

COMMENTARY FROM THE U.S. AGROECOLOGY SUMMIT 2023

Itadakimasu, ikigai, and wabi-sabi: Poems and reflections on trust after the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023

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Submitted February 5, 2024 / Published online April 16, 2024 / Format updated June 4, 2024

Citation: Murakami, C. D. (2024). Itadakimasu, ikigai, and wabi-sabi: Poems and reflections on trust after the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023 [Commentary]. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 13(3), 49–53. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2024.133.003>


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*“How can I trust you?”
Agroecology how?
A murmuration*

Itadakimasu

The third panel of the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023 centered scholars, activists and advocates who, from a variety of institutional positions, have built trusting relationships with farmers and social movements. During the Q and A session, I asked the panel how, in that moment, we might be able to continue to build trust to support relationship-building in the movement for agroecology in North America. The panelists deferred to the audience, and Jonny Bearcub Stiffarm, surrounded by several of her Indigenous sisters, questioned, “How can I trust you?” This question reverberates

in my memory of this event. Her response explained how there was a key spirituality dimension that was missing from the program and how that served as a barrier to trust. She explained that she offered silent prayer on behalf of all of us in attendance in recognition of the gifts presented to us in meals, but also in hope that we can all receive each other’s ideas with an open heart. Many others in the audience murmured about their own silent prayers, simultaneously acknowledging the poignancy in the remark, but also how many others hold this silent or silenced spiritual dimension. After sharing with a new colleague, Antonio Roman-Alcala, that I was half Japanese, we speculated about sharing the concept of *Itadakimasu* with the group. *Itadakimasu* is a Japanese way to say grace before a meal—a way to give thanks for the food and in acknowledgment of the work of farmers and cooks and all else in the universe that went into preparing a meal. The following morning, there was some intentional space opened up for the group to gather outside. There were several songs,

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stories, and poems that were shared by Debra Echo-Hawk and others. Inspired by this, I jotted down some haikus in my notebook (which I have, of course, now lost), but I hope to share a bit in this reflection about what ongoing trust-building may look like for agroecology on Turtle Island (North America).

I am deeply grateful for the conference organizers and the number of risks and hours of unrecognized labor that it took to convene a group of about a hundred researchers and practitioners of agroecology. Leading up to the conference, it was difficult for me to comprehend what it would feel like to be in a room with so many “heroes,” mentors, and sources of inspiration. I am further grateful to have gotten to know several farmers, organizers, movement builders, and early-career scholars who help me better understand the contours of agroecology at the current moment. I had spent so much time in graduate school trying to piece together the history of the science, practice, and social movements embedded in agroecology and then have had the pleasure of building a representation of what agroecology is through the courses I have taught for the past seven years in an interdisciplinary food studies program. Many scientific disciplines and academic arenas are actively hostile or harmful to those who hold marginalized identities. While it is perhaps naïve, I believe (hope) that agroecology can be a refuge for those who hold these traumas, pain, and fear toward science, academics, and research. For me, agroecology became a career pathway that unapologetically centers equity, justice, indigenous knowledge, and peasant farmer knowledge for its role in supporting more sustainable food systems. For this, I am incredibly thankful for those who came before me in working to understand more about how agroecology can be used to support personal and community-based self-determination through the responsible stewardship of natural resources. From experience working and participating in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary teams and also convening groups of people who hold a range of different lived experiences based on race, class, gender, and diverse ability, I know this work can be exceedingly difficult and that it also only truly happens when trust is formed. adrienne maree brown (2017), in her

book *Emergent Strategy*, explains that the social change she has witnessed and wants to emulate happens at “the speed of trust.” She shared the example of the flight patterns of starlings and their murmuration. This network of trust creates a de-centered movement that starts with individual starlings learning to respond to the nearest movements of seven neighbors and creates awe-inspiring undulations. Building trust can sometimes start with some level of shared grieving and reflection on what Paulo Freire (2017) might call the nature of our collective oppression in the current dominant food system. Following suit for many others in the agroecology movement who have called out systemic oppression and structured violence, I am particularly struck by the contributions of Leah Penniman and her book *Farming While Black* and the food sovereignty work of Soul Fire Farm. In amplifying this important work of getting to the roots of sovereignty and regeneration, Liz Carlisle’s (2022) book *Healing Grounds* centers on the stories of Indigenous, Black, Latinx, LGBTQ+ farmers/researchers/climate activists.

Many of those in attendance at the Agroecology Summit were the very people who have dedicated their lives to understanding the nature of this layered and intersectional oppression in our food system. Through decades of scholarship, many in attendance shed light on and tell the stories of practitioners of agroecology who present a pathway forward in a context of global climate catastrophe. The different amalgamation of social identities held by summit attendees means that the weight of this interconnected, intergenerational trauma may be felt differently, and building trust in this environment is going to look different and will take time. Resmaa Menakem (2017), in his book, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, explains some strategies for healing and surfacing this racialized trauma and how this pain is often stored and inflicted upon our bodies. Understanding trauma responses such as defensiveness, guilt, rage, and annihilation, along with strategies for metabolizing this individual and collective pain, are critical to future trust building for agroecology in the U.S. and to help stakeholders continue to show up in these spaces.

To me, there were signs and signals that wherever we are going with agroecology in the U.S. and

North America, there is the hope to bring others outside the academy along, not as a symbolic gesture, but because agroecology does not work without those on the front lines of food sovereignty and food justice moments. Similarly, agroecology does not work to its full potential without a spiritual dimension in gratitude and recognition of the diverse ways of knowing and being in relationship with food systems and Earth. Building trusting relationships may mean venturing into spirituality and forms of knowledge representation that may hold the underlying wisdom and resources that make persistence, resilience, and resistance possible in light of the present local and global conditions. In thinking of a more inclusive form of agroecology, it seems of utmost importance that people be able to bring their full selves to relationships between researchers and social movements.

Ikigai

Ikigai is a Japanese word that refers to a life purpose, or meaning, and the notion that joy can come through the pursuit of this purpose. For me, a biracial, sometimes white-passing, *Yonsei* (fourth-generation Japanese American) man, I find the greatest joy in facilitating dialogue and learning experiences that help people build bridges across differences in pursuit of more sustainable food systems. When I attended the Agroecology Summit this past summer of 2023, it was through this lens that I participated and have since reflected on my role, position, and *gifts* that I may bring. My work as an agroecologist is perhaps a nontraditional one in that I tend to focus on the social dimensions of learning environments and lived experiences of those pursuing careers in sustainable food systems in the U.S. With a biracial identity, I have found that I have developed important entry points for empathy as I simultaneously have a family history of state-sanctioned internment of my grandmother and family during WWII (via Executive Order 9066: Resulting in Japanese American Incarceration, 1942), but also other ancestors who may have benefited from the theft of land of Indigenous peoples under the guise of the Homestead Act and narratives of manifest destiny. My Japanese ancestors lost their landscaping business in the Bay Area during internment in Topaz, Utah, and had to

rebuild without full citizenship due to the Chinese Exclusion Act. While I hold considerable unearned privilege, my family history and associated generational traumas make me want to continue to understand how to name, minimize, prevent, and repair harm. This is particularly true as it relates to inclusion in what I hope to be a broad-based movement for agroecological transformation in this country.

Currently, I am an assistant professor of agroecology and teach primarily in a graduate and undergraduate food studies program at a small, private, former women's college in western Pennsylvania. In this role and with the social identities I carry with me, I have had to learn the importance of facilitating true dialogue, wherein participants practice building mutual understanding and mutual affirmation. In cultivating spaces to scaffold dialogue for more sustainable food systems, this requires understanding ways to build trust. The preconditions for building trust may vary considerably across individuals with a variety of lived experiences, power, and privileges. In my personal work and across a network of agroecologists in the U.S., I hope to build deeper relationships that allow resources and investments to move in a direction that can help support the experts on the ground engaged in food sovereignty work.


Wabi-sabi

I understood that there was originally an overarching goal for the summit, to build “a roadmap” for agroecology research in the U.S., but there was considerable feedback that this term had an exploitative, colonial connotation. Without a “roadmap,” one might think that then things will be hard to control or coordinate, that there may be gaps that are not addressed or other missed opportunities. However, without trusting relationships established between the core stakeholders, it might be too early or too raw to develop this effort to make such a map that adequately encompasses priorities for all stakeholders. Further, such a map might flatten the holistic priorities and full range of motion that is needed to sustain and perpetuate movements, and instead hold them captive within hierarchical institutions and the associated trauma and trigger warranted distrust on the part of individuals on the ground in agroecological movements. This last

Japanese concept, *wabi sabi*, refers to a philosophy and associated art movement that acknowledges the beauty in the imperfections of life and nature. In building trusting relationships between researchers and social movements, mistakes will be made—potentially hurt feelings and missed opportunities. One necessary reorientation is to understand what can be learned from the missteps and how they can be surfaced and reflected upon in ways that offer deeper ways of understanding each other. In pursuit of building trust, future gatherings might more explicitly center trust and relationship-building ahead of any other programming or priority. In these spaces, trust will be further built as we continue to realize and reflect upon any imperfections or places where harm has been done, and also when we call in the collective power and potential in our connectedness.

This collective power starts with deeply knowing ourselves and our associated flaws and blind spots, which may take some time to uncover because of a natural tendency to fear vulnerability, especially in the academy. I shared my Japanese American heritage, but did not disclose, for example, that my family history also features adjacent white privilege, and that when I seek spirituality or richness in my culture, I am reminded about what has been lost to whiteness. Despite the Japanese subject headings, I cannot speak Japanese; I do not know the Shinto prayers my grandma would offer in the shrine in the back room of her Oakland, California, apartment. My prayers are not silent; they were silenced due to cultural assimilation during Japanese Internment and after WWII. In *Healing Grounds*, Liz Carlisle simultaneously centers the stories of Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and Asian contributions to the field of agroecology while also acknowledging and stitching together the trauma of the food system. After rereading her book, I realized many of the cast of climate activists and agroecologists she featured in the text were in the room with me. I realize there are others who are part of this same murmur of learning to deeply trust those around them because their lives and liveli-

hoods depend on this trust. I hope that I can emulate this in my personal sphere and that I can maintain ways to be in coordination and communication with others seeking strategies for food sovereignty on the land. As agroecology researchers look to build trust in the U.S. among social movements, movements for food justice and food sovereignty, it is important to seek strategies within individual spheres of influence in support of reparations for enslavement, giving stolen land back, and acknowledging that considerable work has already been done to understand the history and current needs of those most marginalized in the food system, but who also hold some the greatest promise for mitigating and adapting to climate change through agroecological practices rooted in indigenous farming and foodways.

Another striking reflection is the many intergenerational relationships in the room at the summit. Through this lens, I see how I am tied to the work on the margins at Midwestern land-grant universities that helped challenge corporate consolidation in U.S. agriculture and learn to form deeper relationships through regional food systems. While there may be understandable blind spots in my own awareness of the reality that while funding and academic clout may center around institutions such as my alma mater and other academic institutions, there is also historical land theft, institutionalized racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and all the other -isms and fears that serve as real barriers to building relationships with indigenous food sovereignty, food sovereignty, and food justice movements. From my position, perhaps it is my role to figure out how to have difficult but productive conversations to help others realize and acknowledge the historic and contemporary impact of these harms and explore more strategies for building trusting relationships and distributing assets in this murmur for agroecology. 

A gift, ikigai

A misstep, wabi-sabi

Itadakimasu

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