In late 2012, a delegation of hundreds of activists from more than twenty-five nations gathered high up on the Aren volcano in Sumatra’s Bukit Barisan mountains. The Indonesian Peasant Union (Serikat Petani Indonesia), one of Indonesia’s largest agrarian justice organizations, worked with The Peasants’ Way (La Via Campesina), an international activist organization, to bring them together.

Indigenous peoples joined agricultural laborers, smallholder farmers, and politicians from as near as South Sumatra and as far as Senegal and Brazil. A few campaigners, artists, and scholars, me among them, joined as well. The delegation traveled to Casiavera, a village on the volcano, to discuss their shared struggles for livelihood and well-being as states and corporations across the world remain intent on evicting rural, Indigenous, and marginalized peoples from their homes and dispossessing them of their forests, agricultural lands, and waterways.

Organizers with the Indonesian Peasant Union chose to host everyone in Casiavera because it is the site of a remarkable land back movement of smallholder family farmers and plantation laborers. Starting first in the late 1990s, a group of agriculturalists from Casiavera worked together to occupy the Dona Company cattle ranch and plantation above their homes. Ever since, Casiavera’s reclaimers have worked to expel the agribusiness company, challenge the government’s power to control their land, and make a new life working it.

The opening speaker at the gathering, a co-founder of the Indonesian Peasant Union and coordinator of Via Campesina, celebrated Casiavera’s
reclaiming movement and urged the visiting delegation "to take inspiration from these reclaimers for the continuation of our movements into the twenty-first-century."

After three days of visits with Casiavera's movement members and long conversations among themselves, the visiting Via Campesina delegation released their Bukit Tinggi Declaration. The declaration outlined their shared vision of modern global smallholder movements, which work to "defend land and territory, erase poverty, and honor the earth."¹ That the delegation chose to release this vision of agrarian justice from Casiavera spoke to the relevance of this reclaiming movement for other struggles for livelihood and autonomy across the Earth's many landscapes of extraction and exploitation.

Moved by my brief visit to Casiavera in 2012, I returned to Aren in 2015 to live and work there for the better part of a year.² Malin, a smallholder and longtime peasant union member whom I had met at the Via Campesina gathering, offered to introduce me to life on the reclaimed land. Directly behind his family's home in the middle of the village was a slight rise, where I looked out on a tall forest growing across a miles-long hollow of the volcano. Above this gently sloping hollow, the volcano's slopes steepened again to become the deeper green of the cloud forests on the mountain's highest reaches. At the edge of town just before the start of these forests, a peculiar gate was visible. Across the top of the gate were the words “Collective Land” (Tanah Ulayat) written in big, black block letters. “Up until the late 1990s the gate said Dona Company,” Malin told me, pointing at the sign.

After passing through the gate into what Casiavera’s reclaimers now call their “collective land” (tanah ulayat), a twenty-minute walk led us to Malin’s family plot, where with his wife he tended a small plot of cacao, cinnamon, clove, avocado, sugar palm, and mahogany trees.³ Malin’s family plot was one of more than two hundred similar smallholder plots on the land. Interspersed between them were vegetable gardens and patches of forest. Nearby was a fifteen-cow dairy shed, where a handful of younger women and men were sitting on buckets, milking their cows. A few simple barns belonging to agricultural cooperatives marked the upper reaches of the land.

It was a bustling landscape, alive with thousands of trees that produce valuable food, fiber, and timber. All of this, Malin told me, began in the 1990s with the work of smallholders, a peasant union, and a few small cooperatives. Under the cool shade of the broken canopy, the sounds of groups
of reclaimers working their plots traveled out from other parts of the land, along with birds moving about higher up in the trees. The spicy-sweet smell of cinnamon bark hung in the air. Scattered across the land were a few still uncultivated plots, a reminder of how Casiavera’s newfound smallholders planted their forests in what was once a plantation without any trees at all.

Countering Dispossession, Reclaiming Land is an ethnography of the social movement that unfolded in Casiavera. I focus on reclaiming as a way to counter dispossession: as a mobilization away from state and corporate exploitation of the land and toward a small-scale, cooperative, and collective life. I ask how Casiavera’s reclaiming movement emerged to counter a century-long history of multiple dispossessions of smallholders from the land. Along the way, I inquire about how this movement created new social and ecological relations, remaking the community into a smallholder economy and the land into a smallholder landscape.

Eventually, in Casiavera hundreds of onetime plantation laborers, landless workers, and smallholders took collective control of the land and cultivated a forest ecology on it that supported their own, albeit imperfect, emancipation. Casiavera’s transformation is an accomplishment that deserves
celebration, even while reclaimers faced challenges and outright failure. Nearly half of the families who tried to reclaim the land failed to make their plots productive. Other reclaimers were never able to get access to a plot, even though they wanted one. More difficult still was that even after they gained control of the land, many of Casiavera’s reclaimers remained in relations of debt, contract farming, and wage labor—the very relations of work that reclaimers sought to avoid when they set out to become smallholders. Still, over the last two decades hundreds of women and men in equal measure have gained access to a one-quarter hectare plot on the collective land, worked to cultivate it, founded cooperatives, and joined up with a peasant union to create a new political agroecology across the land.

**FROM DISPOSSESSION TO RECLAIMING**

When I first met Malin, he told me only that in the late 1990s workers in Casiavera reclaimed the land from “investors.” Over the months and years that followed, Malin led me to understand how the struggle for this land involved a much fuller history that includes a series of radical transformations. In
the mid-1800s a new form of Dutch colonialism brought a draconian forced coffee cultivation scheme to the volcano. Colonial overseers used violence to compel Casiavera’s residents to clear the cloud forests above their homes and plant coffee trees. Dutch-forced coffee cultivation would eventually end in the face of entrenched Indigenous resistance fifty years later.

Following the failure of forced cultivation, in 1905 the Dutch Council of Justice in Padang for the first time signed over the legal right to control the land itself to a European agribusiness, W. H. Samuel. The company took control of the land, logged the forest, and established a cattle ranch.

Generations of company control of the land were broken during World War II when the brutal Japanese occupation of the archipelago ruptured more than three centuries of Dutch colonialism in Sumatra. At the end of the war, an Indigenous revolutionary movement was able to defeat the Dutch army’s attempts to regain control of the archipelago, establishing the post-colonial Indonesian Republic. The birth of the republic was a time of smallholder liberation from the colonial plantations and factories. On the Aren volcano Casiavera’s smallholders were able to cultivate their lands, previously lost to colonial dispossession, in peace for some fifteen short years.

Dispossession returned in full force in 1968, after the fall of the republic and the start of Indonesia’s murderous New Order military dictatorship, when the national Agrarian Directorate leased the land to the Dona Company and its owner, Mahmud Teuling, a retired military police officer. For a full three decades, company staff ruled the land and oversaw a cattle ranch and tobacco plantation.
The full weight of the New Order, one of the twentieth century’s most violent military dictatorships, backed Teuling’s control of the land and the laborers who worked it. Forged out of a genocide that targeted members of leftist political parties and workers’ organizations, the New Order perfected the use of force to dispossess smallholders. Teuling’s ranch and plantation was a merciless place. The forests were cleared. Teuling became rich. Two decades later, in the early 1990s, Teuling’s daughter took control of the land concession and started a ginger plantation. Erosion from sun and rain and the spraying of herbicides and pesticides damaged the soil. Organic matter and nutrients were lost. People, plants, animals, insects, and microorganisms were poisoned.

Where Casiavera was once a community of free smallholders, under colonial and authoritarian rule the latter became dispossessed laborers. Eventually the logging, cattle ranching, and monocultures on the land ruined it, leaving the soil bare, leached, compacted, and eroded. Throughout this era, Casiavera’s residents remembered that they had cultivated the land above their homes through different periods of this changing history of land control. And when the New Order weakened in the 1990s, hundreds from Casiavera went up and occupied the plantation as part of an archipelago-wide reclaiming movement.

In a series of letters to government officials, Casiavera’s reclaimers declared the Dona Company bankrupt and the plantation land ruined, even as the company refused to abandon its claims to the land. Reacting to Casiavera’s first occupations along the edges of the plantation, Dona ownership and staff sought to continue planting its ginger and tobacco monocultures. They announced plans for a new industrial sorghum plantation on the land. But in the late 1990s hundreds more reclaimers from Casiavera joined the occupation of the land, effectively bringing the plantation to an end.

Early on in Casiavera’s reclaiming, when the first families went up to the plantation land to cultivate it as their own, activists and political leaders took note. One of the first peasant unions to form under the New Order, the West Sumatran Peasant Union (Serikat Petani Sumatera Barat), then still operating underground, began recruiting members in Casiavera. The union worked to strengthen the occupation with protest organizing, agroecology training, and legal support. At the same time, movement leaders brought other movement members to Casiavera, framing Casiavera’s mobilization as one that could inspire and inform others.
So began two decades of connection between Casiavera’s reclaiming and Indonesia’s agrarian movements. The West Sumatran Peasant Union would eventually join up with similar regional organizations to create the national Indonesian Peasant Union, a movement organization that has coordinated reclaiming movements for decades across the archipelago.

Casiavera’s reclaiming movement was about regaining control of land and territory, what the latest generation of Indigenous activists in the Americas call land back: the anti-colonial (re)creation of Indigenous land control, community, and landscapes. As such, Casiavera’s Indigenous Minangkabau-led reclaiming movement joins the efforts of hundreds of thousands of landless agricultural workers and smallholder farmers, Indigenous and not, in Indonesia and beyond who are struggling to reclaim plantations and other sites of state and corporate dispossession of land (e.g., North America’s Land Back, the Zapatistas, the Landless Workers’ Movement in Brazil, the Kenyan Peasant League, and the Taiwan Farmers Union). These are all movements for agrarian sovereignty, struggles for the right of rural peoples of all kinds to determine for themselves why, when, and where they live and work.

Reclaiming movements seek to create new livelihoods and ecologies that move away from what has been the dominant form of economy in the Sumatran countryside for over a hundred years: the state handover of land to corporations for industrial exploitation. These mines, timber estates, dams, and plantations reordered the landscape seemingly without moral concern.

Today’s dispossession continue the killing of thousands of species of living beings and push people off their land. Over the last fifty years, more than two-thirds of Sumatra’s forests have fallen as voracious logging operations and plantations of palm oil and timber spread apace across the island. The agrarian changes have brought about the tragic impending extinction of the Sumatran rhino and orangutan, arson of plantation infrastructures, militarized repression against dissenters, and the murder of activists working toward another way of doing things.

Violent overlords, capitalist financiers, men and women laboring as coolies, ranch hands, planters, pickers, pesticide sprayers, and deforestation: Casiavera’s reclaiming movement brought all of these ills of ranching and plantation production to an end. As a way of countering their own dispossession, Casiavera’s reclaimers constructed new, agroecological lifeways that centered on diversified work and cooperatives. A smallholder landscape took form as reclaimers took control of the land and cultivated agricultural
forests on it, what people on the volcano call \textit{parak} and Westerners call agroforests.

Casiavera’s agroforests have a threefold importance related to nature, global climate cycles, and smallholder economics. Intimate, human-scale relations with commodity-giving plants grown without toxic chemicals were the foundation of reclaimers’ agroecological livelihoods. These were reciprocal relations that made the landscape healthier. The agroforests are significant for their ecological diversity: about half that of the uncultivated cloud forest that grows on the highest reaches of the Aren volcano, but far greater than that of the industrial monoculture plantations that now cover hundreds of thousands of square miles of Sumatra. What’s more, Casiavera’s growing forests made up a watershed, completing Sumatra’s complex water cycles in ways that industrial agriculture does not. These cycles allowed the agroforests to take up carbon out of the atmosphere. In contrast, industrial agriculture is the world’s second largest emitter of carbon dioxide and other climate-changing gasses after the energy sector.\(^6\)

Casiavera’s forests are perhaps best understood as an expression of reclaimers’ specific movement worldviews, which are not reducible to explicitly material or economic concerns. These lively working food forests link unstable
matters of political mobilization, household production, and human ecology. They are emergent from reclaimers’ unique critiques of industrial capitalist agriculture and participation in direct-action land protest. Reclaimers honed these critiques with their deeply held Indigenous Minangkabau ideas of what they call their matriarchate, a matrilineal form of community
organization that places women’s rule at the center through practices of collective land control, social deliberation and consensus seeking, and environmental balance upheld through cycles of creation and destruction. Reclaimers in Casiavera acted along moral, ideological, and spiritual dimensions to elaborate nothing less than an agrarian cosmology.

Casiavera’s reclaiming attests to the fact that colonial and capitalist dispossession is a flawed enterprise. It cannot expand forever. Yet reclaiming movements also carry import beyond critiques of dispossession. The changes that unfolded across Casiavera, on the Aren volcano, and in other locales of the Bukit Barisan are nothing less than the resurgence of smallholder life. Reclaiming in Casiavera was the way rural workers sought out better livelihoods than the typically difficult, dangerous, and exploitative forms of agrarian work available to them in the surrounding plantations, logging operations, and mines. The many social movements working for decolonization, food sovereignty, land for the tiller, indigenous rights, and the environment are all in need of more dialogue on how to counter dispossession and move toward new lifeways, uncertain as these new topographies of life remain. My aim is to show that reclaimers’ experiences on the Aren volcano can provide a point of reference in these discussions.

RECLAIMING! CREATING COUNTER-DISPOSSESSIONS

Critical agrarian studies, a collection of anthropology, sociology, and human geography, provided me with a set of concepts to understand changes in Casiavera. The best of these studies have shown how capitalist relations emerge among agrarian peoples as state planners, financiers, and industry continuously remake landscapes into zones of extraction and exploitation. These changes are the agrarian question, which scholars have recast as questions about changes in land, labor, and capital in the countryside for more than a century. One enduring component of these analyses is dispossession, specifically the expropriation of land and its commodification. As it has unfolded across the planet over the last three centuries, dispossession is a process of state and corporate territorial acquisition that targets Indigenous and agrarian peoples’ lands for enclosure. For both Alexander Chayanov, the early theorist of Russian peasant collectives, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, one of the first anarchist scholars, dispossession was another word for the state theft of peasant lands. For Karl Marx, dispossession was the way