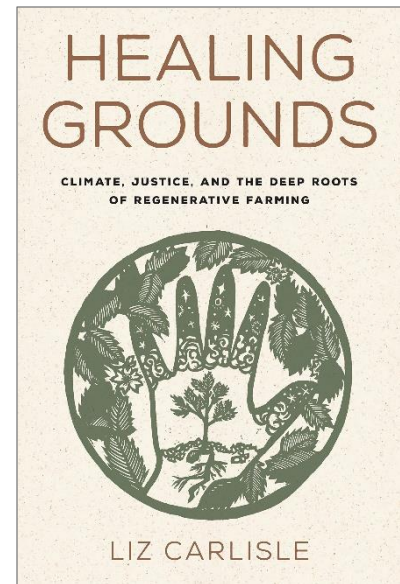


## Regenerative agriculture and racial justice

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Review of *Healing Grounds: Climate, Justice, and the Deep Roots of Regenerative Farming*, by Liz Carlisle. (2022). Published by Island Press. Available as hardcover and eBook; 200 pages. Publisher's website, which includes teaching materials from students: <https://islandpress.org/books/healing-grounds>



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At a time when regenerative agriculture has come under increasing scrutiny for murky definitions (Newton et al., 2020), corporate dilution (Nargi, 2020), and a lack of attention to racial justice and land access (Fassler, 2021), Liz Carlisle's *Healing Grounds: Climate, Justice, and the Deep Roots of Regenerative Farming* (2022) offers an expansive, justice-oriented understanding of regenerative

agriculture. In *Healing Grounds*, Carlisle makes the case that the regenerative farming practices gaining popular traction are not new but are instead deeply rooted in the agricultural traditions of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities across the globe. To unearth these deep roots, Carlisle features the stories and work of several BIPOC women leaders in regenerative agriculture, weaving in a wealth of interviews, archival research, and historical data to examine structural agricultural injustices and the multitude of regenerative farming practices sustained by BIPOC communities.

Like many enthusiasts, Carlisle first encountered regenerative agriculture through concerns about climate change and the promising possibility of recapturing carbon underground through soil-friendly farming practices. However, after learning from farming communities of color in the process of her research, Carlisle realizes that “this story of

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climate and agriculture [is], fundamentally, a story about racial violence” (p. 10). She argues that, for regenerative agriculture to live up to its climate-healing aspirations, it must first attend to the extractive, colonial logics that birthed and continue to uphold the contemporary food system. The argument that agricultural and climate justice requires racial justice is—like regenerative farming practices—also not new, but currently remains on the margins of broader regenerative agriculture conversations. *Healing Grounds* enters this conversation using a deft storytelling approach that captures and delicately balances the global, historical breadth of BIPOC regenerative farming practices with the depth of commitments to justice by individual movement leaders.

In Chapter 1, Carlisle introduces Latrice Tatsey, a member of the Amskapi Piikani (Black-foot) Nation who is researching buffalo restoration programs on the prairie. These efforts seek to rekindle the mutually flourishing relationships between buffalo, the once carbon-rich native grasslands, and Indigenous plains peoples. Chapter 2 then introduces Olivia Watkins, a Black agroforester returning to steward North Carolina land held by her family for generations. In conversation with Watkins, Carlisle points to the rarity of such intergenerational land tenure in the face of historical “federal farm programs [that were], essentially, a means to transfer capital from the Black community to the White community” (p. 57).

In Chapter 3, readers meet Aidee Guzman, a Chicana soil ecologist whose research demonstrates the benefits of above-ground crop diversity for underground mycorrhizal fungal diversity. Guzman also emphasizes diversity in farming communities themselves, as the immigrant farmers she works with in California’s Central Valley are incorporating regenerative farming traditions from their homelands. In Chapter 4, readers meet Keu Yang Moua, a Hmong farmer in California whose crop diversity supports beneficial soil fungi and also provides her diverse customer base with culturally appropriate produce. Referencing rotational swidden agricultural practices from Southeast Asia and the broad Asian roots of composting, Carlisle illustrates the painful irony of Asian American farmers’ struggle to access the land tenure and infrastructure neces-

sary to effectively implement these long-term ancestral practices.

Carlisle ultimately concludes from her interviews that “the future of regenerative agriculture hinges on whether the people needed to practice it are afforded stable access to land” (p. 161). Thus, the book wraps up with land justice advocates Stephanie Morningstar, Neil Thapar, and Mai Nguyen, who present alternative land trust models that seek to increase access for BIPOC communities and eventually move beyond “land as property” conceptions altogether. Carlisle leaves readers with the final lesson from her interviewees: “healing the climate means healing land . . . and healing land means healing colonization” (p. 177).


Carlisle’s compelling narrative style draws readers into individual stories without losing sight of critical historical and structural elements. The content is thoroughly researched, well-documented, and covers remarkably wide ground while maintaining focus. Carlisle’s conversational and delightfully engaging prose makes this book accessible to academic and non-academic audiences alike.

*Healing Grounds* makes a timely and critical intervention, particularly given regenerative agriculture’s recent rise in popularity and concerns about its dilution and greenwashing. Carlisle charts a clear, challenging, yet hopeful path forward for regenerative agriculture and food systems justice, one that requires deep systemic change, racial justice, and BIPOC leadership. She identifies key levers for change, including confronting racialized disparities in access to land, exploitative farm labor structures, and the “agriculture as domination” (p. 10) paradigm. These are daunting but necessary tasks for a truly regenerative agriculture.

Interestingly, Carlisle does not make explicit her reasons for choosing this “regenerative” framing, even though, as she points out, some farmers she spoke with do not necessarily adopt the “regenerative” label for themselves. Carlisle’s promotion of a social justice foundation for regenerative agriculture may lead readers to wonder why she did not use agroecology as a framing, with its well-established activist orientation. However, the “regenerative” frame does aim Carlisle’s intervention squarely at regenerative agriculture advocates, potentially bringing vital, needed conversations

about racial justice to spaces unfamiliar with agroecology. Carlisle also traces an excellent, informative history of the agroecology movement in Chapter 3. Still, a discussion of her overarching terminology choice, however brief, could make the intentions clearer for readers curious about the politics of the “alternative” agriculture lexicon.

Terminology aside, Carlisle invites readers to accompany her own learning journey with a welcoming tone and a gentle but insistent call to action. Her commitment to learning from and centering BIPOC expertise provides an important example for regenerative agriculture communities

that have struggled to address equity and racial justice, particularly in the United States. Indeed, *Healing Grounds*’ scope remains within the U.S.; although Carlisle skillfully documents regenerative farming’s global roots, the primary interviewees and takeaways remain rooted in U.S. contexts. Even so, any reader interested in the now world-wide conversations around regenerative agriculture has something to learn from *Healing Grounds*, which once again reminds us that *healing* the land from extractive agriculture and climate change cannot and will not happen without racial justice. 

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