



## Article

# Composting Ecofeminism: Caring for Plants, Animals, and Multispecies Flourishing in Molly Chester's Dream Farm

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**Abstract:** Using the documentary *The Biggest Little Farm* (2019) and its follow-up sequel *The Biggest Little Farm: The Return* (2022), this article examines how American filmmaker and farmer John Chester and his wife Molly transformed previously dead land lacking biodiversity into Molly's dream farm over the past decade. My article argues that the way the films illustrate the Chesters' intricate relationships with plants, animals, and multispecies players is a way of showing how ecofeminism's concerns and insights can best be integrated into organic food/farming, which do not foreground gender in their analyses and activism. The article consists of four parts. The first describes the challenges Apricot Lane Farms faced before and after the Chesters' arrival. The second part explores the Chesters' "thinking with the soil" and de la Bellacasa's commitment to soil care in *Matters of Care* (2017), showing how this can serve as a refuge in a sense, as defined by Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing. The third part examines the Chesters' approach to conflicts, setbacks, and loss of life by emphasizing the potential for "staying with the trouble." Finally, the article concludes by demonstrating how the Chesters present Apricot Lane Farms as an attachment site of co-flourishment by caring for the plants, animals, and microorganisms essential to supporting all life's ecosystems.

**Keywords:** staying with the trouble; composting feminisms; matters of care; the Plantationocene; *The Biggest Little Farm*; *The Biggest Little Farm: The Return*

In the 21st century, we live in a world that is on the verge of extinction, where plants, animals, "multispecies players" (Haraway 2016, p. 10), and even humans are at risk. As a result of the constraints and opportunities presented by the Anthropocene, feminist philosopher and theorist Donna Haraway and anthropologist Anna Tsing examined "the legacies of plantations" and view the Plantationocene as "a system of multispecies forced labor" (Mitman 2019). Haraway suggests that plantations have been characterized by a radical simplification of peoples, crops, microbes, and life forms during the past 500 years, as well as a disordering of generation times for species, including humans (Mitman 2019). In such conditions, Molly Chester's dream farm, Apricot Lane Farms in Ventura County, California, is fundamentally at odds with the plantation, which would not tolerate the "capacity to love and care for [a] place" (Mitman 2019).

A pair of eco-documentaries, *The Biggest Little Farm* (2019), nominated for an Academy Award in 2020 and many other awards,<sup>1</sup> and *The Biggest Little Farm: The Return* (2022), tell the tale of American food blogger Molly Chester and her husband American filmmaker and cinematographer John Chester, who together set out to practice sustainable and regenerative farming practices. By virtue of John's remarkable storytelling abilities, his films stand out among recent films that highlight sustainable agriculture and environmental concerns.<sup>2</sup> John uses his 26-year experience as a cameraman to portray the transformation from a dead, compacted field void of biodiversity into a bio-diverse farm inhabited by various plants, animals, and multispecies players. Apricot Lane Farms, which covers approximately 200 acres of land north of Los Angeles, is Molly's dream and a promise the Chesters make to Todd, their rescue dog saved from a place where a woman hoarded hundreds of dogs. With her determination to establish a dream farm, Molly plays a major role in the success of Apricot Lane Farms by working alongside her husband to implement sustainable



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farming methods, incorporating ecofeminist ideas of refugia (refuge), composting, and interconnectedness.

Composting feminisms, coined by Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis, play an important role in mapping the relationship between feminism and contemporary environmental humanities. Using Haraway's statement that "We are all compost" (Haraway 2016, p. 101) as a starting point, Hamilton and Neimanis' composting feminist position recognizes that composting is both "a material metaphor" for ecofeminist scholars as well as "a material labor" practiced in soil care, celebrated by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa. In addition, Joni Adamson, an environmental humanist, proposed the establishment of "humanities-led communities of purpose" to investigate food futures, a key aspect of environmental humanities that includes agriculture, farming, food preparation, and the experience of eating. In this context, Hamilton and Neimanis' emphasis on "certain feminist concepts and commitments" underscores the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences into environmental humanities (Hamilton and Neimanis 2018, p. 501). Following these trajectories, my analysis of the films suggests that Molly's dream farm, demonstrated through John's films, embodies a contemporary interpretation of ecofeminism,<sup>3</sup> characterized by a feminist approach to care in the relationship between humans and nonhumans. The films also illustrate how to thrive in the Plantationocene by weaving a compelling narrative of survival and refuge.

This article is divided into sections based on the Chesters' process of operating Apricot Lane Farms. Drawing on Haraway and Tsing's concerns about the Plantationocene, this article first describes how both man-made and natural "troubles" decimated Apricot Lane Farms before and after the Chesters took over. The second part of the article explores the correlation between John and Molly's "thinking with the soil" and de la Bellacasa's commitment to soil care in *Matters of Care* (2017), and how this can serve as a refuge in a sense, as defined by Sue Stuart-Smith and Haraway. Furthermore, the third part of the article examines Molly and John's approach to facing unpredictable conflicts, setbacks, and loss of life by highlighting the potential for "staying with the trouble," in Haraway's sense of "attaching oddkin," while taking into account the cautionary note provided by theorists such as Haraway and de la Bellacasa who caution against the pure and innocent notion of care and call for "dissenting within the troubles" (Haraway). Finally, the article concludes by demonstrating how the Chesters present Apricot Lane Farms as an attachment site of co-flourishment by caring for the plants, animals, and microorganisms essential to supporting all life's ecosystems.

### 1. Rising in the Plantationocene

The field of environmental humanities is gaining prominence as an interdisciplinary approach, gradually replacing previous schools such as ecocriticism, environmental critique, and green cultural studies. The environmental humanities bring together scholars from various disciplines to collaborate in addressing and generating solutions for the environmental crisis, also called the Anthropocene, a geologically "accurate" term to describe the current era. In 2016, a workshop titled "Anthropologists Are Talking about the Anthropocene" was held, in which scholars from various disciplines, including Haraway and Tsing, discussed and debated the term Anthropocene and its related challenges. During the workshop, Haraway proposed the term Plantationocene to describe the rapid decline of plant species due to industrialization and the subsequent domestication of plants as a replacement for Capitalocene, which was previously used (Haraway et al. 2016).

Molly's vision for a farm in *The Biggest Little Farm* and *The Biggest Little Farm: The Return* (*The Return* hereafter) is never portrayed as a utopia. With a promise to build a life of purpose together, Molly, a food lover, has a grand vision for Apricot Lane Farms that sets it apart from other farms. It includes orchards, gardens, animals from children's books, and an abundance of ingredients for cooking. However, prior to John and Molly's purchase of the farm 11 years ago, there was no such landscape. Having a dream farm in mind, Molly and John discover that the farm they bought with funds provided by their family

and friends was relatively barren. To their dismay, upon arrival, the 45-year-old agricultural farm appeared exhausted and was dominated by the prevalent use of manipulated monoculture. The Chesters describe their surroundings as “large-scale monoculture-type farms” (Chester 2019, 0.11.29–0.11.33), including the remnants of the world’s largest indoor egg operation, located to the north in a place known as Egg City. This facility was home to 3.5 million chickens producing approximately two million eggs daily. Additionally, miles of red raspberries were grown to the west of the farm under plastic hoop houses, further emphasizing the region’s high level of monoculture practices.

Monoculturalism, which contributes to the Plantationocene, can be considered a synonym for “homogeneity and uniformity” (Shiva 1993, p. 7), in much the same way that the Capitalocene evokes “capitalism as a way of organizing nature” (Moore 2016, p. 6). Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecofeminist, has expressed concern about monoculture’s detrimental effects on agriculture, stating, “In agriculture, the monoculture mind creates the monoculture crop” (Shiva 1993, p. 39). Monoculture might also be the result of infrastructures built to increase commercial profitability and facilitate long-distance transportation. John and Molly’s observation of a landscape dominated by lemon and avocado monocultures, lacking in crop diversity and reliant on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, led to the demise of beehives and the depletion of soil nutrients. Consequently, monoculturalism’s effects have adversely ripped apart human–nonhuman relationships, resulting in a disrupted landscape. The continuation of monoculture practices for over four decades has made Molly’s aspirations of a diversified farm seem unrealistic and unattainable.

John’s films demonstrate the devastation wrought by monoculture on the soil and ecosystem but also convey an alarming message, implying that their farm is vulnerable in the Anthropocene. As an Emmy award-winning wildlife filmmaker, John employs the narrative technique of “in medias res” in his films to foreshadow the looming effects of climate change on their farm and highlight the challenges they face as farmers. According to the definition of “in medias res” in *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*, the term refers to “starting a story or account straight into the main part without any introduction.” The opening scene of *The Biggest Little Farm* begins with a bushfire in a neighboring area that may not be the “main” part of his story. However, this scene indicates that John starts his film in the midst of their struggles. By doing so, John creates a sense of urgency and alertness, implying that the farm is always at risk in the Anthropocene, despite his expert capturing of the picturesque and lush atmosphere of the farm. Additionally, John also sheds light on the various challenges that impede their daily operations, including the destructive wildfires prevalent in Southern California, the prolonged droughts affecting 11 states, including California, in the central and western United States, the heavy rainfall that erodes topsoil and washes it out to sea, and “a fifth season, the season of wind” (Chester 2019, 0.59.14–0.59.17). As Molly laments at the beginning of the film, “I never dreamed we could even get to this point to have so much to lose” (Chester 2019, 0.02.10–0.02.17).

Both *The Biggest Little Farm* and *The Return* employ flashbacks to chronicle the journey of establishing and running Apricot Lane Farm.<sup>4</sup> The first film illustrates the transformation of the farm into a “garden oasis” over the course of seven years (2011–2019). This is evidenced by impressive results in terms of food production, with an annual output of 500,000 pounds, and a dedicated workforce of approximately 30 individuals,<sup>5</sup> many of whom initially joined as volunteers (Byrnes 2020). The follow-up sequel, *The Return*, provides an update on the ongoing processes at the farm (2019–2022), with a particular focus on the continuing story of one of the main characters from the first film, the pig star Emma. Throughout the past decade, the Chesters’ guru figure Alan York, one of the top experts in traditional agriculture,<sup>6</sup> anticipated three phases of their regenerative farming method. The first three years serve as a honeymoon phase, laying the groundwork for the future farm; then there will be a problem (trouble) period, which will occasionally occur after the golden stage, and finally, there will be the regenerative period, as the farm starts to mimic the ecosystem and welcome the return of biodiversity.

From amateur farmers with little knowledge about agriculture, Molly and John have transformed into a couple who now run an abundant and garden-like farm full of lush vegetation, multiple animals, and microorganisms. This sun-drenched adventure expresses John and Molly's care and devotion for their beloved dog, Todd, which ultimately leads to the creation of refugia for both humans and nonhumans. Furthermore, according to de la Bellacasa, "care" is defined as "thinking with" and "thinking with care" as a set of specific actions: "thinking-with, dissenting-within, and thinking-for," as outlined in Haraway's relational ontology in a speculative way (de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 19). This thinking trajectory will be the basis for the subsequent sections.

## 2. Thinking with the Soil

While Tsing views the Anthropocene as marked by the loss of "refugia, places of refuge," Haraway suggests cultivating new epochs that can "replenish refuge" in every way possible with each other (Haraway 2016, p. 100). One option for ensuring the survival of "mortal critters" in the Plantationocene involves working together to "reconstitute refuges," which can partially and robustly recuperate and recompose biological, cultural, political, and technological elements (Haraway 2016, p. 101). In other words, for Haraway, refuges are places where landscapes and waterscapes can be "reconstituted significantly." We are currently at a point where "the limits of homeostatic adaptation" have been reached, and it is becoming increasingly necessary to engage in the practice of care by "repopulating and refilling broken places" (Haraway and Tsing 2019). On the other hand, before Tsing and Haraway, ecofeminist Terry Tempest Williams used the term refuge to describe a place of healing in her non-fiction work *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (Williams 1991), an early environmental humanities text. For Williams, the destruction of the environment and the subjugation of women are intertwined, and both issues require a place of refuge for healing and restoration. Refuge serves as a means of resistance against systems of oppression, particularly those perpetuated by monoculturalism, the patriarchy, and capitalism.

In this regard, both *The Biggest Little Farm* and *The Return* illustrate the power of thinking with nonhumans, such as soils and other critters, in recovering and reconstructing relationships with the place. Following the purchase of the farm, the Chesters found fields of unproductive and desertified soil, overgrown with "devil-weed" (puncture weed), and a parched irrigation pond with damaged irrigation pumps. While holding dried dirt that could not be crushed and seemed unsuitable for the growth of any plants, Molly sought guidance from York, who initially rejected being involved in the project three times. With Molly's persistent enthusiasm, York finally transforms into the "Master Yoda" of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey in the eyes of the Chesters (Roll 2019a). On every visit, York gives them a Bible-like outline and a compass to determine what they can accomplish and how to proceed (Roll 2019a). Although York passed away in the second year of the Chesters practicing regenerative farming, he proposes that the three components that help build "a diverse microbial soil" essential to the success of the venture include cover crops, straight compost, and a vermicompost operation (Roll 2019a).

The Chesters attribute the first three years of farming at Apricot Lane Farms not so much to agriculture as to setting up the infrastructure, such as "ripping out crops, putting in culverts, and building fences" (Roll 2019a). To commence the revitalization process, which involved "starting over everything"<sup>7</sup> by clearing 55 acres of existing trees and demolishing the majority of the monoculture orchards, the Chesters plant 750 varieties of stone fruit crops, citrus, and nuts, restore an old pond, build compost piles, and repair over five miles of irrigation lines, among other efforts (Byrnes 2020). Additionally, understanding cover crops is highly crucial to improving soil fertility. With York's guidance, the Chesters pay particular attention to soil health by planting cover crops between the trees to nourish the soil, making compost tea out of the farm's animal feces to further enrich the soil, digging culverts to prevent runoff, turning a horse arena into a garden, and building chicken coops

(Chester 2019, 0.19.10–0.19.20). All of these efforts aimed to provide nutrition to the soil by thinking with the soil.

Thinking with the soil means considering it as a living, interconnected system that requires care and attention, as advocated by ecofeminists. Composting, for example, is one method that improves soil fertility and supports plant growth after converting organic matter into nutrient-rich soil amendments. Thus, the practice of composting on Molly's dream farm evokes an ecofeminist point of view on composting, which serves as a metaphor for both gardening and feminism. Transformation and interconnections are two crucial factors embedded in the composting metaphor. In her interview with ecofeminist Catriona Sandilands, feminist scholar Marianna Szczygielska argues that "composting" has been used as a powerful material metaphor for "surviving on a damaged planet" and "living in capitalist ruins" by authors such as Haraway and Tsing (Cielemęcka and Szczygielska 2019, p. 14). Furthermore, Sandilands acknowledges the work of Hamilton and Neimanis in advancing "an ecofeminist quest for democracy" through composting, a practice closely linked to gardening and plant care (p. 14). In Sandilands's analysis, composting has three dimensions. Firstly, for Sandilands, composting is a domestic practice that indicates a basic understanding of the soil community and decomposition processes. It is biological and historical, not simply a messy metaphor (p. 14). Additionally, Sandilands recognizes the practical, hands-on exercises in soil ecology outlined in de la Bellacasa's book *Matters of Care*, encouraging one to think "not just about compost, as compost, or like compost, but rather with compost" (p. 14). Lastly, composting can be understood as a biopolitical practice that may challenge Zygmunt Bauman's "gardening state," which regulates and disciplines both plants and people. We currently live in a biopolitical era in which life is harnessed to capital (pp. 6, 13). Sandilands sees composting as a series of encounters between multispecies players rather than only as a metaphor for political action (p. 14). Similarly, Sandilands shares Haraway's perspective on composting, preferring it over posthumanism and valuing humus over humanities (Haraway 2016, p. 32).

At Apricot Lane Farms, Molly and John employ composting in a way that aligns with Sandilands's understanding of the practice. They build a 40 foot worm compost facility, an oversized palace designed to collect the excrement of earthworms, which York refers to as "the holy grail" of soil nutrients. They then brew this vermicast into tea and feed it to the soil by injecting it into their irrigation system and spraying it onto the leaves, as they absorb nutrients eight to ten times more efficiently than the roots (Roll 2019a). York's recommendation also aligns with Hamilton and Neimanis's argument that it is crucial to consider the types of materials used in composting (Hamilton and Neimanis 2018, p. 501). Instead of viewing composting as merely a metaphor, Hamilton and Neimanis emphasize the importance of the actual practice, including the labor and care involved in cultivating and selecting "what goes into the compost bin" (Hamilton and Neimanis 2018, p. 502).

Thus, to think with composting is to think with multispecies players. First, the cover crops, a mix of legumes and grasses, rebuild the soil by feeding microorganisms, creating a porosity that allows water and rain to seep through and "sequester over a hundred million gallons of water" (Chester 2019, 1.02.23–01.02.25). They also increase the biomass, which is organic matter that contributes to the sponge-like effect of soil (Roll 2019a). As John explains, through photosynthesis, plants pump a liquefied version of carbonic sugars into the soil to feed microorganisms. These microorganisms perform the alchemy of providing essential nutrients to feed the plants. Second, the flywheel system constructed by the Chesters biologically replicated the functioning of a natural ecosystem. In the flywheel, the vermicompost operation breaks down decaying matter as vermicompost, putting all of these microbes, "these warriors," back out onto the soil to go to work. In this way, they create a system that prioritizes "soil as king" (Roll 2019a), the great alchemist of all death, containing a multitude of microorganisms and "churning away at decaying life-forms." These "purpose-driven organisms alchemiz[e] death to life" (Chester 2019, 1.18.56–1.19.08) by offering decaying plant and animal matter for future life. Molly, who attended a food and culinary school in New York, also indicates that composting is like cooking because

we feed and cook for the land the same way we do for ourselves by adding fermented products to our bodies (Roll 2019a). Rich Roll further illustrates that we try to better our immune system, as a microcosm, by promoting biodiversity in our gut flora in the same way that we do with soil, which is the microbiome of a farm or the planet at large. In other words, “soil is the digestive tract” (Roll 2019a).

John’s narration in the films demonstrates that animals, compost, and cover crops all serve the same purpose of revitalizing the soil by infusing it with a variety of beneficial microorganisms. Without these elements, Molly’s dream farm would not function. This concept aligns with de la Bellacasa’s idea of a “soil-attentive mode of care.” Using feminist care theory as a source,<sup>8</sup> de la Bellacasa in her book *Matters of Care* develops a theoretical framework of care as a political practice, which has important implications for understanding the problems we face in the Plantationocene. Similar to Haraway and Tsing, de la Bellacasa critiques “the linear temporalities of technoscientific productionism,” which underpins the agricultural revolutions (de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 171). For de la Bellacasa, productionism not only serves to restrict what is considered care to “a managerial ‘conduct’ of tasks to follow,” but it also hinders the possibility of fostering “other relations of care” that lie outside its narrow objectives (p. 186). The approach to soil care in the “utilitarian-care vision” or “a productionist frame” prioritizes increasing soil’s productivity, often at the expense of other relationships and adopts an exploitative and human-centered attitude with a one-dimensional temporal viewpoint (p. 186). In other words, “time and patience is something that capitalism doesn’t allow” (Peirce 2019). However, the “soil-attentive mode of care,” which is a feminist perspective of the politics of care in human–soil relations, emphasizes the importance of a many-sided web of relationships and re-evaluates the connections between “care and temporality” (p. 188). When seen in this light, the Chesters built a care community by nourishing the soil via composting on their farm.

The rejuvenation of Chester’s farm entailed a substantial investment of time and resources. Despite this, within six months, the Chesters had already exhausted their entire first year’s budget without planting crops. Nevertheless, this does not appear to be a concern for York, as he maintains that the ultimate goal is achieving the highest possible biodiversity level. In place of single-crop orchards, a diverse array of cover crops, trees, and row crops were planted “in swirling patterns over the hilly landscape” (Roten 2019). York assures the Chesters that “all of this diversity will somehow lead to simplicity” (Chester 2019, 0.27.38–0.27.44) because “the flywheel is being built, so now it becomes self-perpetuating and self-regulating” (Chester 2019, 0.27.48–0.27.54). Apricot Lane Farms does not view time linearly but rather as an exercise within a cyclical process “full of life, with plants, livestock, wildlife, all working together” (Chester 2019, 0.27.55–0.28.05) to build the soil and live in “harmony,” as York envisions.

### 3. Dissenting within the Troubles

According to Matt Zoller Seitz’s sarcastic film review, *The Biggest Little Farm* reveals the “fairytale nature of the origin story” and describes a reality not accessible to everyone. Seitz points out that few of us can pack up and move on short notice to provide a better home for a dog, let alone 240+ acres of land that were designed as “a self-contained ecosystem experiment” (n.p.). Thus, the movie is “more selling than telling” (Seitz 2019). Other reviewers also criticized that the film’s “bucolic dream” needs “deep pockets” (Kennedy 2020) and this “modern-day Eden . . . sounds too utopian to be practical” (Debruge 2018). Indeed, John’s documentaries, drawing from his professional background as a cameraman, occasionally showcase idyllic and picturesque scenes of farming life. Having practiced regenerative farming according to York’s suggestions for many years, the farm appears to be an oasis of green among other nearby landscapes. Thus, Molly’s “paradisial lyricism” vision of the farm gets some realization and evokes Susan Griffin, one of the pioneer ecofeminists whose fundamental text *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (Griffin 1978) poetically advocates for a female power that empowers individuals by seeking refuge from systemic monocultural supremacist thinking and by promoting ecological wisdom and healthier

relationships. Despite John's use of the word "harmony" to describe such a vision in the films, it would be an innocent interpretation to view *The Biggest Little Farm* and *The Return* without paying attention to the hard lessons the Chesters have learned while practicing regenerative farming. As John acknowledges more than once, "our reality was so far away from anything like a farm" and "I guess I don't know what Alan's idea of a perfect harmony is even supposed to look like because every step we take to improve our land seems to just create the perfect habitat for the next pest" (Chester 2019, 0.43.00–0.43.19). This is "trouble in paradise," as movie reviewer Robert Roten points out. In light of Haraway's emphasis on the importance of storytelling in the Plantationocene, which creates new relationships with critters through making (odd)kin in our current world, this section argues that *The Biggest Little Farm* and *The Return* effectively visualize the significance of staying with the "troubles" and developing other ethical relationships between humans, critters, and the planet.

John's documentary uses four animated sequences, designed by Jason Carpenter, to illustrate the conflicts and ambivalence between Molly's dream farm and the harsh reality they confront in practicing regenerative farming. As de la Bellacasa points out, a feminist perspective on care in the politics of things both "encourages and problematizes" the potential for translating ethical and political caring into ways of "thinking with nonhumans" (Matters 30). Moving from de la Bellacasa's perspective on care to the Chesters' experiences, the adoption of their dog Todd presents the first significant example of "thinking with nonhumans." Todd's excessive barking for eight hours when the Chesters left their Santa Monica apartment caused them to relocate to a rural farm where Todd would enjoy increased freedom and ample space. If Apricot Lane Farms improves Todd and his caretakers' wellbeing, it also makes the couple face unpredictable and unseen conflicts, failures, and the death and dying of life while strictly following regenerative principles, pointing to the possibility of living with the troubles. Many unpredictable situations, "the X factor" (Chester 2019, 0.28.50–0.28.54), emerge while the Chesters diversify their farm. For example, planting cover crops, which improves soil regeneration, requires more labor-intensive mowing. As starlings flock to the farm, they consume the fruits on the trees, leaving little behind for the couple to harvest; as Molly comments: "At this point, it feels like we're just growing fruit to feed chickens" (Chester 2019, 0.56.12–0.56.19). Moreover, the cover crops support a large snail population, and they are fond of eating citrus tree leaves, which directly impacts the productivity of those trees. As John sadly acknowledges, another issue caused by their farming in the third year was the accumulation of dark feces in the pond, resulting in a toxic algal bloom that was enhanced by the prolonged drought and lack of fresh precipitation (Chester 2019, 0.49.02–0.49.13).

The presence of coyotes is the most devastating example of "trouble" arising from the farm's management. As the Chesters celebrate the success of their traditional farming practices, which have advanced into "a phase of regeneration that goes just beyond simply farming" (Chester 2019, 0.29.15–0.29.22), they merrily discover that the land also becomes a habitat for "delicate wildlife," which are returning in increasing numbers (Chester 2019, 0.29.38). However, despite this positive picture of biodiversity, their farm continues to face significant challenges posed by the presence of coyotes, causing considerable losses of chickens and ducks. The troubles continue to accumulate as their only consultant, York, passes away due to an "aggressive form of cancer" (Chester 2019, 0.35.06–0.35.08), leaving them feeling "both heartbroken and completely frustrated," as noted by John. To make matters worse, they face new problems that they are unable to resolve.

In contrast to the neighbors who would use pesticides on "pests" or shoot a coyote chewing an irrigation line, John initially attempts to "figure out what beneficial role the coyote plays here" (Chester 2019, 0.30.58–0.31.04), even though his farm team members feel sympathy for the dozen ducks and hundreds of chickens the coyotes had decimated. Nevertheless, he does not persist in his refusal to shoot the coyote when Molly shouts that the coyote is with the chickens. John confesses after killing the coyote: "Along with the coyote died part of my belief in the power of an uncompromising idealism, the very

thing that got us to such a beautiful place in our life” (Chester 2019, 0.58.42–0.58.47). As John narrates, the camera focuses on Todd, seemingly as a reminder of why they began this journey. He reflects on the idea that this place is one that they cannot fully control. In the second film, *The Return*, John expresses his belief in running a farm: “Everything on the farm must be serving the farm and playing its part, or, it must go. That’s to protect the survivability of the farmer and the farm” (Chester 2022, 0.12.10–0.12.25). Although John explains that “we don’t apply the same pressure of productivity to every creature on the farm” (Chester 2022, 0.13.02–0.13.06), a small number of animals who call Apricot Lane home and play a critical role in the soil regeneration process are later sold for food (Roll 2019b).

John’s decision (or impulse) to kill the coyote and animals sold for food at Apricot Lane Farms, an agricultural farm, challenges the premise that care is always “pure” or “innocent.” Drawing on Haraway’s ideas about thinking with or engaging with the world in a non-dualistic way, de la Bellacasa emphasizes the significance of valuing the complexity and messiness of the world rather than seeking purity or transcendence (de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 8). The practice of caring for nonhumans is “noninnocent care,” which is not without its ambivalence and potential negative consequences. In some contexts, for de la Bellacasa, care is inextricably bound to killing, such as weeding a garden to ensure that it is more fertile (de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 164). John’s films demonstrate the dilemma, as he expresses: “I’ve created an expectation that to control the coyote means to kill him” (Chester 2019, 1.04.35–1.04.45). As a matter of fact, after years of practicing regenerative farming, John and Molly experience conflicting emotions. They have discovered that as their farm flourishes, pests also thrive, creating a “delicate dance of coexistence” that is difficult to navigate. The better the fruit, the more birds come; the healthier the row crops, the more aphids. This realization brings complexity to their understanding of regenerative farming, causing them to feel ambivalent about the coexistence of pests and farms.

Nevertheless, refusing to adopt a dualistic way of thinking by either completely eliminating the coyote or abandoning their egg operation, John takes an alternative path—staying with the troubles. As Haraway insists, “dogs are not surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with. They are here to live with” (Haraway 2003, p. 5, emphasis added), so are the Chesters’ coyotes or other “pests.” The death of the coyote is not so much to teach John to question “idealism” as it is to teach him to comprehend that “the potential of care” is to create new possibilities (Matters 19). As the word “trouble” has an etymology that can be traced back to a French verb from the 13th century, signifying “to stir up,” “to make cloudy,” or “to disturb” (Haraway 2016, p. 1), the death of the coyote provides a turning point for John to understand “Intent alone is not a protector” (Chester 2019, 0.37.23–0.37.27). In reflection, Molly and John consider York’s words: “Alan told us that things like this would eventually balance out” (Chester 2019, 0.42.20–0.42.29); “Alan told me once that coexistence with land can’t be forced. It’s more of a delicate, patient dance . . . with no guarantees” (Chester 2019, 0.54.00–0.54.21); and “Alan claimed each year would get easier and more predictable. He called it the rhythm of farming” (Chester 2019, 0.54.42–0.54.51). John finally comprehends what York has taught them is not just “a way of farming” but also “a way of seeing” (Chester 2022, 0.01.13–0.1.19), a way of seeing the world by “shifting our lens, calling it a problem with an opportunity” (Chester 2019, 0.28.35–0.28.42).

Turning a problem into an opportunity needs delicate patience and observation, which is something that can be learned from gardening. Sandilands holds particular admiration for the ideas put forth by Robin Wall Kimmerer, who emphasizes reciprocity in forming relationships with plants. This viewpoint suggests that in order to cultivate mutually beneficial connections with plants, one must take into account and attend to the needs of the plants rather than only thinking about how they can be useful for human purposes. Catering to what the nonhumans need is also the “true care” that Sue Stuart-Smith defines. According to Stuart-Smith, “true care” necessitates mindfulness and attention. To truly care for something is to be attentive and responsive to its needs, tuning in and focusing

on something beyond oneself (Stuart-Smith 2020, p. 75). In the film, John discovers “Todd is constantly staring deeply at these almost infinitesimal details” (Chester 2019, 0.49.41–0.49.55), as if he is “decoding how the world around him works.” John decides to learn from him; whenever a new problem arises, he will “first take a step back and watch it” (Chester 2019, 0.51.14).

True care requires patient observation and admitting vulnerability, through which John finally figures out how to “balance the needs of the farm with that of the wildlife” (Chester 2019, 0.30.18–0.30.24). For example, the hundred ducks, whose poop polluted the pond during the drought, are sent to the orchards to eat the snails that kill the tree roots. As John notes, “In just a single season, they devoured over 90,000 snails” (Chester 2019, 0.50.50–0.50.57). They also know that more cows and sheep will produce more manure, but manure to flies “is the food for their babies” (Chester 2019, 0.51.32–0.51.34), and maggots are food for chickens. In this way, the fly population is reduced to a manageable level of coexistence. Thus, by taking the time to observe and understand how the ecosystem functions, the Chesters may be able to develop a more ethical and sustainable solution to approach the uneven balance. As John states, “Observation followed by creativity is becoming our greatest ally” (Chester 2019, 0.52.22–0.52.28). John’s statement echoes what Anna Tsing has termed “latent commons,” hidden sites of ally-seeking in the face of institutionalized alienation during droughts and winters (Tsing 2015, p. 255). There is no way that Tsing views latent commons as places to “redeem us,” nor are they places to be in harmony, because latent commons “are those mutualist and nonantagonistic entanglements found within the play of this confusion” (p. 255). Therefore, latent commons exist “amidst the trouble” and humans “are never fully in control” (p. 255).

The trouble created by gophers is resolved by inviting owls to nest on their farm, although the Chesters had no idea when they would come. The sight of a coyote paralyzed in the garden while hunting a gopher made John realize, “The coyote might not be just a pest; he may very well be our friend” (Chester 2019, 1.10.50–1.11.06), especially after the Chesters caught 900 gophers, which eat all the roots, in one month. Having Rosie fulfill the role of guardian dog—John preferred to use this term to emphasize her role as a caretaker of other animals and avoid any connotations of aggression and exploitation associated with “guard dog”—allows the coyotes to hunt gophers instead of chickens. In *The Return*, John includes scenes of coyotes and their young to illustrate that they also have a place and a family on this land. Through this realization, John comes to understand that all “pests” serve a beneficial purpose, including gophers by aerating the soil, if we take the time to pay attention (Chester 2019, 1.13.22–1.13.28). York assures the Chesters that they will no longer be alone in their farming venture by the seventh year, which is confirmed by John and they see things that they had never seen before (Chester 2019, 1.15.33–1.15.37). The Chesters’ farm sees an influx of 87 barn owls, effectively controlling the population of gophers through their diet of an estimated 15,000 gophers. Other “specialized players” also “arrived to do their part,” including “hawks attacked from above,” gopher snakes, weasels, badgers, and coyotes that attack from below, and even the guardian dogs become hunters (Chester 2019, 1.17.11–1.17.28).

This flourishing promise borne out by York for seven years parallels the proposal of ecofeminist Winona LaDuke regarding an economic amendment for the seventh generation. According to the proposed amendment, “... *The rights of the people to use and enjoy air, water, sunlight, and other renewable resources determined by Congress to be common property, shall not be impaired, nor shall such use impair their availability for the future generations*” (LaDuke 2022). Such “future” generation or posterity is “the Seventh Generation from now” (LaDuke 2022). LaDuke’s proposal emphasizes community-based economic development that promotes the creation of sustainable practices rooted in the local community, as do the Chesters for their human and nonhuman players.

Practicing regenerative farming after the seventh year is like surfing for the Chesters, constantly adapting to the “power of nature” and riding without any great effort on their part by “establishing this equilibrium” (Chester 2019, 1.16.15–1.16.18). As again

communicated by York to the Chesters, they will see “a web of life” when “complexity and diversity” complement and reinforce each other (Chester 2019, 1.16.37–1.16.40). As the camera lens centers on the majestic sight of the Milky Way, John states that he “feel[s] so captivated by its complexity.” He reflects on the understanding that “Earth is a part of [this galaxy]” and that he, along with all other living things, “actually spin inside of it” (Chester 2019, 1.11.15–1.11.38). Seeing humans and nonhumans physically located within the same galaxy reminds him of the interconnectedness of all life on this planet. As John indicates, “those tiny revelations that are born from *failure*” provide “a fuel for the engine of our ecosystem” (Chester 2019, 1.12.42–1.12.51; emphasis added). Failure is never easy to deal with, but it is a way of unblocking attachment sites for Haraway and Tsing.

#### 4. Thinking for Rebuilding Attachment Sites

Inspired by Australian artist Patricia Puccini’s sculpture of hybrid creatures and following her concerns, Haraway addresses how we can “take care of our failures” and embrace them in a meaningful and material way rather than always focusing on “the fixes or the successes” (Haraway and Tsing 2019). This task, as Haraway suggests, will allow us to address our failures and rebuild attachment sites in response to the numbers released by “the plantation and its progeny” (Haraway and Tsing 2019). Reestablishing attachment sites starts from facing failures, as the failures of “ongoingness crumble lifeways in our times of onrushing extinctions, exterminations, wars, extractions, and genocides” (Haraway 2016, p. 132), which includes the failure to maintain the health of the land, water, plants, animals, and people at Apricot Lane Farms 45 years ago. John’s films depict Apricot Lane Farms as an attachment site in Haraway’s sense, a location with a “kinesthetic, performative, and affectional ecology” (Haraway and Tsing 2019), where the more sustainable ecosystem is constantly entangled and collaborating as various species interact on the farm. In John’s films, he highlights either physical sites, such as farms, gardens, and fruit baskets at Apricot Lane Farms, or abstract ones, such as shared beliefs, values, and experiences practiced in regenerative agriculture, enabling them to form connections and attachments with the critters and world around them.

In the meantime, John’s films depict Apricot Lane Farms as an attachment site in several ways. First of all, the cinematography in John’s films not only illustrates how their regenerative farming practices beautifully transformed the land from its extractive farming for 45 years into “something that was better than what it was even 45 years ago” within eight years (Chester 2022, 0.26.48), but it also helps to visualize the composting ecofeminist understanding of interconnectedness. Although this film is not the only example of a regenerative and teaching farm, it makes significant contributions compared to other farm films over the past five years.<sup>9</sup> For example, John’s films bring much-needed attention to the importance of regenerative farming practices, inspiring more people to explore sustainable food production methods. During the two-hour walking tour of Apricot Lane Farms, John describes how people are able “to visualize interconnectedness” by learning about the scientific mechanisms that facilitate the functioning of the players on the farm. Furthermore, John mythologizes the film’s players and actors so the audience can relate, including stories of aphids or ladybugs. It took the Chesters three or four years to see the ladybug population reach a level that could override the ant population protecting the aphid population (Roll 2019a). He weaves stories like this, including one about Greasy and Emma, a rooster and a pig star who found companionship and shared a home together.

In a podcast interview with Rich Roll, John explained that his documentaries do not contain talking heads, pointing fingers, or assign blame but instead act as storytelling that includes the perspectives of animals (Roll 2019a). John’s storytelling strategy echoes Haraway’s idea of the “Children of Compost,” which we all should strive to become, urging us to “write stories and live lives for flourishing and abundance” (Haraway 2016, p. 136). With the film and the notoriety and profile the Chesters have gained, Rich Roll suggests that they may be able to take advantage of the opportunity to utilize their farm beyond what they are doing in the soil to “really educate future generations of farmers” as well as

the general public, enabling them “to vote with their choices and their dollars” (Roll 2019a). Rich Roll and John also concur with the idea that it is this generation’s responsibility to spread the message by storytelling and to mythologize the new way of seeing so that it may be passed on to the next generation. The teaching is far more than merely what they do; it is about the “way of thinking, and about a certain way of problem-solving that requires to think differently” (Roll 2019a).

In this light, although John’s documentaries are characterized less as environmental films than as “a byproduct of regenerative agriculture” as a whole, John clarifies that the biodynamic method that they adopt is not the only way, nor does John believe that holistic or permaculture methods are necessarily the best methods (Roll 2019a). Ways of building attachment sites for the Chesters are as varied as possible. In place of playing “the victim card” and accusing humans of causing the Plantationocene, the Chesters “fall in love with possibilities” (Roll 2019a), similar to Haraway and Tsing’s suggestion that we can rise from the ruins. As a result, even though the farm regenerates itself in years six and seven, John is not entirely convinced that things will become more accessible or better. Nevertheless, he recognizes that how they approach problems has completely changed (Roll 2019a). It takes a long time for the ecosystem to respond to the efforts they have made. In contrast to pursuing “perfect harmony” in maintaining the farm, the Chesters, with optimism, consider the ecosystem to be “alive with infinite possibilities” (Chester 2019, 1.26.50–1.27.03). Once unleashed, the ecosystem is bound for greatness.

The care and maintenance of a farm require continuous commitment. Despite their efforts to coexist with the “pests,” the Chesters still find each day on the farm “both terrifying and magically unpredictable” (Chester 2019, 0.26.34–0.26.37). As de la Bellacasa points out, care is embedded in “the everyday fabric of troubled worlds,” and one should learn how to “embrace its ambivalent character” (de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 11). Ways to cultivate the capacity of “response-ability,” which Haraway refers to as “an ecology of practices,” encompass both “collective knowing and doing” (Haraway 2016, p. 34) and engage with the feminist notion of care. In the view of the feminist Tronto, caring is an ongoing process demonstrated through “a single activity” or as a series of interactions (Tronto 1993, p. 103). Following Tronto, de la Bellacasa also proposes that care should be viewed as “something open-ended”; moreover, the “ethics” in ethics of care refers not to “a realm of normative moral obligations” but to “a hands-on, ongoing process of recreation of ‘as well as possible’ relations” (de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 6). This understanding of care, according to de la Bellacasa, extends beyond the traditional relationships of care, such as those between parents and children, and the elderly and their caregivers, or other “dependents.” This is not exclusively the responsibility of “feminine” individuals and values (p. 160), but rather, a decentralized approach to ethics should be considered in nonhuman worlds. By cultivating pleasure and the love of attachment in Haraway’s sense at Apricot Lane Farms, the Chesters and their farm team become cognitively and practically proficient in agricultural skills. As a result, they become participants in creating an attachment-friendly environment, thereby maintaining an ethical framework that includes nonhuman species in “the living community” as members without exceptionalism or paternalism (de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 167).

The Chesters are committed to passing on their care for the plants, animals, and microorganisms to the next generation. Haraway’s famous call, “Making kin, not babies,” emphasizes creating connections with nonhumans rather than solely focusing on procreation. At the end of *The Biggest Little Farm*, John’s camera work parallels the birth of a female calf with that of his son, Beaudie, born to his wife Molly. Telling the aging Todd that he is always their first child, John “makes kin” with nonhumans and “makes babies” to pass on the knowledge. The scenes in both *The Biggest Little Farm* and *The Return* depict how Beaudie, the son of the Chesters, learns about the world through farm life, including his enjoyment of freely picking and eating wild blueberries. This highlights the idea of a community with a shared purpose, a principle that John and Molly now strive to uphold on the farm. This community of purpose involves, as John indicates, “the support of the

wildlife and the soil,” but it is also shared by “a team who believed in this way enough to make it a reality” (Chester 2019, 1.19.55–1.20.02).

Contrary to the mass forced labor that generates plantation wealth, the farm team at Apricot Lane Farms, according to Molly, who organizes the team while film editing and other tasks occupy John, contains 12 team leaders to manage various tasks, including business, sales, plant and soil fertility, controller, sales and transportation, communications, orchard, chef, packhouse, HR, scientific study and research, housekeeping, habitat restoration, estate landscape, facilities, holistic livestock, holistic garden, and soil ecology (“Our Team” 2023). John’s films contain some scenes in which the farm employees display unease when they find dozens of dead chickens that a coyote has attacked. By examining the Chesters’ farm through Tsing’s lens, the employees are not workers in the classic sense of the factory: “alienated labor without interest in the product” under capitalism (Tsing 2015, p. 127). John and Molly are not owners who “accumulate” wealth by investing in assets derived from the surplus value generated by their employees (p. 62). As Molly indicates in the interview, their farm has a duplex house and accommodates a variety of workers and apprentices, depending on the availability of beds and work. During a structured three-month training program, new workers rotate through various departments and receive in-depth training from one of the twelve team leaders. The farm places a greater emphasis on hiring individuals with “the right perspective, openness, and willingness” rather than those who are experts (Roll 2019a). It is Molly who takes on the crucial role of facilitating communication and connections within the team, ensuring that they can function as a self-sustaining ecosystem. The ultimate objective is for the team to function independently, allowing Molly to devote more time to hands-on farm work. John, Molly, and now Beaudie, and their team members become part of building attachment sites, especially those who believe in their practices.

## 5. Conclusions

In the view of de la Bellacasa, whose ideas of matters of care arise from her engagement in permaculture, the management of soil, water, and other natural resources is crucial to the development of sustainable food production systems. At Apricot Lane Farms, Molly realizes that the nutritional quality of the food she cooks is directly related to the health of the farm and soil. Molly’s tenacity and relentless optimism lead them on a journey with their mentor, Alan York, to regenerate the landscape, “bringing life, nutrients, and biodiversity back to the land” (“Our Story” 2023). The Chesters’ regenerative farming practices demonstrate a deep commitment to caring for the plants, animals, and multispecies players, as well as maintaining the land for future generations, which is in line with de la Bellacasa’s idea that care is essential to establishing sustainable relationships and communities.

From the perspective of composting ecofeminism, Molly and John’s approach to composting and gardening recognizes the inextricable link between theoretical and practical considerations as well as the intersection between the personal and political realms, a long lineage of feminist thinking articulated by Hamilton and Neimanis (2018, p. 524). As a result of regenerative farming, the Chesters’ recuperation of Apricot Lane Farms is considered political since it challenges the dominant industrialized monoculture agrarian ideology. In Molly’s view, John’s films illustrate these challenges and an attachment site resulting from their love for their farm (Roll 2019a). In spite of the presence of a bushfire in the nearby neighborhood at the end of *The Biggest Little Farm*, which suggests “a comfortable level of disharmony” (“Our Story” 2023), the Chesters maintain their attachment to their farm, underscoring that vulnerability prevails. However, this also demonstrates the Chesters’ willingness to persist despite discomfort or adversity, highlighting their dedication to the place, Apricot Lane Farms, they call home.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See the catalogue of accolades conferred upon *The Biggest Little Farm*, available on their official website at <https://www.apricotlanefarms.com/biggest-little-farm/>, accessed on 26 March 2023.
- <sup>2</sup> In contrast to other recent films that feature interviews with scientists or experts, such as Josh Tickell and Rebecca Harrell Tickell's *Kissing the Ground* (2020), John employs captivating visual narratives to connect the land, soil, people, plants, animals, and microorganisms, demonstrating that diversity is both a challenge and a solution for many "troubles" associated with regenerative farming practices.
- <sup>3</sup> In this article, I use *ecofeminism* loosely without detailing its movements, its relation and conflict with feminisms, and its diverse positions, such as essentialism and social constructionism. My main purpose is to inspire a conversation between feminists whose care and concerns extend to nonhumans in accordance with Hamilton and Neimanis' idea of "inclusive feminism."
- <sup>4</sup> Although York suggested that they document everything from the beginning, John did not think of using a camera to film the ongoingness of the farming until year five (Roll 2019a).
- <sup>5</sup> Molly is the primary person working with the farm team whenever John is engaged in film editing and other tasks (Roll 2019a).
- <sup>6</sup> In this context, traditional farming is equivalent to regenerative farming and biodynamic farming. John explains and clarifies the difference between regenerative practices and conventional farming, in which high-value volume products are produced at the lowest cost without regard for the nutrients contained in the food or soil health (Roll 2019a).
- <sup>7</sup> Perhaps this attitude of "start it over" contradicts Haraway's notion of "partial recuperation." Haraway comments in *Staying with the Trouble*, "In the face of unrelenting historically specific surplus suffering in companion species knottings, I am not interested in reconciliation or restoration, but I am deeply committed to the more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together. Call that staying with the trouble" (Haraway 2016, p. 10). The approach of restoration after destruction or genocide in a manner reminiscent of the Holocaust is certainly not the mindset of John and Molly when they, following York's guidance, decide to practice regenerative farming. In his differentiation of organic farming from regenerative farming, John explains that their way of farming is not organic farming, which might be helpful in preventing further destruction of biodiversity. For John, organic farming does not consider soil health at a fundamental level so that one can truly regenerate it, nor does it address the habitat restoration required on farms for biodiversity to thrive and achieve equilibrium. Therefore, the Chesters "start it over" in accordance with York's suggestion.
- <sup>8</sup> In *Matters of Care*, de la Bellacasa traces the source of her theory of care to feminism. Feminists Joan C. Tronto and Berenice Fisher opened up the concept of care within feminist discourse by proposing that it should not be limited to "human interaction with others" (Fisher and Tronto 1991, p. 103). Tronto and Fisher argue that caring should be understood as "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (p. 40). They believe that caring encompasses taking care of our physical bodies, our personal identities, and the environment around us (p. 40).
- <sup>9</sup> I appreciate the insightful comment provided by the anonymous reviewer regarding the presence of farming communities that have been practicing regenerative farming in the United States since the 1960s, and their influential role in shaping our perceptions about food production, quality, and the impact on the environment.

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