chapter explores these five historical processes to the extent that they occurred in Oregon’s Willamette Valley. I focus mainly on the historical processes of social actors, less so on the first historical process of biological and geological development. I begin by dedicating my attention to the food lifeways of the Willamette Valley’s Kalapuyan peoples and describe the territory’s initial socio-historical formation. This provides important context for understanding the impact that agrarian settler colonization had on the territory and its inhabitants. My narrative weaves together the third and fourth historical processes, capital accumulation and state governance through two distinct, yet intertwined periods. I uncover how capital and white settler colonization transformed the territory, beginning especially from the mid-nineteenth century onward, with the arrival of the first settler colonists to the Willamette Valley. I then follow the historical processes of capital

accumulation and state governance, to investigate how the territory was incorporated into the corporate food regime. I end by reflecting on a collection of the historical cultural and political movements that formed in resistance to the corporate food regime to re-construct the territory.

The Formation of a River Valley and its Human Entanglements

The geological features of the Willamette Valley, as we know it today, were formed over 7,000 to 12,000 years ago through a series of major flood events, known collectively as the Missoula Floods (Lewis, 2017; Robbins, 2021). This contributed greatly to the formation of the region's rich soils, that contribute to its reputation for agriculture today (Robbins, 2021; Warren, 2018). From the Willamette River, fields and forests extend eastward to the Cascade mountain range and westward to the Coastal mountain range. The Willamette River is the geological centerpiece of this territory, providing the region its name (Robbins, 2021). This name was adapted from the Indigenous Kalapuyan name for the river, possibly *Walama* (Thompson, 2006). For the Kalapuyans, the river was not only a source of food, but, along with a broader network of connected river systems, served as a set of "highways" that were used to travel and trade (Robbins, 2021), thus being of great importance for Indigenous food lifeways. The river also had a spiritual significance. In an interview with Jessica Thompson (2006), Carol Logan, an elder of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, explained the importance of the river:

Our people got foods from out of the waters there, there's different kind of species that live in the water. So, our people would do that through nets, or, you know, in the shallower areas, there's other kind of foods that they could gather there. They dried a lot of their foods along the river. [...] traveling by the water, doing ceremonies by the water because the water is very important and a part of our ceremonies. Water is life, [...] you know, we can't have life without the water.

As Carol Logan's reflection conveys, food lifeways are "ways of being in the world that focus on the interactions between people and things through the medium of food" (Fisher et al., 2017).

Indigenous food lifeways are important to the construction of territory, because they represent the entanglements between humans and their environment through food and spirituality. Food lifeways, as a practice of claim-making (Shattuck & Peluso, 2021), contribute to the construction of territory by stimulating communication and movement within the territory. The relations between land and people, and the importance of food to Kalapuyan lifeways is illustrated in Carol Logan's description of the intricacies between life, death, food and spirituality:

And there was a lot of burial grounds within that Willamette Valley. And that's why the camas thrives so much [...] because our people ate the foods, our people then became a part of the land through the food - a connecting to the earth. So when you eat the foods, you connect to the earth, you connect to the water, so when you pass away and get buried in to the water, you basically are those foods, you are that which you ate. So then, it just, your body deteriorates. Then you make that land fertile again. That's what makes the foods grow, that's what makes the land fertile, that's what gives the land all it's nutrients and its vitamins and everything. (quoted in Thompson, 2006)

The territory has not been without human influence since at least after the Missoula Floods, and perhaps even before. By some accounts, the Kalapuyan peoples have lived here for 14,000 years (Lewis, n.d.). Archaeological evidence of earthen ovens used to cook staple foods, such as camas, have been uncovered from as far back as 11,500 years ago (Kramer, 2000). Indigenous peoples and Indigenous scholars of western Oregon describe the long history of Indigenous peoples' presence as preceding archaeological evidence, instead referring to "time immemorial," an acknowledgement that the Kalapuyan homelands have been here forever. In the words of Carol Logan: "Our people have been here forever, as long as the life has been here of our people [...]" (Thompson, 2006). Indigenous scholars of western Oregon, like Dr. David Lewis, have contributed to the understanding of Kalapuyan food lifeways and how Indigenous peoples and natural environments, and the relations between them, co-constituted the territory.

The construction of territory as a co-constitutive process between humans and the natural world appears in descriptions of Kalapuyan food lifeways.

The food lifeways of the Kalapuyans followed an annual cycle, represented today in seasonal rounds (see Figure 1). Socio-cultural practices were intertwined with the landscape through the practices of claim-making (Shattuck & Peluso, 2021), such as dwelling, movement, and administration of natural resources and social practices. Plant-based foods were cultivated and harvested according to the seasonal abundance. The ecosystem management practices that the Kalapuyan peoples engaged in, like fire management (Lewis, 2016), created a stable environment in which food sources were abundant. Kalapuyans used field burning to manage the abundance of various plant food sources, including camas, which they “baked, stored and traded in bulk” (Kramer, 2000), which lends itself to an understanding of the Kalapuyan peoples are more than hunter-gatherers. These horticultural practices, in turn, shaped the natural landscapes that the Kalapuyans lived in, and contributed greatly to the “park-like setting” (Lewis, 2016) we experience in the Willamette Valley today.

Hunting and fishing supplemented their largely plant-based diets, and what could not be harvested within close proximity was traded with other tribes throughout the territory. This drove seasonal migration patterns, in which small family groups travelled to trading camps to engage with other tribes, and created a complex political structure that facilitated the co-existence of different tribes within the region (see Figure 2).

KALAPUYAN SEASONAL ROUND

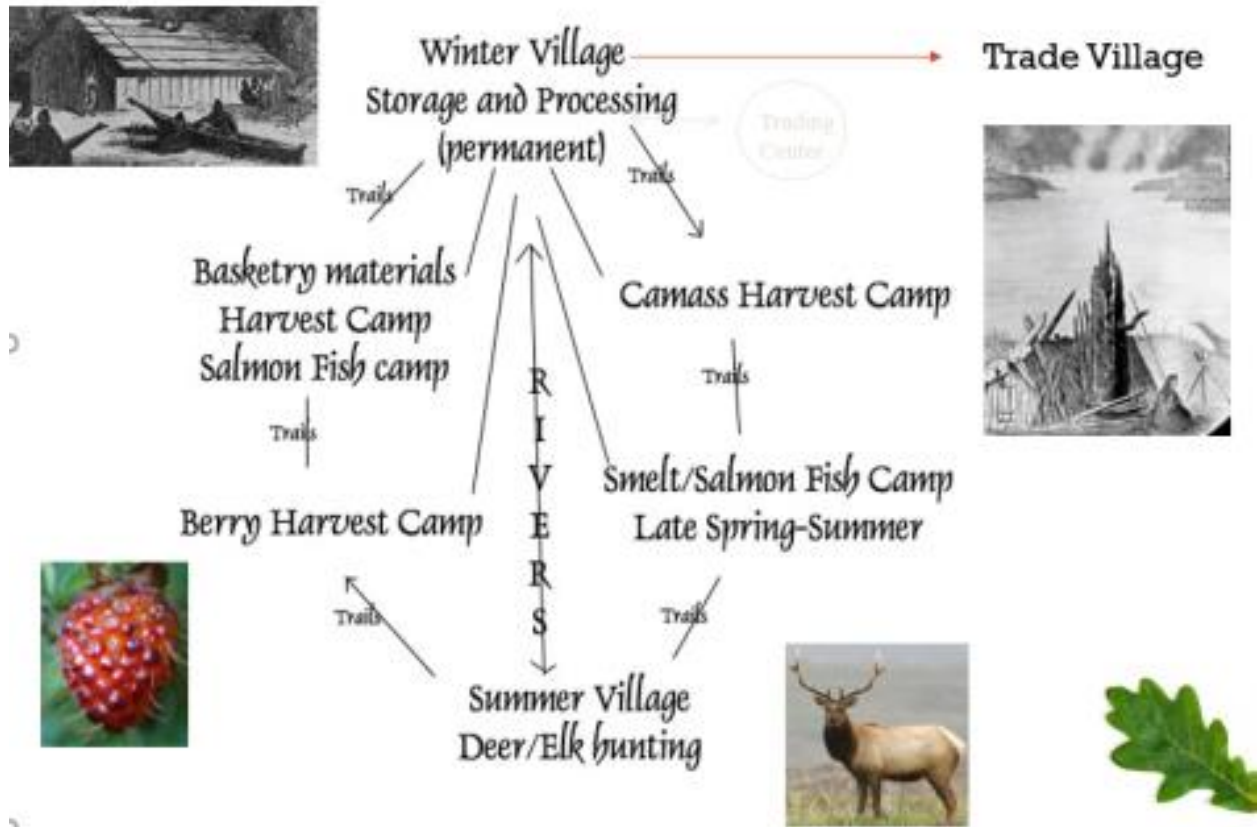


Figure 1: Kalapuyan seasonal round represents the social, cultural, political and ecological characteristics of the territory, across time (seasons) and space (seasonal migration). Taken from (Lewis, 2016)

Socio-political ties emerged through the interactions between families in regional trade networks (Lewis, 2016). David Lewis (2011) describes how deeply intertwined Kalapuyan settlement and migration patterns were to their foodways:

Before removal to reservations during the 1850s, Kalapuyan tribes inhabited the Willamette Valley and portions of the Coast and Cascade foothills. They lived in an annual cycle in permanent villages along rivers, where they remained throughout the winter. During the spring, they would travel by canoe to places where crops were ready for harvesting, fish were running in the rivers, and animals were coming down from their winter quarters. The Kalapuya maintained regular contact with their neighbors and participated in regional trade networks.

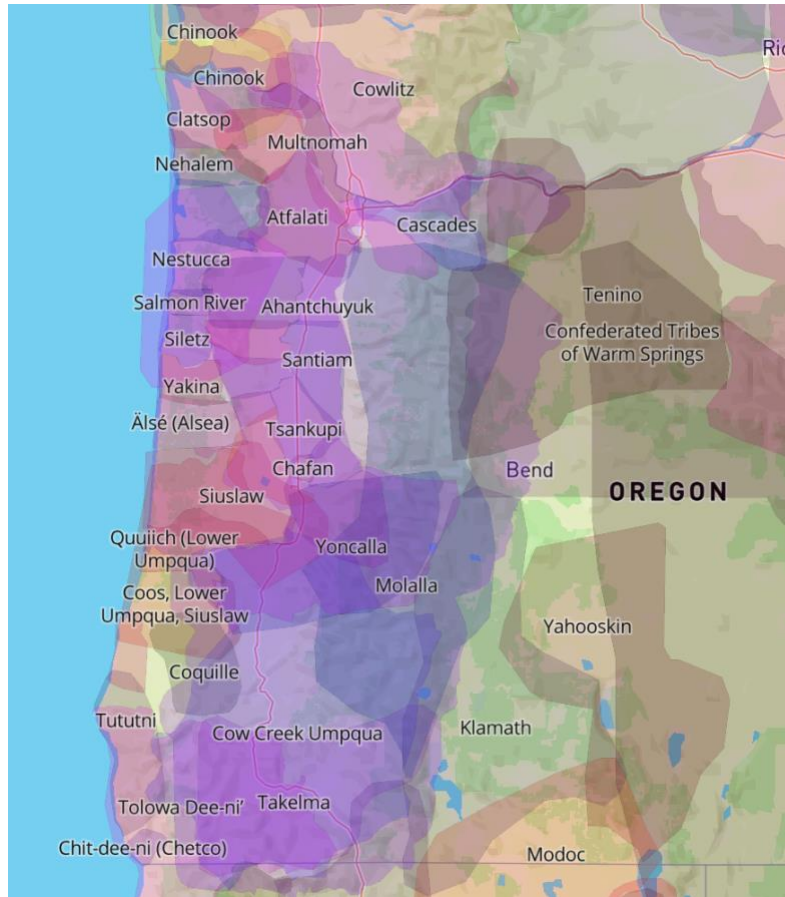


Figure 2: Map depicts overlapping territories of Indigenous tribes and bands of present-day western Oregon. Tribal activities were not confined to insulated territories. The Indigenous peoples of the Willamette Valley were part of complex, stable societies that engaged in relational food lifeways. Image taken from Native Land Digital, <https://native-land.ca>

These trade networks were made possible, in part, by the diversity of ecosystems within and around the Willamette Valley that allowed various Kalapuyan bands to develop food practices that reflected the landscape’s geological and biological diversity. The biocultural diversity of the Kalapuyan peoples is also reflected in the diverse languages and customs of the territory (Thompson, 2006). “Inter-tribal networks” were formed, as many of the tribes relied on their trade networks with other tribes to supplement food sources and other materials that were not locally available (Lewis, 2016). The co-existence of the diverse tribes was managed through political administration and socio-cultural institutions, like inter-tribal marriage and their interdependent food lifeways (Lewis, 2016). The Kalapuyan food lifeways are an excellent

example of how socio-cultural practices within a specific geography created a territory that was constructed through social relations between human and non-human worlds.

Empire and the Farm

Colonization (n.)

from stem of Latin *colonus*, meaning “tiller of the soil, farmer” or *colere* “to cultivate, to till, to settle in”

Agrarian developments in North America during the nineteenth century were broadly characterized by political-economic shifts from periphery economies to industrial capitalism and specialized production. These developments were in dialectical relationship with the rise of settler colonialism, which made land, labor and raw materials available to capital production (Sayers, 1999). Historian Kenneth R. Coleman (2019) identifies three distinct forms of colonialism present in Oregon in the 1840s, including settler colonialism. Mercantile colonialism used new territories to extract wealth through market-based engagement *with* Indigenous peoples, creating “multi-ethnic societies.” Missionary colonialism intended to convert and integrate Indigenous peoples into Euro-American society. The third form of colonialism, settler colonialism, is of most interest in this chapter, because it so drastically transformed the territory. Settler colonialism is distinct from other forms of colonization, in the intent of colonizers to settle permanently and recreate the lifestyles they followed in the places they had journeyed from (Barber, 2019; Veracini, 2013; Wolfe, 2006). Veracini (2013: 313) explains how settlement of Euro-Americans on Indigenous lands constituted this distinct form of colonization:

Settler colonialism is about turning a place and a specific human material into something else, and, paradoxically and simultaneously, about a specific human material that remains true to itself in a place that is ‘other’. Of course, while the colonies settlers build for themselves are either independent or politically subordinate to the colonising metropole, a capacity to establish a new society that replicates the original one (without its perceived shortcoming) is inevitably

premised on the possibility of controlling and dominating indigenous peoples. As the possibility of encountering a genuinely empty locale has been historically quite rare, building settler colonies and the exercise of colonial domination, while different, should be seen as inescapably intertwined (hence the need for a compound definition containing both ‘settler’ and ‘colonialism’).

To settler colonists, Indigenous peoples were a nuisance that got in the way of their objectives to settle and establish new societies. Settler colonization’s logic of elimination was used as a tool to create the “white utopia” that was drawing many settlers to the Willamette Valley (Perry, 2020).

William G. Robbins (n.d.) writes of the time:

For nearly two decades, [Missouri State Senator] Benton and others described the Northwest as an earthly paradise, a place where prudent and ambitious American citizens could turn their dreams into reality. Others were even less hinged to reality. The most single-minded and obsessive of the Americans promoting settlement on the Columbia River was Harvard-educated Hall Jackson Kelley. After reading the Lewis and Clark journals in 1817, Kelley promoted the Oregon Country as a “New Eden,” a land with “sublime and conspicuous” mountains and a “salubrious” climate that was “well watered, nourished by a rich soil, and warmed by a congenial heat.”

These are the stories that follow how settlers came to Willamette Valley in search of a “New Eden,” as Robbins describes above, that they could make according to their own imaginary. This imaginary contributed greatly to the lore that drove westward expansion and colonization of the Willamette Valley.

The American lore of westward expansion is alive and well today in the tales of the Oregon Trail. In 1840, the first wagon trains left Missouri for the Willamette Valley (Gibson, 2011). The Willamette Valley’s Euro-American population increased exponentially throughout the next two decades, from 1,500 in 1843, 6,000 in 1845, 13,294 by 1850, and 52,000 in 1860 (Robbins, n.d.). Various scholars have cautioned against tales of exceptionalism that often surround the Willamette Valley’s history. Katrine Barber (2019) connects migration across the Oregon Trail to a pattern of global mass migration that was driving settler colonialism around the

world, creating what has been termed the “rise of the Anglo world.” William G. Robbins (2021) critiques the simplified narrative that “overblown descriptions of the region” are what drew settlers to make the journey. The industrialization of the 19th century caused “shifting social and economic conditions,” that compounded with a depressed agricultural economy in the American Midwest during the 1830s and 1840s. Robbins (n.d.), referring to the work of historian Carlos Schwantes (1996) in the Pacific Northwest, argues that “agrarian societies equate wealth with landholding and that hard-pressed midwestern farmers found the promise of abundant and fertile land a sufficient attraction to undertake the arduous two-thousand-mile journey to the Willamette Valley.”

The territory came to hold a new meaning for its settlers, one that was at odds with the territorial, place-based identities of its Indigenous co-creators. Settlers were not only bringing themselves and their physical effects across the continent in covered wagons; they also brought with them dreams for the future, ones deeply rooted in Euro-American agrarianism. These new imaginations contributed to the process of claim-making (Shattuck & Peluso, 2021) and would legitimize the violent dispossession of Indigenous lands, and their enclosure for the purpose of building new Euro-American agrarian societies. According to Barber (2019), “[m]any overlanders came west hoping to secure land — financial independence for themselves and an inheritance for their children — and to avoid the racial and religious conflicts of the states, to make anew social and political communities that reflected but also improved on their old homes.” By the 1840s and 1850s, when the largest portion of settlers were making their way to the Willamette Valley, the Indigenous population had already been diminished from an original population size of approximately 14,000 individuals to nearly 600 by the mid-1800s. This occurred through successive waves of disease, such as smallpox in 1782 and malaria in the

1830s, spread through earlier contact with Euro-American colonizers (Lewis, 2014; Thompson, 2006). This contributed to the assumption that the lands, and other natural resources, were not being used efficiently, and were free for taking, an assumption that was fueled and supported by U.S. federal policies, like the Monroe Doctrine, which legitimized Manifest Destiny and squatter democracy (Suval, 2017). David Lewis has written about the “dramatic scale of near destruction” of the Kalapuyan peoples that was precipitated by these diseases, contributing to “a loss of tribal identity, community continuity, and tribal languages and culture, as well as lasting psychological and health effects” (Lewis, 2014: 420):

[The many Kalapuyan tribes and bands] had an incredible network of commerce already established before the Americans and British arrived. Soon after, the tribal peoples got very sick. The cold sick visited them, and no tribal remedies were successful. Tens of thousands died of newly introduced malaria, influenza, smallpox, and other ailments, beginning in the 1780s and continuing into the 1850s. By then, the tribes were remnants of their former powerful nations. Many had occupied vast territories in the valley through several politically associated villages, but they were forced to collapse to a single village of survivors. Tribes of perhaps a few dozen souls, who once numbered into the thousands, banded together for protection and companionship after so many had died. On the heels of the epidemics came the pioneer settlers who began taking what appeared to be empty, unclaimed lands. The vast prairie land was an Eden with rich soils that were seemingly being wasted on the poor, miserable tribal peoples. The newcomers took over the best lands. Then, to add insult to this injury, they organized to completely eliminate the tribes from the land.

From the draining of camas fields (Lewis, 2016) and “through ordinary acts of fencing” (Barber, 2019), to acts of outright genocide, the conflict between settler colonialism and Indigenous sovereignty transformed the territory. Settler colonization and the agrarian transformation that it entailed, significantly changed human relations with the landscape, by prohibiting the continued management of the land by Indigenous Kalapuyans, and by manipulating the land for Euro-American agriculture. In the words of a settler himself, settlers to the Willamette Valley “went anywhere we pleased, settled down without any treaty or consultation with the Indians, and

occupied our claims without their consent and without compensation” (Burnett, 1904).

Indigenous political scientist Glen Coulthard (2010: 79, 82) explains that, whether the violence was outright or indirect, by threatening Indigenous peoples, their resources and their worlds, settlers were threatening “an [Indigenous] ontological framework” of “interdependent relations covering the land and animals, past and future generations, as well as other people and communities.”

What might be characterized as “below the threshold of actual violence” (Wilm, 2018: 218) contributed directly to what David Lewis describes in his work, “Four Deaths,” as the “literal” and “cultural” deaths of the Kalapuyan peoples (Lewis, 2014). Thompson (2006) writes of the same time that “It was when the United States government began to offer free land in Oregon territory that the Kalapuya way of life began to crumble entirely: farmers drained wetlands, plowed camas and tarweed fields, introduced exotic crops and prevented the native people from using fire to promote the growth of essential food sources.” Euro-American settlers to Oregon’s Willamette Valley needed to destroy Indigenous food lifeways in order to replace them with their own agrarian models of civilization. This process of ‘destroying to replace’ is a defining characteristic of settler colonialism (Wolfe, 2006).

The 1850 Donation Land Claim Act (DLCA) consolidated the settler imaginaries of the Willamette Valley through federal policy. This is an excellent example of how new socio-political institutions manifested within the territory and were used to regulate and transform the physical landscape. The DLCA was the most generous affirmative land policy in the history of the United States. If married, settlers could claim up to 640 acres of land, equaling one square mile (Johnson, 2014). Most of these claims were concentrated in the Willamette Valley, which boasted some of the highest quality soils in the nation. David Lewis writes that “[b]y 1851 there

was no land in the Willamette Valley unclaimed by American settlers, who also called for the removal or genocide of all Indian peoples” (Lewis, n.d.). By 1855, the year the Donation Land Claim Act expired, over 7,000 claims had been filed, most in the Willamette Valley, amounting to 2.6 million acres of land. (OHS, 2014) That same year, the Grande Ronde reservation was established through the Kalapuya Treaty. Indigenous peoples throughout the Willamette Valley were forcibly removed to the reservation, while land ownership was legally granted to white settlers. This process established agriculture as a foundation of the region’s economy (Coleman, 2019).

White agrarianism was further entrenched in the territory through the mediated exclusion and inclusion of racialized identities in ways that would contribute to the construction of this imaginary. Examples of this include the forced removal of Indigenous peoples and the Black Exclusion Laws of the mid 19th century; the state’s Alien Land Law and Japanese internment after WWII; and the inclusion of “others” for agricultural labor, through migrant labor laws, like the Bracero program, forced seasonal field labor during Japanese incarceration in internment camps, and Indigenous land allotment and termination. The ideal of a ‘white utopia’ was being used to claim the territory as part of Euro-American economies. People of color were and continue to be invited to do agricultural labor, especially Mexican laborers (Bussel & Tichenor, 2017; Korsunsky, 2020). Laborers of color have played a fundamental role in shaping Oregon’s landscape into what it is today, all the while remaining invisible (Sifuentez, 2016). Shattuck and Peluso (2021) write that territories are used by states to control who has access to natural resources, like land. This is done “by limiting, enabling or encouraging specific activities within the boundaries of a particular territory, including the exclusion of people and activities” (p. 198).

The cultural and political practices of agrarian settlers became a powerful force in shaping the region.

The theft of Indigenous lands and the import of temporary labor, which I will explore in more detail in the following section, are characteristic of both settler colonialism (Barber, 2019) and racial capitalism (Montenegro de Wit, 2021; Pulido, 2017). The settler colonial project in the Willamette Valley was only made possible by the racial ideologies that spurred on settler colonization in the United States, in the first place (Akram-Lodhi et al., 2021). Settler colonization was the initial mechanism that would integrate the Willamette Valley into the global food regime, transforming the territory into a site of capital accumulation under the governance of the U.S. nation state.

From Colonization to Commodification: Incorporation into the Corporate Food Regime

Since the mid-1800s, the racialized governance of agri-food resources in the Willamette Valley, like land and labor, has led to the violent dispossession of Indigenous homelands and has simultaneously created the conditions for a capitalist agri-food regime, also known as corporate food regime. Eric Holt-Giménez (2017) writes: “By the end of the nineteenth century, mercantilism, colonialism, and industrialization had all combined in a new form of global capitalism that spread powerfully, if unevenly, around the earth” (p. 32). What Holt-Giménez describes here is the transition from a colonial food regime to a corporate food regime, as the role of agriculture in development of global capitalism changed (McMichael, 2006). While the colonial food regime was characterized by commercial food production in settler states (including family farms in the U.S. west) to support urban and industrial development, especially in Europe, the corporate food regime was characterized by U.S. hegemony and the

nationalization of commercial food markets (Wiebe et al., 2010). The Willamette Valley was a critical site of development in these global patterns.

In the Willamette Valley, the rise of commercial agriculture began with its initial settlement by Euro-Americans, but was escalated by the development of railroads that connected large settlements within the region, as well as to the rest of the nation. The resulting shift from family farming and subsistence agriculture to crop specialization allowed farmers to participate in growing national and international markets. Bernstein (2016) writes that *commercialized* family farms were “central to producing export food staples in those regions of settlement that lacked ‘peasantries’ in any sense familiar from the pre-capitalist agrarian class societies of Asia and Europe,” such as those of the United States. During this food regime, the focus shifted towards increasing incomes and crop yields, supplemented by the rise in agricultural technologies, while the incentives for farming shifted away from producing food for local markets. Increasingly, research focused on improved efficiency and profit maximization. Grass seed production began to surpass wheat production in the early 20th century, as farmers tapped into commodity markets for dairy. By the 1950s, the Willamette Valley had become the grass seed capital of the world, producing grass seed on 116,000 acres in 1948 (Malone, 2010).

These new agricultural regimes, which were characterized by large-scale commercial agriculture and concentrated ownership, created new demands for temporary agricultural labor. These demands were further compounded by the loss of domestic farm labor to military enlistment during WWII (Holt-Giménez, 2017). In Oregon, labor demands were largely filled by Japanese immigrants, Indigenous peoples and Mexican migrants, who were incorporated into the corporate food regime as temporary labor. State-level policies were instrumental in creating this labor-agriculture regime, as I will explore below.

In the early 1900s, Oregon was home to a growing Japanese agricultural community. In the wake of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, Japanese migrant labor was in high demand. There was a growing trend for Japanese laborers to invest their earnings into farming and farmland, and by 1923, 60% of Japanese immigrants in Oregon were engaged in farming. The success of Japanese farmers created resentment amongst previously established white farms, and that same year the Oregon legislature passed the Alien Land Law, which prohibited first-generation Japanese immigrants from owning or leasing land (Katagiri, 2023), tying Japanese labor back into capitalist modes of production. In this case, land and labor was being regulated based on ideologies of racial difference for capitalist production through a single state policy. At the end of WWII, the entire country saw a spike in xenophobic sentiments towards Japanese. Lawmakers in Oregon passed the Oregon Plan in May of 1942, which mandated the incarceration of Japanese in labor camps, largely for agricultural labor. Archival documents show that the labor shortage in Malheur County, Oregon was a large driver of the policy (Young, 2022).

WWII was also a driver of migrant labor from Mexico. Oregon officially participated in the national Bracero Program between 1942-1947. The Bracero Program allowed seasonal, migrant farm labor to be hired from Mexico. Many farms continued to recruit Mexican laborers, and by the 1950s hiring Mexican labor was a common practice, despite the policy's official discontinuation in 1947. This left migrant workers in a vulnerable position, risking state and federal persecution for wage labor, as farms in the Willamette Valley continued to rely on and incentivize migrant labor (Stephen, 2012).

Attempts to assimilate Oregon's Indigenous population into Euro-American agrarianism began as early as the mid-1800s, when Christian missionaries to the northern Willamette Valley engaged Kalapuyans in seasonal agricultural labor (Lewis, 2014). Oregon's Indigenous peoples

would be compelled to work as seasonal migratory laborers in agriculture for the next century. The 1887 Dawes Act transferred reservation land ownership to private buyers, and created individual land allotments for each ‘nuclear family’ with the land that was left for reservation purposes (Robbins, n.d.). Many Indigenous people also participated in seasonal farm labor to supplement their income, due to a lack of funding and employment opportunities at the reservations (Lewis, 2014). In 1954, the Western Oregon Termination Act was a further attempt to assimilate the Indigenous population, by undoing the reservation policy, and, once again, forcing Indigenous peoples to relocate and find income sources. Many went to live in urban centers, like Portland, to engage in wage labor, including in agriculture. Oregon’s Indigenous peoples made up a significant portion of the state’s agricultural labor up until the 1970s (Lewis, 2022). David Lewis captures the paradox of this situation, stating that the Indigenous peoples of the Willamette Valley “became the first migrant farm workers of the new agricultural economy, an irony considering they were the land’s original inhabitants” (Lewis, 2014).

The settlement of the Willamette Valley by Euro-American agriculturalists, the ensuing violent dispossession of Indigenous lands, and the subsequent incorporation of agricultural production into the corporate food regime had a tremendous effect on the transformation of the Willamette Valley’s food system. State-level land and labor policies that relied on an ideology of racial difference (Pulido, 2017) and simultaneously incorporated land and labor into national and state-level economies, transformed the territory into a function for capital accumulation. However, settler colonialism is always characterized by the resistance to these systems of exploitation, by both Indigenous peoples and temporary laborers (Barber, 2019). As capitalist agriculture continued to benefit from racialized labor markets and extract value from laborers, a movement against racialized labor hierarchies began to grow, especially out of the joint efforts of

migrant forest and agricultural laborers. Small and family farms across the Willamette Valley were feeling the negative effects of capital-based production as well, and began pushing back against the dominance of industrial agriculture. The pushback against the corporate food regime in the Willamette Valley paralleled other movements, especially against Green Revolution policies across the world in the 1970s (Gliessman, 2015). What emerged was a diverse set of practices that functioned around and outside of capitalist agriculture. The following section elaborates key moments in the movements against the corporate food regime that emerged in the Willamette Valley and describes the particularities of these movements and the issues and questions they grapple with.

Multi-Site Reaction and Resistance to Global Capitalism

By the 1950s and 60s, the negative effects of the global food regime were being felt in diverse communities across rural and urban United States. Resistance to a complete incorporation into the global food regime took many forms, from progressive local food movements, led by white hippies, who were fighting for the health and well-being of their communities (Kauffman, 2018), to farmworker organizing, led by migrant Latine farmworkers fighting for some of the same reasons (Sifuentez, 2016; Stephen, 2012). These movements used very different strategies, and their successes and failures have much to teach us about the importance of a just transition. These lessons can inform how we organize in the present-day, considering the territorial histories I have outlined, as they intersect with the development of commercial agriculture through racial capitalism.

Beginning especially in the 1960s and 70s, movements for organic, local food were budding in the state, especially in the Willamette Valley's urban corridor. Emblematic of this

movement were the various cooperative natural food stores that sprung up in the Willamette Valley's urban areas, some of them still going strong today, including The Kiva in Eugene. The emergence of cooperative food stores in the Willamette Valley matched a national pattern of a rise in consumer cooperatives across the United States in the 1970s (Kauffman, 2018). Behind the slogan of 'food for people, not for profit,' was a generation of consumer activists that engaged with the politics of food, inspired by the work of Frances Moore Lappé, especially in its critiques of the corporate food regime. Farmers markets were becoming increasingly popular (Landis, 2022), alongside the rise of organic agriculture and local food markets (Kauffman, 2018). Notably, the first organic produce labelling scheme in the country, Oregon Tilth, was founded in the Willamette Valley in 1984 (Korsunsky, 2020). The organic agriculture movement arose in response to environmental and health concerns with industrial agriculture and was accompanied by back-to-the-land movements. This meant that for many of its followers, organic agriculture was both a new farming method and a political call to action against the corporate food regime (Kauffman, 2018).

While the organic food movement has done a lot for agricultural change in this country, it also failed to address deeply rooted issues that were driving the problems of pollution and extractive food economies. The strategies of the organic food movement were largely "color-blind" (Guthman, 2008a) and class-blind. In the 1960s, food cooperatives catered specifically to 'white middle-class hippies,' isolating diverse urban communities. While the environmental scandals of the 1970s, including pesticide poisoning and chemical additives in food, combined with rising food prices, drove more mainstream middle-class consumers towards these alternatives, this iteration of the alternative food movement was characterized by some as "elitist and bourgeois" (Kauffman, 2018, p. 260). By the 1980s and 1990s, there was a decline in

cooperative food stores, pushed by the “laws and financial institutions that did not adequately support cooperative enterprises” (Kauffman, 2018, p. 274). The failure of the movement itself to address the ecological and social concerns of its supporters may be connected to its narrow political focus (Kauffman, 2018). Guthman (2004) suggests that the neoliberal politics of middle-class consumer activism is closely linked to the political identities of the U.S. West, influenced by a separatist Jeffersonian democracy, which happened to be a major pull factor for many settlers embarking on the Oregon Trail (Lalande, 2017).

At the same time, farmworkers were organizing along more radical lines. Oregon is home to one of the country’s most long-lived labor union (Korsunsky, 2020), PCUN, a labor union that has prided itself on organizing the food systems most exploited social group: undocumented migrant laborers. Beginning in 1950, faith-based organizations in Oregon began to provide services for migrant farmworkers and stand in solidarity with them. These organizations generally took a “passive social welfare approach” (Stephen, 2012). By the 1970s, inspired by the work of Cesar Chavez and the national movement for farmworker rights, worker-led organizations emerged in the Willamette Valley. The Willamette Valley Immigration Project, which would later become *Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste* (PCUN), opened in 1977 to serve undocumented rural workers, focusing in its early years on forest labor (Stephen, 2012). PCUN officially formed in 1985, with the objective of uniting and organizing forest and farmworkers across Oregon to advocate for better working conditions. Their early work focused largely on issues surrounding amnesty and pesticides (Stephen, 2012), contributing to both the social and ecological dimensions of transition. By the late 1980s, PCUN had shifted their focus primarily to farm workers. They became instrumental in helping laborers achieve better working and living conditions (Stephen, 2012). Today, PCUN is one of the most successful farmworker

unions in the country, due to their continued commitment to serving undocumented laborers (Sifuentez, 2016). Reflecting on the success of PCUN and the importance of a radical politics for food systems transformation, Sifuentez (2016) writes:

PCUN challenged the idea that the absence of citizenship made undocumented workers vulnerable to deportation and thus unorganizable. Its commitment to organizing all workers regardless of citizenship made PCUN a leader among groups that were rethinking the relationship between farm work and immigrant rights. [...] PCUN utilized strategies similar to those of the United Farm Workers, yet defined its own criteria for success. In sharp contrast to the UFW, PCUN developed an internationalist critique of imperialism, capitalism, and militarism reminiscent of those of the International Workers of the World (IWW) and Centro de Acción Social Autónomo (CASA). PCUN's strategies, tactics, and vision were influenced by the UFW, but it also learned from the larger group's failures and embraced a more inclusive viewpoint.

The legacy of PCUN has led to the formation of some of the most inspiring organizations that are working to transform food systems in the Willamette Valley, by facilitating farmworker housing development, leadership development and land ownership (Stephen, 2012).

The marked difference in politics between these movements contributes significant historical evidence of the importance of a just transition in the territory, a lesson about politics that can and should be applied to the contemporary local food movement. One major lesson to be learned from the comparative longevity and success of PCUN is the importance of organizing diverse identities, especially those that are most impacted, like undocumented laborers.

Conclusion

The settlement of the Willamette Valley by white agriculturalists spurred an agrarian transformation that created a legacy still felt in food systems today. In fact, The Willamette Valley was a critical site of development of the corporate food regime. The Willamette Valley is an especially interesting case to understand these trends, as the racialized transformation of the

territory was so explicit. Settler colonization so drastically transformed the territory, because of the intent of settlers to remain on the land and recreate Euro-American agricultural regimes in the territory. By fencing land, ploughing the earth, draining camas fields, alongside outright genocide, agriculture became a tool through which settlers had the dominance within the territory to create the socio-cultural relations with the territory and the socio-political regimes that enabled the territory to become part of the corporate food regime. State-level land and labor policies that relied on an ideology of racial difference (Pulido, 2017) and simultaneously incorporated land and labor into national and state-level economies, transformed the territory into a function for capital accumulation. This was facilitated by an ideology of racial difference that sanctioned the theft of Indigenous lands and exploitation of laborers of color (for capital production). Through its integration into the nation-state, and therefore, the global food regime, the dominance of racial capitalism was solidified through public policy, from Indigenous removal, the Donation Land Claim Act and Black exclusion in the mid-nineteenth century, to Japanese incarceration and the Bracero program in the 20th century.

These historical dimensions of the territory provide a critical understanding of the challenges that food movements face in their attempts to transform the food system. The co-opted organic movement shows that a transition that is uncritical of racial capitalism cannot succeed in the transforming the corporate food regime. At the same time, farmworkers were organizing along more radical lines, providing a more hopeful pathway for the future of food and agriculture in the Willamette Valley.

In the next chapter, I will take a deep dive into the challenges that food movements in the Willamette Valley are grappling with today, and whether they include deeply embedded structural and systemic inequities explored in this chapter. What has been learned from the

failures and successes of older food movements, and where is there still an opportunity to learn from the territory? In exploring these questions, I hope to make the case for a territorial food systems transformation.

Chapter 4: ‘A Behemoth of an Issue:’ Encountering Systemic and Structural Challenges in the Food System

If you have ever driven along Interstate 5, which travels north to south through Oregon’s Willamette Valley, you might have noticed the road sign proclaiming Linn County as the ‘grass seed capital of the world.’ The first time I drove by the sign, I wasn’t sure what to think. The sign seems to proclaim its opposition to (what I perceived as) the idyllic vision of Oregon’s rural landscape, which is dotted with red barns and quaint farmhouses, grazing sheep and cows. As I embarked on this research project – a process that would lead me past the sign many more times on my way to agriculture conferences and food systems gatherings – I began to understand that the contradiction I saw was, in some ways, symbolic of the struggles for agricultural transformation in the territory.

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how Oregon’s histories of settler colonialism and racialized labor contributed to a territorial transformation that was characterized by racial capitalism. In this chapter, I investigate the structural and systemic barriers that food movements face, and the strategies they employ to overcome those barriers, in their attempts to transform the food system in the present day. The emergence of the particular socio-political strategies being used in Oregon to overcome various lock-ins of the corporate food regime mirrors a growing collection of movements globally that use the political principles of agroecology as a mobilizing framework.

Often, strategies for food systems transformation emerge from the grassroots, where the politics of food sovereignty are used to claim power for alternative agri-food systems (Anderson et al., 2021; Giraldo & Rosset, 2018; Lawhon & Murphy, 2012; van der Ploeg, 2012). In this investigation, however, I focus on the more formalized spaces of civil society that are allied with and can serve to enable the grassroots in a context where capitalism is so deeply entrenched.

Through an extensive review of case studies of agroecology movements, Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al. (2018) identified external allies as one of the key drivers for agroecology to scale beyond isolated experiments at the farm level. External allies also contribute to agroecological transformation by enabling favorable policies and markets (Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al., 2018), facilitating social organization between movement actors (Anderson et al., 2021; Andréé et al., 2019; Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al., 2018), and mediating interactions between grassroots movements and dominant institutions in ways that transform institutions to support agroecology (Anderson et al., 2021; Montenegro de Wit, 2021). In this chapter, I will describe why my participants consistently expressed the need for a hybridized approach, in which allies work to access resources and legitimacy for agroecology, while remaining accountable to the protagonists of transformation, like small farmers, farmworkers, and the grassroots movements they engage in.

My goal in this chapter is to understand how the strategies of allies align with transformative approaches to food systems change, and what can be learned from global movements working to transform food systems through agroecology. By doing so, I attempt to answer my second research question: “How does the existing alternative food movement reflect the process of agroecological transformation?” The structure of this chapter is as follows: First, I draw on my interviews with food systems activists and organizations to describe the systemic and structural barriers that shape social and ecological conditions in Oregon’s food systems. This provides the context for understanding why agroecology is a relevant framework for territorial transformations in the Willamette Valley. Then, I provide a glimpse into the strategies that food systems organizations are engaging in as a hybridized movement to transform the current conditions. Finally, I explore the limitations of these strategies, as expressed by my participants

and from what I have learned about the context of racial capitalism within the territory. I do not close this chapter simply by reflecting on the limitations; rather, I provide an introduction to the learning strategies that can contribute to expanding how movements tackle deeply systemic and structural barriers in food systems (explored in detail in Chapter 5).

Systemic and Structural Barriers

In the present moment, our food systems are often characterized by low wages, high food prices, and a manufactured tension between food production and ecological sustainability (Kaljonen et al. 2021; McMichael, 2009). While these concerns exist globally, they were also central to the narratives that I heard from food systems activists and professionals working throughout the Willamette Valley. When asked what they imagine for the future of food systems in the Willamette Valley, one of my participants alluded first to the frustrations they had with the current system, which was preventing any real change from being achievable:

Yeah, I mean, that's such a huge question. It's hard to.. I mean, it's such a big.. It's such a behemoth of a of an issue to tackle. I don't really know where to begin or even what the end product looks like.

They went on to describe two simultaneous pieces that, in their view, needed to happen to transform our food systems and make space for alternatives. The first piece was “mathematical,” a question of making economics work for everyone, a potentially solvable issue. The second piece was deeply cultural and referred to the racial divides in land access and farm labor, including the theft of Indigenous lands. Not so easy to solve.

Oregon’s agricultural industry has been used by the state as a vehicle for progress since the start of the violent state-sponsored settlement of the territory by white agriculturalists. The industry’s incorporation into the global food regime, alongside many other agri-food systems

around the world, reinforced commercial agriculture as a vehicle for development and economic progress in Oregon.

The role of commercial agriculture in the state's economic development has driven much of the state's public policy and has incentivized commercial production at the expense of ecological sustainability, fair labor, local food access and small farms. One example of this can be found in Oregon's land use policies. Oregon has some of the strictest land use laws in the country, intended to protect farmland from urban development (1000 Friends, 2020). This is especially relevant, considering that urban development and agricultural development goals are often at odds with each other. As one of my participants said, "the best farmland is often in the flat bottom ground near rivers, where we also like to build our settlements, and the biggest patch of class one soil [in Oregon] is paved underneath the city of Portland." While these laws were designed to protect farmland, they tend to preference large-scale production, by requiring large minimum lot sizes that price out many small-scale farmers from farmland purchase.

In a system where you have to "pay to play," the inequities around food access and farm resources can be glaring. Getting access to land and funding for farm infrastructure and equipment is a real challenge for beginning farmers, especially "for farmers that don't come from a farming background, or don't have inheritance [or] a trust fund." One effect this has had, is that small farmers are having to become businesspeople. But the competitive nature of running a farm business doesn't necessarily align with the reasons that motivate people to start farming in the first place. I often heard the message that farmers didn't get into farming because they wanted to "run a business" or "make money," but because they wanted to feed their communities, contribute to local "bounty" and collective "liberation." Despite their commitment to feeding their communities, and doing so through ecological practices, many small farmers are

not getting paid enough to cover their costs of production and labor, let alone pay themselves a livable wage (Gray, 2013), a finding that was corroborated by my participants. The tension between wanting to support ecological farming practices and needing an income high enough to get by was expressed by many of my participants that work closely with small farmers and farmers of color.

These agricultural systems, that are designed to contribute to state and global capital, can be especially challenging for new and beginning farmers who want to farm ecologically (Carlisle et al., 2019), but do not yet have farmland or a reliable market base for their products. Across the U.S., land is prohibitively expensive for beginning farmers (Calo & Peterson-Rockney, 2018). Heidi, explained how challenging it has been, as an extension agent, to communicate to beginning farmers that “this is the system that we’re in right now.” It’s a system in which land is prohibitively expensive, markets are flooded, farm workers are not getting paid the full value of their labor, while many farmers themselves aren’t making enough money. In some cases, farmers take on a second job to support their farm lifestyle (Beach & Kulcsár, 2015), a national pattern that one of my participants noted in Oregon as well. It’s not a hopeful message to have to communicate. But it’s not uncommon for new farmers, who start off with a dream of feeding their communities, to experience burnout and exhaustion. A study of Iowa farmers showed that this burnout is driven by the profitability of a farm business and other factors, including physical health, social relationships, and personal satisfaction (Rissing 2019).

There’s a collective frustration with the “inequity” that characterizes the system along the entire food supply chain. Several of my participants suggested that the real, economic challenges on the production side often mean that consumers face considerable barriers to accessing nutritious local and ecologically grown food. Alice, who has been a farm operator and is an avid

farm market supporter, told me: “The real cost of food is higher than a lot of people are able or willing to pay, and that is a determining factor in who has access to alternative food system products.” Another respondent noted how challenging it can be for farmers to balance their goals of feeding the community with making a living: “there are farmers that I talk with that... the prices that they’re charging for their products, their organic local vegetables, to be able to be a viable farm, there’s a certain demographic that can afford it [local food]... and, you know, they’re like ‘it’s how we have to grow to survive and market as a farm’, but it’s not what they dreamed of when they became farmers.” These critiques are reminiscent of the limitations of local food institutions, like farmers markets or natural grocery stores, which tend to cater to the white middle-class (Guthman, 2008b). The limitations of the Willamette Valley’s local agri-food system, that replicate commodity economies, are being felt by farmers in the Willamette Valley and the allied organizations that work with them.

There has been growing support for movements against industrial and commercial agriculture, towards localized food systems that support social and ecological values. In the U.S., these movements began emerging in the 1970s, in response to environmental and health harms, as I detailed in the previous chapter, and have since evolved to incorporate concerns around climate change, farm labor and food justice. These ambitions exist outside of the dominant regime, for the most part; however, they are growing in legitimacy within some regime institutions, like Oregon State University’s Small Farms Program. The resistance against extractive models of agriculture demonstrates that these models are not universally accepted, nor are they the only pathway forward. These alternatives are promising, and their resilience in the face of such significant systemic and structural barriers is symbolic of the power of grassroots alternatives. However, any substantial transformation of these barriers has been limited. Despite

beginning farmers' willingness to engage in non-capitalist economies, the persistence of systemic challenges ultimately undermine their endeavors (Suryanata et al., 2021). In Oregon, the systemic support for commercial agriculture, like the promotion of policies that are “anti-labor, pro-farm aggregation, and pro-chemical use,” has created a “stacked competition between industrialized food and small-scale production,” as one of my participants put it.

The financial/economic challenges that producers and consumers encounter were linked to the racial history of capitalist agriculture by more than one of my participants, who described these systems as “inherited,” stating that “they were designed this way.” By linking contemporary inequities in the food system to the histories of how our food systems came to be, food systems activists are making important links to structural barriers that need to be addressed for food systems transformation. The consolidation of these barriers are closely intertwined with slavery and colonization (Rogaly, 2021), connections that some of my participants were compelled to point out. One of my participants noted that: “In agriculture, whether you want to participate in the system or not, our system of agriculture in Oregon - well in this country - is based on slavery. And it's set up a system that is inherently inequitable.”

These critiques of historical inequalities and the design of ‘the system’ indicate a growing consciousness around the structural and systemic barriers to equity and sustainability in the food system. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed these inequities in the U.S. and globally, as meatpacking and farmworkers contracted the disease at higher rates than the general population, and hunger and food insecurity increased (Montenegro de Wit, 2021). For Montenegro de Wit (2021) these issues reveal “deep and interlinked ecological, social, and epistemic metabolic rifts,” that can ultimately be connected as symptoms of racial capitalism.

Agroecology can provide an alternative paradigm for food systems design. The practices and principles of agroecology contribute to healing the ecological (Betancourt, 2020; Montenegro de Wit, 2021) and social (Bezner Kerr et al., 2019; Montenegro de Wit, 2021) metabolic rifts that drive the crisis. Although farm-level transitions are important and can often be an entry-point for farmers into agroecology, the socio-political dimensions of agroecology are especially interesting for this case study, given the context of racial capitalism and the social inequalities that I have outlined. Abolitionist and emancipatory agroecologies are especially relevant in this context. Abolitionist agroecology, advanced by Maywa Montenegro de Wit (2021), center critiques of racism and the principles of abolition in the development of agroecological alternatives. Emancipatory agroecology takes a similar approach to critiquing structures of oppression, focusing on building the autonomy and leadership of agroecology's peasant protagonists (Giraldo & Rosset, 2022).

I noticed that the values of agroecology were present in the narratives that some of my participants told me about their visions for the future of food. I began each of my interviews by asking my participants to describe the kind of food system they were working to create. By asking this question, I was hoping to understand how well their ideals aligned with agroecology. I learned that the values of food sovereignty drove much of the work my participants did. In their narratives for the future for food and agriculture, many of my participants translated the values of food sovereignty to their own context, describing the importance of equitable access to open-source seeds, land and water, culturally appropriate foods, and community- and solidarity-based food economies. They spoke about the importance of “having control” over the food system to contribute to local communities, rather than global commodity markets, and for everyone to have the capacities to grow food, if they wanted to. For some, this meant having smaller, diverse

farms, so that everyone is able to access land. For others, it was fundamentally a question of addressing historical inequities in land and water rights. It also meant building alternative economies based on collective ownership, including for farm equipment, labor, and even housing. These alternative economies would support the revitalization of rural communities and close the rural-urban divide, be nimble in the face of increasing crises, like COVID-19, and be more culturally responsive. Alternative economies that support the collective, would, in turn, support ecological farming practices by having food come from “land stewards and earth tenders,” and those folks, in turn, being cared for by society, and by shifting to “a holistic understanding of health of the environment in terms of long-term productivity” and “building the viability of the land and resources that you’re stewarding, instead of this extractive mindset.” This included having space on farms that is reserved for wildlife habitat, also known as conservation lands, and respecting the fact that “the lines between nature and where people live [...] and grow their food” are “very messy.” What one of my participants described as the “seed to compost experience,” translated the importance of closed loop ecological systems. Regardless of the particularities of their visions, there was a shared commitment to address historical inequities. This included ideas like making adapted seeds “preferentially available to BIPOC farmers” and working with those communities to develop those seeds through participatory research. At minimum, it is important to ask ourselves: “What are the social implications of the food system, the choices we’ve made historically [...]?”

In these narratives, there is a collection of ideas that would interpret agroecology as a science, practice and movement. In the following section, I will explore how these values translate into the practices that folks are using to overcome structural and systemic barriers in the food system. This will help to understand how organizations are already contributing to an

agroecological transformation, and in what ways agroecological principles can be deepened to address the lingering challenges that my participants continue to grapple with.

‘The issues are bigger than grassroots efforts can solve:’ Nurturing Agroecology through Hybridized Movements

During one of my first interviews for this research project, I unexpectedly encountered an answer to a lingering question I have had about the role of allies in food systems transformation. I met Alice in Junction City, a tiny rural town outside of Eugene that is home to many of the Willamette Valley’s earliest farms. As she was telling me about how deeply entrenched the systemic issues in agriculture are, she reflected on the importance of allied organizations in making the seemingly impossible possible:

“we’re living in a time of scarcity of water, of depletion of soils, of pollution of the air, of all of these things, and it’s hard to change from the inside when your [farm] operation is so tangibly impacted by the actions of people who you cannot control. So I think that’s where we go with policy, is that *the issues are bigger than grassroots efforts can solve*. I think that’s why we lean into land use policy, and resource reallocation from the government, and things like that to try to fix some of these [systemic] problems.”

Recognizing the significant structural and systemic barriers that small farmers are up against, who are already struggling to survive, Alice was one my first participants to point out the need for allied organizations to help overcome the limitations that grassroots movements face. The tension between grassroots protagonism and the resources needed to overcome systemic barriers remains one of the outstanding questions for agroecological transformations (Anderson et al., 2021; Giraldo & Rosset, 2022; Montenegro de Wit, 2021). Allied organizations can reduce the burden of frontline communities, contributing to a “systems approach” for food systems transformation (Anderson et al., 2019). One of my participants reflected on the value of a

systems approach, in that it can relieve some of the tension the leadership of frontline communities and the labor burdens that involves:

We could do a better job or expand on the ways that we can engage folks with lived experience. [But] I think historically we have operated under the head of we're convening organizations that are working within the food system. So we have historically not been focused on direct connection with each with every potential community, because we can never be that expert, right. Our focus has been convening the folks who do the work and have the deep connections to their communities, and helping connect those folks to each other. By those folks, I mean, connecting those organizations doing similar work, or related work, to each other to share and learn together and to create more partnerships.

Food systems transformation requires a network of warriors, builders and weavers (Stevenson et al., 2008), who can contribute the “diversity of tactics in different spaces” needed for transformation (Anderson et al., 2021). Cooperative forms of governance play a central role in food systems transformation, by encouraging the active participation of a diverse set of actors, especially from civil society, while maintaining a commitment to the leadership of frontline communities (Anderson et al., 2021; Andréé et al., 2019; González De Molina & Lopez-Garcia, 2021). There is a growing trend in the nonprofit sector to contribute more explicitly to transformation, where calls to ‘build movements, not organizations’ (Gottlieb, 2015) are changing the way allied organizations interact with social movements. For OCFSN’s members, this allows various organizations with a common objective to work from a “mindset of abundance.” This means, rather than “trying to claim space” by competing with each other over limited grant funding, organizations are leaning into their particular strengths and designing complementary programs that build collective capacity and support “a diversity of tactics in different spaces” (Anderson et al., 2021). During our interview, one of the network’s working group coordinators, Andrew, reflected on OCFSN’s role in bringing together diverse civil society actors and building power outside of the regime:

The network is here to bring people together and build power and create collective capacity to do this work. I think it's common in transition or social change, or social benefit work, there's a lot of silo-ing and organizations working on specific purposes, in their specific mission. But [they] struggle in coming together and thinking about a broader vision for the work. And so that's OCFSN's mission, is to do just that, bring people together and build that trust.

Later on in our interview, Andrew also noted that these collaborative models are being driven by the urgency of systemic crises, like climate change, and are creating new opportunities to address these crises from a diversity of approaches:

And I think a lot of it is because of our current system, the current ecological and economic and social struggles and crises, like climate change, there's a lot of overlap in what folks are working on, but then there's also just such a diversity of ways that can go about addressing these challenges. And I think there's a diversity of thought on how to do that within the network. It's not one or the other. There is a broad array, both from folks who are really focused on policy change in food systems, folks who are really looking at grassroots mobilization, and everything in between - I think it's a broad array. and I think that as a network we help to identify where these kind of theoretical structures overlap and then help bring people together and support each other in that. And then also kind of identify where there are gaps.

The need to move away from silo-ed social change work, towards building collective capacities is central to the mission of OCFSN. In one example, having built relationships through OCFSN allowed a group of organizations to work together to maximize on an unprecedented opportunity to provide funding for land purchase. Alice explained that “for the first time USDA is releasing grant funds that can be used for land purchase, which is nuts! And so in that regard we have been well positioned to be a supporting partner on those, to demonstrate community support and technical assistance, so that none of the money has to be used for starting new technical assistance programs and it can go more to actual land purchase.” This kind of collaboration is remarkable, considering the importance of land access to agroecology.

But coming together to build collective movements is not without its risks (Anderson et al., 2021; Andrée et al., 2019; Giraldo & Rosset, 2018). It can be risky for grassroots movements

to collaborate with nonprofit organizations. The co-optation of movement politics and ideologies has contributed to the failure of grassroots movements to transform the regime. One example is the organic movement, which had deeply political motives in its emergence (Kauffman, 2018), but has reproduced socio-economic inequalities, by not addressing the power asymmetries that ultimately create those inequalities (Alexandre De Lima et al., 2021). On the flip side, grassroots movements can be limited to “islands of success” (Gregory et al., 2017), if they do not engage with and transform the broader system beyond the protective niche. Thus, it is important to consider the governance structures that characterize the interactions between the grassroots and allied organizations. Interventions designed to support agroecological alternatives can be varied and have differential impacts on the transformative potential of these alternatives (Anderson et al., 2021; Andrée et al., 2019; Giraldo & Rosset, 2022; Montenegro de Wit, 2021). Anderson et al. (2021) describe interventions in agri-foods systems along a scale, ranging from interventions that suppress or co-opt agroecology and strengthen the dominant regime, to transformative interventions that ultimately deconstruct the regime and replace and anchor agroecology in its place. The position of a specific intervention along the scale is determined by the extent to which the intervention supports the agency and leadership of small farmers or peasant protagonists. Next, I will examine some of these interventions, by looking at the strategies being used by OCFSN’s member organizations to determine how they might contribute to agroecological transformation in the Willamette Valley.

A common approach used by a number of organizations to contribute to the success of agroecological niches in the Willamette Valley are technical assistance programs. These are training programs designed to improve the skills and knowledge of small farmers for running

successful farm businesses. The structural and systemic barriers that I describe above have real implications on the lives of small farmers and their ability to make a living and survive under the conditions of capitalism. When faced with the realities of market-based food systems, many farmers look for support in accessing viable markets, developing relationships with buyers and creating a market base. In response, some organizations are providing farm viability training, which helps farmers build business and marketing skills to bring their products to consumer markets. These trainings attempt to make farming a more viable endeavor, helping farm businesses survive and community food systems thrive, despite the systemic barriers that they're faced with. To paraphrase one of my participants, the longevity of capitalist systems requires people to figure out ways to survive within them by making money and a livelihood. While farmers, especially those engaged in food liberation work, are not motivated by money, they still need to survive in order to be able to do that essential work. That's why, what seemed to me to be a narrow focus on economic success of farms, farm viability is actually an essential skill for farmers to have, considering the systemic conditions we find ourselves in. Farm viability provides a pragmatic solution and somewhat immediate relief to the difficult conditions of being a beginning small farmer. The focus on distributive justice is a response that attempts to amend the socio-economic inequalities that characterize the broader food system. Distributive justice is a framework used to investigate the differences in who benefits and who is harmed by specific interventions, and by systems, more broadly (Kaljonen et al. 2021), and is a framework that is particularly useful in the context of racial capitalism.

But farm viability ultimately only addresses the symptoms of a commodity-based food system, and are often only marginally successful in the long-term (Korsunsky, 2020). The need

for other strategies, that address economic inequalities more deeply, and dismantle the disabling elements of the regime (Anderson et al., 2021), was clearly laid out to me:

How many farm businesses, when they start, actually have a business plan?
Probably none of them. Because the people who actually have access to start farm businesses are people who have the privilege and the luxury of being able to fly by the seat of their pants and just figure it out. So, writing a business plan clearly is not what makes you able to start a farm or not. Money is what makes you able to start a farm or not. And we can't do anything there.

Many of my respondents noted that a large part of the problem is about money. In this system where you have to “pay to play,” where you need significant capital to access land (Calo & Peterson-Rockney, 2018), and where food systems are incorporated into capitalist economies, having access to money matters. By engaging with the state through policy advocacy, allied organizations focused on engaging with the regime can help “money [...] flow to communities” and build the agency of food producers in the process:

We're not just saying: *'hey, you all have to have this level of greenhouse gas emissions reductions and soil health practices that you implement in the next 10 years; We're going to measure it come back and check on you.'* We're going to say: *'we're going to give resources that support your efforts and help you.'* [We] help them be leaders actually.

In other words, allied organizations are providing farmers with the “financial support to make the transition” to ecological farming, recognizing that although farmer agency is key, the burden of leadership can be a heavy lift considering most small farmers are just struggling to get by.

Public policy can be a useful tool for redistributing resources and undoing systemic preferencing for harmful practices (Guthman, 2004). As Montenegro de Wit (2021) writes:

A divest/invest strategy for agroecology is therefore both ideological – about the explicit and intentional articulation of defensive and offensive approaches – and practical, about redirecting money and other resources from where they have been accumulated so effectively by agribusiness. It is about demanding from our public institutions that resources be channeled towards agroecological alternatives so that it becomes realistic to go from niche to paradigm-shifting potential.

This dual strategy is also reflected in Oregon’s food movements, where there is an emphasis on “both holding bad actors in industrial agriculture accountable and uplifting the alternative food system to centralized industrial production.” Advocating for funding for agroecological alternatives is one way to engage in this dual strategy, pushing the state to divest from industrial agriculture and invest in small farms. Changing these funding structures is a central concern, because, as Alice told me, funding dictates who has access to the fundamental resources for farming, like land: “We can provide all the technical assistance in the world, and if people don’t have money to buy land, what are we going to do?” There is a recognition here of the actual problems that farmers face, and how they are ultimately connected to questions for resource distribution, like land access, rather than broadly attributing the failure of small farms to a lack of skills and knowledge (Calo & Peterson-Rockney, 2018; Suryanata et al., 2021).

The kinds of activities that support agroecological transformation break away from a “protective” autonomous niche, and, instead, facilitate interactions between the niche and the regime that may contribute to transforming the regime (Hargreaves et al., 2011). Several of my participants articulated the importance of allied organizations advocating for policy changes that transform systemic preferencing for commercial and industrial agriculture and, thereby provide agroecological alternatives the space to flourish. Although “Oregon is a small farm state, [small farms] make up such a small farmgate value of Oregon’s gross domestic agricultural products.” At the same time “industry has a lot of social capital [...] so, it definitely makes it easier for [policy makers] to listen to those groups.” In a context where the state regulates land use so strictly, and preferences commercial activities through these regulations, engaging with the state may be necessary. So many of my participants kept looping back around to the need for allied organizations, considering the difficulties of addressing systemic lock-ins:

Because of the land-based reality of agriculture, resource distribution and land ownership are a huge factor. And when only the people with enough money to buy land are the ones who are making decisions about how the industry runs, there cannot be true grassroots overhaul of an industry. [...] The power imbalances are so stark in this industry. There are things that we can do in terms of building community, and building mutual respect and understanding, and offering opportunity and resources to folks who are already in the system, so to speak. But there's so much that cannot be changed without government intervention.

Transforming the relations between agroecological alternatives and the regime, including government institutions, by addressing the disabling structures that create lock-ins, allows these alternatives to grow beyond 'islands of success' (Anderson et al., 2021; Giraldo & McCune, 2019). Creating favorable policies for agroecological practices is indeed a key driver of scaling agroecology beyond 'islands of success' (Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al., 2018).

Transforming the regime can also include non-state institutions, like philanthropy. The Oregon Food Bank is reimagining philanthropy, and is an excellent example of how an institution focused on ending hunger can contribute to the root cause of hunger in ways that go deeper than giving out free food. Contrary to what the organization's name suggests, at the Oregon Food Bank the focus of some programs is "not around food distribution but grant organizing for food systems change, because we know that just distributing food is not the solution to hunger." Instead, the Oregon Food Bank uses grants to support BIPOC beginning farmers to become leaders in feeding their own communities, for example. These kinds of unrestricted grants lift up the agency of food producers, acknowledging their existing skills and the knowledge and experience they bring to the table. At the heart of the Oregon Food Bank's funding approach, is the commitment to "not centering the donor or money, but centering love and equity and a larger sense of care and love for all." In a similar vein, although much less steeped in a commitment to love, the Tualatin Soil and Water Conservation District supports

local food producers by providing funding for food producers to sell their produce at farmers markets and to provide technical training and knowledge building for beginning farmers through incubator grants. Rather than running their own programs, the SWCD acknowledges that farmers already know what they are doing and can contribute that knowledge to supporting a new generation of farmers.

Interventions like these, that support the agency food producers, contribute to *nurturing* agroecology (Anderson et al., 2021). They do so by reducing the barriers that disable agroecological innovations to flourish on their own terms, for example, by providing unrestricted grant funding, which simultaneously reduces the burdens on frontline communities. Many of these programs regularly rely on participatory approaches to inform their strategies, from deciding which policies to fight for in the legislature, to developing new seed varieties for marginal lands. They also lean on their relationships with other professionals that have “boots on the ground,” who can provide feedback and advice on their program design. Some of these participatory approaches are more rigorous than others, but ultimately contribute to the democratic governance of food systems (Anderson et al., 2021; Andrée et al., 2019), which, in turn, nurtures agroecology. Democratic governance contributes to supporting food sovereignty and the agency of food producers, by continuously ensuring that their leadership is centered (Anderson et al., 2021)

Getting to Transformation: Emancipatory and Abolitionist Agroecologies

The strategies I explore in this chapter can help to make some agroecological experiments viable within the confines of the system, but many of my participants raised a lingering, unanswered question about how to move beyond these boundaries of possible

alternatives, questioning whether these strategies really changed the root causes of “oppression” and “capitalism.” Ultimately, interventions that nurture agroecology do not represent the complete picture of what is needed for agroecological transformation, which is a much more complex and dynamic process of many transformations (Anderson et al., 2021). While interventions, such as those explored in this chapter, can contribute to the “transformational capacity” of agroecological niches, movements must engage in strategies that address the disabling structure of the dominant regime (Anderson et al., 2021), not through reform, but through *abolition* (Montenegro de Wit, 2021) and *emancipation* (Giraldo & Rosset, 2022).

The difficulty of finding a balance between making immediate reforms and having the resources and energy to tackle the systems at their root was expressed by more than one of my participants, as we discussed how deeply entrenched capitalism was in the food system:

It's just such a gigantic [problem], like the problem is economic – is capitalism – more than anything else. And all of our little supports that we build around [it] are not doing anything to change that. So we're just going to be stuck in this wheel slowly wearing ourselves down, making teensy little gains or not at all. [...] All of it just feels pretty silly.

The narratives and strategies that I explored in this chapter are caught between radical and progressive ideologies. Holt Giménez and Shattuck (2011) have categorized social movement resistance against the corporate food regime into two main trends: radical and progressive. The progressive trend includes local food and food justice movements, which both include important critiques of the corporate food regime. However, they are each missing elements of a broader socio-economic critique of the corporate food regime; food justice largely leaves out a critical engagement with economic class, while local food, as I've explored in my introduction, is missing a substantial critique of racial inequities. Radical trends encompass a more holistic and structural critique of the corporate food regime, with one of the most popular movements in this

category being food sovereignty. There is a diversity of approaches even within this trend, from rights-based advocacy to decolonial movements. I say that the strategies described by my participants are 'caught between,' because many of the strategies are informed by a radical critique of the corporate food regime, and yet do not always measure up to transform systems of wealth that would contribute to food sovereignty. This is seen in the descriptions of farm viability programs, that are attuned to the racial inequities in farming, yet employ a market-based strategy to address those structural barriers; as well as in attempts to 'make money flow to communities,' where the systemic political-economic barriers are well-understood, yet only incrementally reformed. It is not uncommon for the constituencies of these trends to overlap considerably within food movements (Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). While progressive approaches can contribute to nurturing agroecological niches, they ultimately do little to change the root causes of racial capitalism.

These challenges are also characteristic of food sovereignty movements in Canada, which are similarly locked-in to capitalist ideologies that prevent many transformative measures from happening (Dale, 2021). Dale (2021) explains the limitations of progressive approaches in these scenarios: "The challenge [for food sovereignty organizations] is to make the links between the urgency for systemic change, and the fact that structural forces within capitalism can disastrously inhibit 'progressive' initiatives that are inspired by the ideals of food sovereignty and agroecology." Many of the progressive strategies are informed by a radical politics for food sovereignty, which shows that while the political consciousness around capitalism exists, the question of how to overcome it is still unanswered, leaving many to pick up tools that lend themselves to reform rather than abolition (Montenegro de Wit, 2021) or emancipation (Giraldo & Rosset, 2022). These approaches take decolonization literally (Tuck & Yang, 2012), arguing

for structural changes to land access, and lean into the ontological dimensions of transformation that affirm spirituality. By creating space and opportunities for alternatives to flourish, the progressive strategies that my participants described can contribute to the realization of food sovereignty, but they do not necessarily do much to change the system itself in the present moment.

Andrew, the working group coordinator, connected this tension to the fact that these organizations are part of the broader “ecology of capitalism” (Pulido, 2017), making a reference to the nonprofit industrial complex:

“There is this amazing potential for the network space to bring in a lot more resources to food systems organizing, because of the collaborative model and just the access to diverse funding streams. So, we can help each other identify a lot broader support when there’s people contributing their networks and connections and their knowledge. But then there’s the inherent limit to funded social change. So that is an ongoing struggle in the nonprofit industrial complex.”

Unless something is done to dismantle oppressive regimes, food systems change will be stuck in a continuous loop battling to protect itself from co-optation and suppression. Having outlined the emergence of racial capitalism in the food system and its impact on the territory in the previous chapter, it is impossible for me to ignore the need my informants discussed to dismantle these systems. Reform strategies can be helpful for addressing immediate needs in the short term, but *reform is not enough* (Dale, 2021; Giraldo & Rosset, 2022; Montenegro de Wit, 2021). To this end, Mawya Montenegro de Wit (2021: 121) poignantly asks: “What is reform? What is transformation? What incremental changes, not to be confused with merely adjusting the status quo, can work slowly to overturn, unlock, and open up space for enduring alternatives to grow?”

In response to these limitations, Dale (2021) provides a promising pathway forward for food sovereignty movements in Canada, which are similarly captured by capitalism. He notes that “radical pedagogy is one way that scholars have identified movement organization are

taking up these ideas and furthering debates at the grassroots level.” Political education strategies are also used to support abolition and emancipation (Giraldo & Rosset, 2022; Montenegro de Wit, 2021), pairing literal decolonization of the land with “epistemological decolonization” (Giraldo & Rosset, 2022). In the following chapter, I take a closer look at some of the political education strategies being used by the OCFSN to “move beyond the margins of capitalist agriculture” (Dale, 2021).

Conclusions

An agroecological transformation in the Willamette Valley is constrained by the fact that agriculture in the Willamette Valley is deeply embedded in capitalist economies of the corporate food regime. Folks are clearly grappling with the negative effects of the corporate food regime, which overlap closely with racial capitalism, and many are making the connection between these symptoms and their root causes. As Pulido (2017) said, “racial capitalism illuminates not only the inevitability of injustice, but the structural challenges facing activists.”

Some of the strategies employed by allies contribute to the progressive and radical dimensions of food systems transformation. Many of these strategies reflect a budding movement towards agroecology, from building closed-loop economic and ecological systems, to addressing inequities in access to natural resources. However, significant questions still remain about how to tackle deeply structural and systemic issues that lock local food systems into the corporate food regime. Breaking through the preferential systemic support for industrial agriculture will require more than enabling interventions.

As Freire (2000) once wrote, “only by abolishing the situation of oppression is it possible to restore the love which that situation made impossible.” Freire’s approach to ‘abolishing

systems of oppression' was to build the agency of grassroots movements from the bottom-up, through radical forms of learning and action. In the next chapter, I move on to exploring some of the Freirean approaches to food systems transformation, and how they translate to the context of this territory.

Chapter 5: Co-Producing Hybrid Knowledges for Agroecology Transformations

The potential of pedagogical experiences for scaling up agroecology and food sovereignty has been shown in a number of efforts of social movements, especially in Latin America (Meek, 2020; Rosset et al., 2011), where there is a long history of pedagogical experimentation in politicized social movements. Paulo Freire's proposals for liberation through radical, or critical, education (Freire, 2000) have been embraced by social movements around the world. Originating in the context of Freire's own lived experience with class-based oppression, his philosophies raise the importance of learning through dialogue with others and through one's own lived reality. Thus, critical education becomes a tool through which to situate one's lived experience within a broader context of translocal relations, develop a critical consciousness about that lived experience and ultimately take action to transform one's own reality (Freire, 2000). This dialectical process between learning and action becomes praxis. Social movements for agroecology and food sovereignty often create learning environments using Paulo Freire's critical education approach, where 'students' are empowered as experts of their own lived realities (Meek & Tarlau, 2016). These learning environments often include experiential and co-learning processes, which help to build critical consciousness among participants (Anderson et al., 2019) and enable the democratization of knowledge (Pimbert, 2018), ultimately contributing to the democratization of food systems governance and agroecology transformations.

The relevance of these critical education approaches extends beyond social movements in Latin America, as their potential has been explored in the context of food movements in Europe (Anderson, Maughan, et al., 2019) and the United States (Meek et al., 2019). In the European and U.S. contexts, transformative learning must overcome a long tradition of neoliberal education practices, calcified institutions that are regulating knowledge production, including

around agroecology, and a less robust culture of socio-political mobilization. In North America, a neoliberal ideology around rural economies and agriculture limits the kinds of critiques of those very systems that farmers are willing entertain (Dale, 2021). Anderson et al. (2019) write that “in this context, the meaning and the doing of agroecology is far more ambiguous and up for grabs, making the transformative agroecology learning more urgent, yet also more challenging.”

The challenge consists of being able to translate agroecology beyond isolated experiments at the grassroots and to scale agroecology. Critical pedagogies play an important role in the process of scaling, by contributing to ‘situated learning’ (Meek, 2020), which allows participants to create new knowledge and innovate using their lived experience of success and failure. This kind of shared learning experience occurs in what Wenger-Trayner (2008) call a community of practice. Whether such learning environments emerge naturally, for example when a group of colleagues meets during their lunch break to share their challenges and experiences, or are explicitly facilitated, communities of practice contribute to developing a shared set of resources to address common challenges. When learning and resource building is facilitated for an explicitly political goal, like food systems transformation, communities of practice become *communities of praxis* (Meek, 2020). Communities of praxis, which combine the community of practice model (Wenger-Trayner, 2008) and Freirean notions of praxis (1972), facilitate learning experiences that build movements’ abilities to engage in liberatory action and transform food systems.

Communities of praxis are especially salient in farmer-to-farmer networks, like the ANAP in Cuba, where radical pedagogies led agroecology to be scaled up to 50% of the country’s peasant population (McCune & Sánchez, 2019; Rosset et al., 2011). In this chapter, however, I explore the concept of a community of praxis in how it applies to the allies that

support farmers in a food systems transformation. Allied organization may be able to contribute to building a critical consciousness amongst a variety of food systems actors, including, but not limited to farmers. Although farmers' ideologies can delimit the transformative potential of agroecology (Dale, 2021), it is more likely policymakers, extension agents, researchers and others working at different scales throughout the food system that are reinforcing oppressive ideologies. A "systems approach" (Anderson, Maughan, et al., 2019) to food systems transformation recognizes the need for dialogue between the niche and the regime for transformation to occur. The principles of transformative learning can be easily translated to interactions between food systems allies. These principles, as outlined by (Anderson, Maughan, et al., 2019), include 1) bringing politics and practice together, 2) bringing together diverse knowledge and experience to expand and inform those politics (through networks), 3) democratizing knowledge exchange through horizontal encounters, by 4) facilitating Freirean dialogue between the diverse knowledges and experiences. All of these methods contribute to building the organizational capacity of cross-sectoral movements.

In an attempt to answer my third research question "What role do network organizations play in achieving a food systems transformation?" this chapter will explore the ways in which OCFSN, as a network of food systems professionals and activists, can facilitate the dual purpose of pragmatic solution-making and political learning for agroecology, and how these co-learning processes can lead to the elaboration of more radical forms of food systems transformation. My understanding is that the process of building a shared repertoire through communities of praxis is both practical and pedagogical, a process to which trust-based relationships are a key ingredient. I will begin by elaborating the ways in which OCFSN functions as a community of practice (Wenger-Trayner, 2008) and a community of praxis, and how these methods contribute to co-

learning for agroecology transformation. A community of practice forms when people gather to solve a shared problem and develop shared solutions (Wenger-Trayner, 2008). When those solutions are explicitly political, or focused on power, the group becomes a community of praxis (Meek, 2020). I will then explore the ways in which the network can deepen the politics of its learning encounters, relying on my experiences engaging with network learning spaces and the existing literature on social movement pedagogies.

Oregon Community Food Systems Network: Facilitating Co-Learning

I first became interested in examining OCFSN as a case study after I repeatedly heard the organization's name mentioned in reference to how food systems professionals were overcoming barriers to their work. My participants repeatedly pointed to OCFSN as one of the resources that they relied on to tackle challenges in their work and increasingly valued as a space to interact with others that were facing similar issues. OCFSN officially serves as a resource hub, for organizations that are interested in supporting sustainable and just food systems “to collaborate, to get ideas” and to collaboratively work on projects, like grant writing (KG). OCFSN facilitates a number of learning spaces, including virtual spaces, which bring together working group members periodically throughout the year, to share their ideas and experiences on a collectively determined topic that is set before the meeting. The network also hosts regional in-person gatherings, which occur less frequently and are structured more around sharing a meal than sharing detailed information about programming (although this is not discouraged if that's what folks want to talk about over a beer). About once a year, OCFSN hosts an in-person gathering for each working group, where members from across the state come together for a few days to engage in structured activities, facilitated dialogue around a specific problem, and crowd-pleasing farm visits and tours. In facilitating spaces that act as containers for participants to fill

with dialogue, OCFSN creates the basis for a community of practice, setting the foundation for “political learning” (Anderson et al., 2019) and “political education” (Dale, 2021) to take place. Communities of practice form in response to a common concern or question and bring a group of individuals together to build a shared set of tools to address the issue. Communities of practice enable learning processes by building relationships between the individuals within the community and their diverse knowledges and experiences (Wenger-Trayner, 2008). These kinds of co-learning environments are critical to the development of new knowledges for agroecological transformation (Anderson, Maughan, et al., 2019).

The network has been helpful for folks to continue doing work in the face of such a complex, systemic issue, like food systems transformation. Many folks are drawn to the network because, despite having low barriers to entry, the outcomes of coming together are tangible:

OCFSN really is like a facilitated collaborative space for all of our different cohort of organizations. [...] I think it’s well worth it. I think that OCFSN itself isn’t maybe delivering results the way that, you know, a funder might be looking for, but their results will be reflected in...will be kind of like sprinkled throughout all of our work.

Rather than focusing on what funders are looking for, OCFSN is instead focusing on the kinds of activities that contribute to the capacities of food movement allies to each contribute to transformation in their own ways, from their own situated experiences in the food system.

Low barriers to entry contribute to bringing a diverse group of folks together, who may come and go depending on their capacities. As I explored in the previous chapter in detail, the network hosts a variety of progressive and radical ideologies, from the overtly political expressions of food sovereignty, liberation and ‘land back,’ to the more progressive expressions of food systems change, such as conservation agriculture, school food programs and land easements. Although the members bring their diverse interests and experiences to the network,

there's a shared commitment to changing the food system and collectively contributing to the well-being of small farmers. As one of my participants explained to me: "I feel like OCFSN are my people [...] we're all in this together, we all want to help beginning farmers and ranchers in some capacity, we all want to contribute to the food system." This shared commitment is informed, in part, by a variety of lived experiences that are grounded in farming. This was identified as a strength of the organization, as someone described to me:

I've got a little bit of a boots on the ground approach, I guess, because I work with farmers; but you know obviously we have folks in there that have farmed themselves and that's super relevant. I think that's really a strength of the group is that you know people have these varying backgrounds and have some closeness to what it's like to be a farmer.

As folks continue to come together, the linkages between them and their diverse networks are strengthened, which can be helpful for working across very diverse communities. For example, OCFSN includes members that work with BIPOC beginning farmers that are engaged in food liberation work, and members that work with white commercial-scale landholders. Nellie explained to me how important these relationships with others in the network are for her, as someone who designs land easements:

It's really helpful to work with partners who are doing research on that, like Tanya, or who are providing on the ground support, like Silvia; and just to be able to know what they're doing and to make sure that we're doing cross referrals to each other. [...] Working in partnership on things where we have common goals and existing programs, but then also hopefully being a two-way channel of information about land use.

As Nellie described, when OCFSN's members gather, they bring the diverse perspectives from the people they work with into conversation with each other. This acts as a "knowledge commons," in which co-learning from "different biophysical, cultural and political contexts" (Anderson et al., 2019) improves the collective capacity of the network and its members to respond to various challenges and opportunities across the food system. As more participants

have come to value these learning experiences, the network is shifting further into this role. In the past year, this has meant increasing the number of in-person gatherings they host across the various regions that their members work in. When I asked Andrew to describe some of the benefits and challenges with bringing diverse perspectives together, he explained that one of the main benefits was the learning process itself:

Folks are able to hear from organizations or individuals that have a different lived experience and come from communities with vastly different experiences, and are able to hear how they address these challenges. [...] So, I think that we get these unexpected pieces of wisdom and insight when we come together and that can inform future projects and future work prioritization. Then also just the increased capacity; I think that we don't continually need to reinvent the wheel because we're learning that 'oh, this organization already has done this' or that 'this piece of content that we needed is already out there' is beneficial just for people's time and capacity.

The “unexpected wisdom and insight” is in reference to a working group meeting for farm viability we had both been in earlier that morning. In the process of sharing the importance of trauma-informed training for Indigenous farmers and ranchers, the working group participants had decided to set up a follow-up meeting to discuss the topic further and exchange ideas for improving training across diverse communities with these principles in mind. This was an excellent example of how the horizontal structure of the group allowed a historically marginalized Indigenous perspective on farm viability training to spark a learning process amongst the group. The horizontal structure lends itself to transformative learning (Wenger-Trayner, 2008), by bringing together people interested in sharing knowledge on improving their work in the food system. The spaces that the network facilitates play an important role in creating these learning environments. Andrew, one of OCFSN’s working group coordinators, went on to describe his role in this:

We bring people together to share ideas and plan and discuss, but we aren't prescribing the content. That's what the folks bring. And I think a lot of it is

because of our current system, the current ecological and economic and social struggles and crises, like climate change, there's a lot of overlap in what folks are working on, but then there's also just such a diversity of ways that can go about addressing these challenges. And I think there's a diversity of thought on how to do that within the network. It's not one or the other. There is a broad array, both from folks who are really focused on policy change in food systems, folks who are really looking at grassroots mobilization, and everything in between - I think it's a broad array. and I think that as a network we help to identify where these kind of theoretical structures overlap and then help bring people together and support each other in that. And then also kind of identify where there are gaps.

These learning experiences are important from a practical learning perspective (Anderson et al., 2019), because members can share opportunities and don't have the "reinvent the wheel" and can move away from competitive relationships with each other towards a sense of "abundance." More importantly, however, this horizontal dialogue space can contribute to "political learning" (Anderson, Maughan, et al., 2019) or "political education" (Dale, 2021) – explored in more detail in the following sections – as these relationships serve to deepen the socio-political dimensions of food movements (Andrée et al., 2019). Rossi (2020) writes that "creating enabling conditions for this intercultural dialogue [between diverse actors], within an inclusive, democratic and collaborative environment, is crucial [for co-developing new hybrid knowledges]," and contributes to agroecology transformation through its "evolutionary dimension," where:

"mutual learning that develops through interactions leads the involved actors' understanding to evolve; at the same time, along with these processes and the related changes in capacities and attitudes, the actors' role may also evolve, giving rise to new potentialities" (Rossi, 2020, p. 3)

The evolutionary dimension that Rossi is referencing is especially important in dialectic, emergent processes, like those of socio-political transformation, where there is no clear end point, and no singular or prescribed pathway. In these processes, the ability to check-in and correct, engage reflexively is essential for making course corrections that can culminate in

transformative outcomes (Rossi, 2020). Especially under the conditions of uncertainty that we find ourselves in, many participants expressed the value of good relationships in navigating transformation:

I don't have that clarity, but at least we're all committed to [trying]; like this is not the step, let's try another step to see what works.

The path is rocky and uneven at best, [...] you're in a mist of fog, like low visibility. [...] There are many different paths. I don't know how it actually plays out, but I think [what helps is] taking steps down that road even though we don't know exactly how it works. And trying some of these different paths is better than just sitting back and saying 'well, we don't know what to do, so we're not going to do anything.'

Grappling with the dynamic nature of transformations (Anderson et al., 2021) and building upon lessons learned requires collective encounters, learning processes and approaches. These dynamic and collaborative learning experiences are key to transformations, as they provide the methods to generate new, collective knowledges that can contribute to the mobilization around shared visions and tactics (Rossi, 2020).

Building relationships and trust

It is through these recurring horizontal learning experiences that network participants build relationships and a repertoire of shared trust with each other. Throughout my interviews, the importance of trust-based relationships was raised as a foundation from which transformation can grow. This included rebuilding trust between white-led organizations and marginalized communities, creating trust-based relationships between individuals across organizations, and fostering trust in learning environments within the network. This trust gives folks the foundation to arrive in these spaces authentically, have the capacity to be honest and provide constructive criticism to their peers, and ask for help. Trust-based relationships are especially important in

building movements that center food producers and their agency, between white-led organizations and communities of color (Lorenzen & Drew, 2023). To quote one of my participants, transformation means “moving at the speed of trust.” As another participant explained, “there’s kind of like community agreements in place that move different than dominant culture. And so that relationship building and developing that trust just looks different and operates on a different scale and time scale, as maybe we historically do.” This involves centering the voices of those that have been historically and systemically marginalized through a process that takes time and a commitment to accountability:

If we build strong relationships with one another and are in community, we can create larger systems change. But really foundationally it is about relationship building. I think that piece that you’re saying, that equity piece, of like who are we holding relationship with and how, matters. And whose voices are being centered in decision making. [...] The network is made up of 60+ member organizations that represent the whole spectrum [of work in food systems]. I think that is kind of like what we want to see. We need all of us in this work to make this change and learn from one another, but again it’s like how we center voices and who has decision making power. I think it’s a question that continues to surface.

Similar to pedagogical encounters in Europe, the horizontal structures of OCFSN’s learning spaces “fostered trust, genuine engagement and sharing between participants” (Anderson et al 2019). The relationship building that happens in these learning spaces, especially the more open ones, can foster the capacities of various actors to build horizontal networks that respect their agency and autonomy. This became clear to me in one of my interviews, where I asked what the best part of the most recent working group convening had been:

Oh yeah, that’s easy! I mean, being together, having the workshops and stuff, like the morning and afternoon sessions were great, but more valuable is being together. And there wasn’t enough time [for that], like I didn’t meet everyone in the room – I didn’t properly meet you. [...] So, facilitating connection building exercises, creating opportunities for us to relate to each other as humans, I think that is the most important [thing].

The value of relationships based on mutual trust is demonstrated in theories about democratizing food systems governance (Anderson et al., 2021; Andrée et al., 2019). Giraldo and Rosset (2022) recognize the “the wealth of relationships” as the greatest asset of social movements. Trust creates the relational connections needed to build collective power between food movement allies, food producers, consumers, and even with allied individuals within the dominant regime. This collective power is based on relationships of interdependence and reciprocity, where there is room “to question, to ask.” As one of my participants said of the recent developments: “I feel like there are stronger connections and that we can move things forward differently.” Considering the lasting effects of historical injustice in U.S. agricultural policy, from land theft to racist lending policies, these trust-based relationships are essential for building collective movements that contribute to a transformation of these legacies. Building trust through communities of praxis thus becomes an important pedagogical approach to food systems transformation, perhaps even enabling movements to overcome the dichotomy between ‘the oppressor’ and ‘the oppressed’ (Freire, 2000).

Building trust between social movement actors from more radical spaces may also require what Kepkiewicz (2015) calls “pedagogies of discomfort.” In terms of food sovereignty, a pedagogy of discomfort describes the idea that food activists may need to engage with their complicity in order to build true solidarity with historically marginalized groups (Kepkiewicz 2015), like the original Indigenous inhabitants of the Willamette Valley on whose land all agricultural production occurs. A pedagogy of discomfort recognizes that learning is not only intellectual, but also affective or embodied (Head, 2020), which is why the affective dimension of agroecology (Van Den Berg et al., 2022) is so critical to transformation. This is especially important in the context of a settler colonial state, like the United States and Canada, which

diverges from the pedagogical priorities of social movements in Europe. Given the fact that, as one of my participants noted, “the power imbalances are so stark in this [agricultural] industry,” a pattern that can be directly linked to settler colonial histories (see chapter 3), transforming the industry and our food systems more broadly will require food movements to grapple with the uncomfortable truths of structural and systemic injustice they are faced with addressing. Being able to express pain and grief, face discomfort and unpack the emotional interests that a diverse group of participants bring to the table contributes to the affective dimension of agroecological transformation (Van Den Berg et al., 2022). The affective dimension recognizes the motivations that drive folks to grapple with transformation, and how, in the process of honoring affects, feelings and emotions, shifts in mindset can take place. As Patel (2019) notes: “Race, class, and history aren’t foodie strong-points. Yet to turn the food movement into one that fully embraces justice, some difficult discussions lie ahead.”

Another way that trust enables transformation is by building true accountability between grassroots movements and their allies. This trust-based accountability then enables network members to work with large-scale commercial and industrial farmers and regime institutions, who are not necessarily considered as part of the food movement. This was an important strategy that some of my participants used to bring programs that support small-scale and ecological farming to scale. The strategies that my participants described to me included being “practice and scale agnostic” in land succession advocacy in programming, because “it helps [the program] bring more people to the table;” people who may not have the same politics, but all of whom “want to protect agricultural land, either for food systems or carbon sequestration or conservation values or just simply rural economic development.” These conversations reiterated the importance of working with a wider range of people, and being “able to speak to everyone

from the values that they're coming from." The importance of this is largely because "the biggest opportunity for change [...] is with this big farm group," because "a lot of the small farms that are part of our local food system are already doing those things [ecological land management practices]."

These 'agnostic' approaches are not easy to engage in and raise the question of how to engage in collaboration in a way "that doesn't perpetuate harm for oppressed identities but seizes the opportunity" to close the gap between the "us vs. them," as my participants explained. What makes these partnerships fit within the network's approach is a parallel commitment to restorative justice, which is fostered within the network and its interactions with other networks. Restorative justice "aims at restoring social cohesion and trustful relationships by confronting the wrongdoings and trying to find solutions that enable cooperation in future and correct the harm for those who have been wronged or suffer a systematic disadvantage" (Kaljonen et al., 2021). In addition, a commitment to procedural justice – the use of an equity lens on decision-making processes, including keeping the barriers to entry into the network very low – helps to keep these relationships accountable to the ultimate goal of food systems transformation.

Being 'agnostic' allows some of these allies to work with institutions that sit squarely within the dominant regime, like the Farm Bureau and the Oregon Department of Agriculture. Attending to these relationships, while remaining accountable to transformative change means that the relationships with dominant institutions can be "multifaceted." As one of my participants said, "you don't have to like someone to be in community with them." Alice described her organization's relationship with the Oregon Department of Agriculture as one in which they "work with the ODA in many ways," "are in their working groups," and "have good relationships with many people;" but they also "take issue with certain decisions," like the seat

allocations on the Board of Agriculture. At the time of our interview, Alice told me they were in the process of suing the ODA for their permissance of a mega chicken ranch near Jefferson, Oregon. These multifaceted relationships are built on a critical understanding of historical and systemic power dynamics. Members mediate their interactions with others using this knowledge. This is especially important for transformative collaborations between white-led organizations and organizations led by frontline communities, especially communities of color. In turn, this understanding of power can build the capacity for allied organizations to critically assess the partnerships they engage in and remain accountable to those partnerships:

We can be aligned here and work together on this, and then we're not aligned here and that's okay. [...] So, seeing where there are points of collaboration but then also being okay with not having everything be in sync. And I think creating that respect [to be able to build those variable relationships] [...], and just building that trust. [...] And working to kind of foster that trust over time and showing up in spaces and then being able to take feedback [...] and then making that change instead of being really defensive. [...] I think this is just a continual learning process.

The ability to critique, grapple with the pain and grief across diverse experiences, and build genuine solidarity is key to the ontological and affective dimensions of agroecological transformation, found, for example, in abolitionist agroecology (Montenegro de Wit, 2021), “pedagogies of discomfort,” or Van Den Berg et al.'s (2022) “movements of affect.” The ability to critique those around you and safely express what is hurting you is what Mia Mingus, a writer, trainer and educator for transformative justice, describes as “the beating heart of connection” (Mingus, 2023).

Deepening Politics for Transformative Learning

Despite the contributions of co-learning encounters to the capacities of OCFSN’s membership, there seems to be a missing link between the activities that OCFSN facilitates and

the civilizational transformation (Escobar, 2022) that some of its members are still searching for. A civilizational transformation requires us to face the ontological dimensions of transformation that reinforce “heteropatriarchal capitalist colonial modernity” (Escobar, 2022: 2). The ontological dimension describes the aggregate set of beliefs that create worldviews and shape our conception and construction of the world (Toledo, 2022), as historical actors. When I consider the complexity of a civilizational transformation, I am reminded of a quote I shared in the previous chapter. In my effort to understand what someone who works to address systemic barriers to land and capital access envisions for the future, I had asked them to describe their ideal vision for the food system. The response that I got indicated that there was a clear understanding for the primary need to dismantle oppressive systems:

It's just such a gigantic [problem], like the problem is economic – is capitalism – more than anything else. And all of our little supports that we build around [it] are not doing anything to change that. So we're just going to be stuck in this wheel slowly wearing ourselves down, making teensy little gains or not at all. [...] All of it just feels pretty silly.

The frustrations reflected in this quote are of an inherently ontological dimension. What they conveyed to me is that the economic worldview of capitalism is driving the systemic and structural issues that food movements grapple with on a day-to-day basis. In Canada’s food sovereignty movements, there are very similar questions about the ability to ever leave behind capitalist production. Dale (2021) notes that “even farmers who are ready to critique capitalism outright will have many substantive questions about the alternatives to capitalism and the processes by which those alternatives may be established.” Thus, the importance of learning processes based in radical pedagogies is their ability to contribute to building “real utopias,” expand peoples’ imaginaries about what is possible and transforming worldviews to transform worlds. Radical pedagogies can help situate the symptoms of an inequitable economic system

that my participants expressed (explored in detail in the previous chapter) within the context of racial capitalism. Importantly, critical pedagogies are equally relevant to those who are ready to critique capitalism, as the possible pathways forward may still be obscured (Dale, 2021). This is reflected in the quote I share above. Despite having a desire to transform structural and systemic barriers, there is little to no known alternative than making incremental change. In Oregon, where the agri-food system is similarly embedded in the logic of capital, radical pedagogies may be able to create new beliefs about the future of food and farming. Although a basic consciousness already exists to an extent among the actors that I interviewed, radical pedagogies can help to make linkages between theory and action that generate new and improved tools to address these systems at their root, advancing an agroecology praxis. Andrew, who coordinates the F4tF working group, expressed to me that, although there is a general awareness around the problem with capitalist agri-food systems, there is a limited engagement within the network's activities of the political root of these problems:

I don't think there is a strong class or economic vision within the full network, [about] some of the structural issues of why producers – socially and ecologically focused producers –struggle so much. We talk a lot about why these farmers are struggling, but we don't get into the economic and systemic [issues] that are the foundations for that struggle.

By shaping and reframing the tools based on a co-learning process that is informed by a critical engagement with diverse epistemologies, the strategies employed may be better equipped to achieve the level of impact that folks are searching for. As Dale (2021) states: “The challenge for [food sovereignty organization, like La Via Campesina's member organizations] is to make the links between the urgency for systemic change, and the fact that structural forces within capitalism can disastrously inhibit ‘progressive’ initiatives that are inspired by the ideals of food sovereignty and agroecology. Radical pedagogy is one way that scholars have identified

movement organization are taking up these ideas and furthering debates at the grassroots level.” However, these radical pedagogies rarely flourish of their own accord in institutions that are dominated by a neoliberal narrative, like many of the food systems institutions in Europe and North America. Anderson et al. (2019) note that: “If transformative agroecology learning is genuinely to provide the ‘connective tissue’ between food sovereignty and agroecology, there is a need to: (a) strategically plan to incorporate it as a part of an integrated organisational development strategy; (b) contribute resources to the systematisation and improvement of transformative agroecological learning praxis. [...] Without systematisation and critical reflection, such organisations might easily fall back into dominant modes of learning (e.g. technical, top-down) and de-prioritize bottom-up transformative learning as an indispensable mode of social movement building.”

With this in mind, I now turn to some of my reflections on where I see the most significant potential for OCFSN to further develop as a community of praxis and thus contribute to a transformation of practices, politics and worldviews. I explore the potential to deepen critical pedagogies through the frame of *dialógo de saberes* (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014).

Dialógo de Saberes: Bringing it back to the farm

Dialógo de saberes, translated as wisdom dialogues (Anderson et al., 2019), bring together actors with diverse experiences and knowledges, to share these knowledges through dialogue, in a way that respects difference (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014). These dialogues can contribute to solidarity, mutual understanding and ultimately collective action, as participants learn from each others’ experiences and perspectives, especially through cross-constituency dialogues (Anderson et al., 2019). OCFSN is already contributing to a *dialógo de*

saberes in some ways, including through its horizontal structure, which facilitates democratic communication (Anderson, Maughan, et al., 2019); through its membership, which consists of a diversity of approaches to food systems transformation; and through the learning space it facilitates, which encourages a dialogue between experiences and knowledge. However, there were three specific learning encounters that explicitly brought the politics of farming into dialogue with the practical knowledge that many of OCFSN's members regularly exchange. The political knowledge, and their associated critiques of capitalist worldviews, came largely from farmers. In the following three sub-sections, I will describe three experiences that I had with OCFSN that contributed to my understanding of how farmers' experiences with ecological farming informs politics, and, therefore, why getting farmers in the room is so important.

1 Naming Capitalism: A Farmer's Voice

During one of OCFSN's annual convenings, I was asked to facilitate a session for the climate resilience subgroup. The intention was to unpack the 'tricky topics' that surrounded and contextualized/imposed the issue of building climate resilience in farming communities. We spent the time discussing important barriers to building resilience, like water and land access, land use, technology use and carbon markets. We took a break to stretch our legs before getting the whole group together to share what we had talked about. During this break, I scanned the room, curious to talk with folks on a more personal level. I noticed a participant, a farmer, who was new to the network. I made my way over and asked what brought them to OCFSN and what they thought of the convening. The answer I got surprised me in the best way possible. The real problem, they said, was capitalism. And that needed to be addressed to make any significant change in the food system, like farmers' abilities to make a living, access the resources they need

to grow food and be able to share that food in a way that is dignified. During the share-back portion of the session, they would relay this message to the entire room of thirty plus participants, and, to their surprise, would be met with a round of cheers and applause.

In a network where most of the meeting time is focused on discussing the practical details of various projects and programs, I was not expecting to hear an outright critique of capitalism. It was the first time I had heard anyone openly express a critique of capitalism amongst the group. But there it was, loud and clear. It came from a farmer, someone who is deeply engaged in the practice of farming, and as became apparent to me then, was also deeply engaged in the politics of farming. As I reflect on this now, I realize that many of my interview participants that explicitly named capitalism had previously been engaged in farming as their primary occupation at some point in the recent past. And more often than not, they connected their critique of capitalism to their experiences, and the challenges they faced while farming.

2 The Practice and Politics of Cooperative Farming

For the 2023 OSU Small Farms Conference, OCFSN was able to advocate for and organize a series of three workshops on cooperative farming. I joined the first session, which was formatted as a panel discussion, followed by a Q&A portion. The panel consisted of three folks, all three of them currently engaged in cooperative farming, including one panelist from Our Table Cooperative, just outside of Portland, Oregon. Much of what they talked about, their hopes and motivations, but also their challenges, reflected the practices and politics of an agroecological transformation. They talked about how sharing labor and resources, building relationships with consumers, and growing community through food allowed them to challenge ‘modern economic theory,’ as one of the panelists called it, and become one of a diverse set of

approaches to ‘dismantle the system.’ They asked difficult questions, like: Should primary food production be profitable? How do we grow food in a way that dignifies people and the land?

These cooperative farmers were contributing their praxial knowledge to a room of young and hopeful farmers and their allies. They were painting a picture of cooperative farming that felt achievable, by translating their own experiences, both good and bad. They were prefiguring a possible alternative to the endless cycle of trying to get by, and in doing so, spurring on others to experiment in their stead.

3 Anahuac: Prefiguring a Multi-Dimensional Agroecology

As part of an annual convening, one of OCFSN’s working groups was invited to tour Anahuac, an Indigenous farm created by and for the diverse Indigenous communities that call the Willamette Valley home. The tour began with a *mística*, a deeply emotional and spiritual welcoming onto the farm. The spiritual values that informed the *mística* were apparent throughout the rest of the tour, as we moved through a landscape that elegantly wove together farming and ceremony. Cultural values were expressed through this landscape and also in the dreams and memories about corn, Indigenous identities and medicine that were shared with us as we walked around. The political values were also clear, as we were told about the power of growing corn to resist and overcome the power of agribusiness.

This learning experience was one of the most meaningful moments of the convening, for myself and other participants that I spoke with in my interviews. Not only was it a living example of a farm that was practicing agroecology, through *milpa* and other culturally-informed on-farm techniques, but was also honoring the fact that farming in an alternative way was also a deeply political and spiritual or cultural praxis. Their version of agroecology was multi-

dimensional, translating not just the practical knowledge of alternative farming, but also the political and spiritual dimensions. The experience on the farm created a setting in which those of us from OCFSN that had joined the tour opened up to each other in ways that we had not experienced in OCFSN's other learning encounters.

In demonstrating the political and spiritual dimensions of food systems transformation, Anahuac had created a praxial learning encounter. Encounters like these may serve to deepen relationships further, create horizontal dialogues between agroecological farmers and their allies, and serve as learning experiences that gracefully weave together the practical and the political elements of transformative pedagogies. They show that another world is possible, through the prefiguration of transformative agroecology.

I tend to think that it's at the farm level where the linkages between practice and politics are most apparent. Strategically planning more of the inter-experiential dialogues can help to deepen the political praxis of the network (Anderson et al., 2019). In each of these experiences, the practice of farming had opened the door to the politics of food systems transformation.

Conclusions

Critical education is a transformative tool used by social movements for food sovereignty and agroecology around the world (Anderson, Maughan, et al., 2019; Meek, 2020; Meek et al., 2019; Rosset et al., 2011). In the Willamette Valley, territorial transformations have to contend with a history of structural and systemic violence and inequity. This means that critical education may be an essential piece to the transformative process, as food systems actors learn to embrace the politics and affects of systemic change. OCFSN is already contributing greatly to the co-

production of knowledge amongst food systems allies, as it serves as a community of practice.

Trust- and relationship-building are central to the mission of OCFSN, as they form the basis for a transformative “systems approach” (Anderson et al., 2019). It is through these continuous process of trust- and relationship-building that allied organizations can create links between the grassroots and the regime, transforming the regime in the process and remaining accountable to the agency and leadership of the grassroots. Trust building therefore becomes both a practical strategy to enhance the work that allies do, as well as serving as a political strategy, as allied organizations come into contact with new knowledges that transform their own perspectives and their strategies for change.

Moving forward, OCFSN can contribute further to the political dimension of transformation by strategically planning encounters with agroecological farmers. These encounters contribute to the prefiguration of agroecology, which makes the pathways to transformation more clear. Considering that many of the participants I interviewed are searching for transformative strategies, expanding co-learning to include more farmers could widen the range of ideas for how to move forward.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

From the violence of settler colonization, to the deep-rootedness of racial capitalism, this thesis covered a lot of difficult and heavy ground. But I hope I have also conveyed a sense of hope for what these lessons can mean for the future of organizing for agroecological transformation. Much of the hope I have for the future of food systems in the Willamette Valley comes from being in the room with the folks that I learned from, who informed this research, and from the countless conversations and experiences not explicitly recounted on these pages. It is from these experiences that I have come to the understanding that while it may not be an easy lift to transform deeply embedded structural and systemic challenges, it is worthwhile. I know it will be difficult, but it makes me hopeful that there is so much will to transform these systems. And, as movements for abolition can teach movements for agroecology: “foundational structures of organizing social life can be changed” (Montenegro de Wit, 2021: 118).

I began my narrative of agroecological transformation in the Willamette Valley with the territory’s transformation through white settler agrarianism, or settler colonization. This was an intentional decision to center structural injustices at the heart of this thesis, which is an expression of my political statement and support for agroecology. While I acknowledge that there is so much nuance within the kind of transformation I am looking for – who are the key actors, what are the pathways towards transformation – it is clear to me from this research, that, at the bottom line, structural injustices need to be addressed in order for a transformation to happen.

This is why, in Chapter 3, I laid the groundwork for understanding the entangled issues of food, ecological sustainability and social justice as territorial issues. I situated the contemporary challenges in their historical context, from settler colonization to the incorporation of the

Willamette Valley's food systems into the corporate food regime. This allowed me to describe how contemporary challenges, like racialized labor, uneven land access, and the dominance of commercial agriculture, are configured by the integrated systems of race and capital.

In Chapter 4, I examined how food systems allies are grappling with these deeply structural and systemic challenges in the present. I found innovative approaches in which allied organizations were constructing networks of “warriors, builders and weavers” (Stevenson et al., 2008), through which they are able to address these challenges at different scales. This allows allies to nurture (Anderson et al., 2021) the agency of grassroots movements, and simultaneously engage with regime institutions in transformative ways. However, there was a lingering frustration with the incremental nature of many of the strategies being used by allies. The question remains, how can agroecology “move beyond the margins of capitalist agriculture” (Dale, 2021)?

In Chapter 5, I explored how radical pedagogies for agroecology can contribute to answering this question. OCFSN currently serves as a community of practice (Wenger-Trayner, 2008) and has great potential to expand its commitment to the politics of transformation, as a community of praxis (Meek, 2020). Trust-building in co-learning environments has become a critical element of both the practical and political processes of food systems transformation, as it happens through OCFSN. Trust-based relationships are key to addressing structural inequities, and can thus contribute to a territorial transformation. Another way that OCFSN is contributing to the politics of transformation, is by creating learning encounters with agroecological farmers, who are already familiar with holding both political and practical change. Strategically planning these encounters more regularly could greatly contribute to the transformative potential of OCFSN.

My research questions may have centered around the Willamette Valley, but the questions and the answers that I came across have helped me link what is happening in Oregon's Willamette Valley to global movements for agroecology. What happens in agriculture in the United States has global impacts.

As I wrote in my introduction, my commitment to agroecology comes from the transformative learning experiences I had while living amongst smallholder farmers in Nepal. When I first began my journey as a master's student in Global Studies, I imagined I would continue working directly with the communities that I had learned so much from. Instead, logistical and intellectual challenges led me to a research project on my front doorstep. I stand in solidarity with smallholder farmers in a different way: if I can contribute to a transformation of food systems in a place that has significant institutional and political power, then maybe it will ultimately open space for agroecology to flourish around the world. Rather than trying to push miniscule technical improvements amongst the people that feed the world, perhaps I can contribute to undoing systemic lock-ins that create barriers for agroecological innovation to happen on its own terms.

What I have learned through this research about systems change may contribute some new ingredients to learning for agroecological transformation in other contexts around the world, especially in the Global North, where systemic lock-ins are deeply entrenched in the cultural and institutional fabric. In Europe, farmers are facing similar tensions between feeding community and getting by as businesspeople (Guzmán et al., 2022). In Canada, there is a familiar tension between agricultural production and Indigenous sovereignty (Matties, 2016). These tensions are similarly influenced by a history of settler colonialism that still permeates agri-food systems today. The ways in which these challenges are experienced and addressed may be unique to the

particular set of institutions regulating agriculture in a specific place, and yet, patterns can be traced across the world. Ultimately, the similarities across different case studies around the world shows that these diverse case studies are linked through global institutions, like racial capitalism.

The optimist and activist in me hopes this thesis contributes to agroecological transformation in real time. OCFSN is in the process of reframing its strategic plan and rethinking how to move forward as a network, an exciting moment for me to have been doing research with them. I have spent the last year trying to contribute to that end, working in tandem with many of the folks you've heard from in these pages. As OCFSN moves into the future, my musing might provide some inspiration to their next steps.

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