

Ground Truthing: The Politics and Culture of Soil and Water Conservation in Iowa Agriculture

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This dissertation explores the complex relationships between natural resource conservation and industrial agriculture in Iowa, specifically focusing on efforts to address water pollution in the state. Drawing on thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, I discuss what makes conservation culturally salient and practically difficult to achieve, focusing on relationships, variation, and power dynamics. This difficulty around conservation arises in part from the tensions between what I call the corn assemblage and the prairie assemblage that especially clarified in the wake of a lawsuit that cited agricultural drainage systems as sources of pollution. These assemblages—composed of humans, nonhumans, and technologies—work for and toward the necessarily vague and co-productive concept of conservation, motivated by their respective desires of farm continuity and landscape change, but also working to bridge these desires to make a more encompassing lively and livable landscape. However, the circulation of (scientific) knowledge and its practical implications complicates conservation work, as the assemblages negotiate blame, accountability, and ultimately, responsibility for environmental degradation. Science becomes one of the major sites of both state and everyday politics in Iowa, a facet that is generally dismissed and obscured. I conclude that the current industrial agricultural system requires extensive material and ideological work on the ground, from multiple actors and groups, in order to be sustained, work that fortunately is not omnipresent but constantly shifting and subject to revealing gaps. The work of industrial commodity agriculture reveals both the structures, groups, and practices maintaining the status quo as well as the potential sites and actions for change.

