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COMMENTARY FROM THE U.S. AGROECOLOGY SUMMIT 2023

Growing change at the intersection of art and agroecology

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Agroecology in the U.S., as commonly institutionalized, remains firmly rooted in its techno-scientific approaches centered on quantitative biophysical data and natural science research methodologies that flatten the richness of its relationality, land-based practices, and social movements. The crucial role of art and popular forms of artistic expression are often undervalued within the walls of academia and higher-education institutions, while elsewhere, it embodies the steady pulse of anti-colonial resistance and the daily pursuit of life-affirming practices.

Art has the power to be deeply critical, emotional, transgressive, provocative, and revolutionary. Poetry, digital media, protest art, chants and songs, dance, photography, and a plethora of media tap into the essence of human and more-than-human relations in ways that are powerful and integral to the agroecology movement. Power is exercised through narrative and semiotic battles,

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where racial capitalism and white supremacy seek to perpetuate dehumanization and disinformation. Despite being labeled as controversial and being shadowbanned by social media companies who level baseless claims against anti-colonial activists, political art, such as Artists Against Apartheid,[1] persists as resistance against oppressive forces. In this current political moment, activists at COP28 raised watermelon symbols, standing in place of the banned Palestinian flag, with its vibrant black, white, red, and green colors and land-based (agri)cultural connotations. Renderings of olive tree are being preserved, even as the olive tree groves are replanted as agroecological strategies against settler colonial domination and erasure. Palestinian traditional *tatreez* cross-stitching persists as a dynamic craft filled with agroecological motifs of regional flora and fauna of the region, and has also gained new life as a visual reference for cultural survival.

Art grounds agroecology, and vice versa.

During the U.S. Agroecology Summit in May 2023, agroecologists from intergenerational and diverse backgrounds and lineages—practitioners, activists, researchers, and educators—gathered together in what became, for many, a frustratingly academic and institutional space. Reflecting on the constraints set by these spaces and modes of communication, we felt the palpable absence of artistic expression. Triggered by this void, we ask a set of vital questions about the role of art: How does art support, expand, and transform agroecology? How does it help articulate its ancient and future liberatory potential? How does art fundamentally change our research processes, teaching, and community-building? How does it transgress power structures? How can we support each other in art-based teaching, research, and community work that catalyzes liberation?

In this commentary, we call to recognize and value the crucial role of art in agroecology movements and to center the power of artistic expression in our teaching, community organizing, and research. We invite you to take a seat with us on that sunny day near Kansas City, on the back porch of the Elms Hotel, as we each share a short insight from our unique perspectives into how art shapes agroecology, engaging in a thoughtful exploration of the aforementioned questions.

Firstly, we offer a regrounding in forward-facing retrospect, to situate that back porch among the original peoples of the Osage, Kaw, Pawnee, and Ioway nations. What is now known as Kansas comprises the current home to four federally recognized Native nations: The Prairie Band Potawatomie,[2] the Kickapoo Tribe of Kansas,[3] the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska,[4] and Sac and Fox Nation of Missouri in Kansas and Nebraska,[5] as taught to us by summit co-attendee Brett Ramey. Secondly, we unpack the very words 'art' and 'agroecology,' to extricate them from disciplinary constraints and sector connotations. These vast intertwining realms precede—and proceed from—current colonialist contradictions, offering escape routes from despair toward (agri)cultural memory and repair.

[1] https://againstapartheid.art/toolkits
[2] https://www.pbpindiantribe.com/about/
[3] https://www.ktik-nsn.gov/history/
[4] https://iowatribeofkansasandnebraska.com/about-us/
[5] http://www.sacandfoxks.com/

Garrett Graddy-Lovelace: *Those who love and keep seeds know beauty contains and carries knowledge. The artistry of agrobiodiversity in action begets artistic orientation and commitment; how could it not? It delights the eyes and mouth. It nourishes the body and heart, of children on through to elders. Agrobiodiversity artisans craft their agrarian and culinary art to cultivate beauty, meaning, and flavors for shared pleasure, and thereafter cherished (agri) cultural memory. Of course, it's creative. Colors in their multiplicity—in maize, beans, okra pods, cabbages, apples, melons—convey and confer life at its fullest. Varieties of variety, to be admired and respected, discerned and selected, and saved for the next planting. Those with agrarian skill inherit, cultivate, and adapt agrarian artistry; how could they not? Those who don't know this don't know agricultural biodiversity.*

Rendering agrobiodiversity merely science erases its artistry, paving the way for (agri)cultural appropriation. Not only is this a colonial move, it helps explain coloniality: reductive science hierarchized above objectified aesthetic. As if scientific experimentation does not involve affinities and intuition, ethics and valuations. Rendering agrobiodiversity into plant genetic resources for food and agriculture further erases the Indigenous and African Diaspora, mostly women who stewarded these all along, whose labor, agrarian skill, and artistry have co-developed these agrobiodiverse matrices and modes for millennia. To all of our benefit. Call it art. Not to demean it as nonscientific, but to honor it as a monumental intellectual creative and aesthetic co-endeavor.

Karen Crespo Triveño: *Curating arts-based agroecology requires a reflexive methodological approach that entangles the co-struggle toward transformative futures, marrying the interpersonal with agroecological inquiries, theoretical underpinnings, practice, and movement work. In pursuing a collective agroecological and food sovereignty future, autoethnography, a feminist methodology that has interpretive meanings and practices (Denzin, 2014), can center one's consciousness of a specific phenomenon through retelling events by documenting observations, narratives, and recalled memories with analytic reflexivity. McIvor (2010) illuminates that the self and collective can be centralized through the praxis of art, such as photography, videography, mural curation, storytelling, and recalling oral traditions. Autoethnographers like Levkoe et al. (2023) have practiced collective autoethnography (Chang et al., 2016; Levkoe et al., 2019) through participatory film to enhance relationality, critical reflection, and dialogue for Indigenous food sovereignty, addressing power dynamics, interconnected identities, and differing positionalities. Some have also called for a decolonial autoethnography (Datta & Chapola, 2023; McIvor, 2010), which interrogates what it means to know, emerging from an Indigenous research paradigm that centers on ceremony, spirit, prayer, and the wisdom of elders.*

As a reconnecting Quechua warmi (woman) with lineages from Qullasuyu living in Andean diaspora, I ground scholarly and creative practice with autoethnography as a pathway toward reconnection to foodways, seeds, agricultural biodiversity, and Land.[6] *In pursuit of repairing cultural and epistemological ruptures that have fragmented ways of knowing and being within my lineage, I draw on autoethnography and the instruments of photography, videography, and recipe development as reclamation, returning, and I practice relationality (minka) and reciprocity (ayni) with human and more-than-human beings. While reflecting on recipes and videos, I write autoethnographic reflections to recall memories, telling stories of diasporic experiences. The images in Figures 1–3 are stills from my recipe videos as I continue to learn and prepare ancestral foods to reconnect my body with the spirit of my ancestors.*

Figure 1. *Tojori* is a hot beverage made from ground-up *maíz willkaparu*.

Figure 2. *Maíz willkaparu* is an Indigenous maize (*sara*) variety of gray color from the Andean *altiplano*.

Figure 3. *Api Morado* is a hot beverage made from purple maize, cloves, cinnamon, and citrus.

[6] I capitalize "Land" to highlight that many First Nations Peoples understand Land as a living relative, or as an autonomous being (Mvskoke, 2022).

Ana Fochesatto: *Cultivating an agroecological future and fostering a healing tapestry of relations with each other, humans, and more-than-humans beckon us to sow seeds of imagination in fields of possibility and liberation. Our collective imaginaries of the future have been monopolized for far too long by scientific modeling and bureaucratic language depicting ecological doom that only offer weak narratives on mitigation and Band-Aid solutions. They stifle hope and true justice, reproducing cynicism and division.*

In my research on the future of agriculture, it is not uncommon for the people I interview to categorize their views as "very radical," only to articulate aspirations that echo the desires and paint similar visions of the future as those expressed by most other interviewees. Breaking through the constraints of self-censorship and disconnection within communities is a crucial part of our work as agroecologists. Hope and imagination are fundamental to crafting collective visions that propel our work of transformation every day. Art is essential to this process because it communicates the future where institutionalized forms of expression fail. My colleague, Erin Lowe, and I interviewed nearly 130 people across the Midwest about the future of agriculture (Lowe & Fochesatto, 2023). We turned the many stories of the future we collected to the artistic hand of our colleague Liz Anna Kozik in the four evocative drawings (Figure 4). The drawings bring to life four core themes that rang through the people's manifestations of a just transition in agriculture.

Our transdisciplinary and artistic collaboration with Liz faced hurdles in funding, which were remedied by my advisor, Adena Rissman's, support and discretionary funding. In academic institutions that continue to embody and reproduce Western positivism, many would characterize this part of our research as "less rigorous" or "nice to have, but not necessary." Yet these drawings move people in ways that our peer-reviewed publications do not.

Art is a strong actor in lifting up the stories of our communities—reflecting and fertilizing the robust hope, resistance, and interconnections that tie together our vibrant visions for a just food and farm system. It follows, then, that to further agroecology, we must center art in our methods, pedagogies, budgets, and priorities, allowing artistic expressions to reshape and nourish our perspectives of what is possible. ●

Figure 4. What Could a Just Food System Look Like? How Do We Get There?
These illustrations are a collaboration with scholar and artist Liz Anna Kozik (https://liz.kozik.net) that reflect themes from interviews with 128 Midwest community members conducted by Ana Fochesatto and Erin Lowe on creating a just transition in animal agriculture.
See https://grasslandag.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/391/2023/02/Just-Transitions-Report_final.pdf#page=15

Ryan Tenney: *Cultural Producers and artists engaged in the practice of social transformation keep seeds in their arsenal. Our methodologies include (dis)integrating via the sample/break/remix of ecocidal imaginaries of modernity by utilizing ART (Advanced Rhythmic Technologies, and Agrarian Rhizomatic Temporalities) that remain connected to a maternal ecological source of rebirth. Amilcar Cabral, the revolutionary agronomist, pinpointed the importance of culture to liberation struggles. Just as happens with the flowering of a plant, in culture there lies the capacity (or the responsibility) for forming and fertilizing the seedling, which will assure the continuity of history and assure the prospects for evolution and progress. (See excerpts from the Sankara Farm zines in Figure 5.)*

Seeds offer access to genetic algorithms of planetary inhabitation. Ancestral memory contained in seeds is an (epi)genetic archive that can be activated, edited, or experienced. The traditional practice of placing a seed in one's mouth in a ritual of planting is the present moment of activation, generations in the making, collapsing or containing ascending and descending temporalities of ecological knowledge.

> *When I started our seed collection several years ago, I soon realized the potential of these living beings. Both seeds and rootstock are technologies of time travel that embody the historical legacy and the future potential. Perhaps they serve as a concrete example of a future remnant as they carry the potential of both past and future. In the case of the rootstock, as a clone. And in the case of a seed, as a child. In the same way that the prairie plants and so many other histories and cultures and peoples lie waiting around us here.*
>
> *—From "Remnant Agro-ecology: Notes from the Fertile Crescent" by Omar Tesdell (@omarecolo), from this year's Prairie Festival 2022. Tesdell is an associate professor in the Department of Geography at Birzeit University in Palestine and is the director of the Makaneyyat research group.*

The embodied knowledge contained in seeds is shaped by the actions of land stewards through the epistemological braid that Robin Wall Kimmerer (2015) speaks of, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), scientific inquiry, and plant knowledge. Our growth in this manner is not uninhibited. The historical legacy and future potential of Palestinian native plants have been subjected to the temporality and the brutal imagination of the settler. Settler temporalities actively erase, co-opt, and/or outright ban the practices and epistemologies of survival. The settler viewpoint renders the braid of knowledge (TEK and plant knowledge) as an obscure exterior waiting to be conquered. The settler must turn his gaze to the culture of the occupied and even destroy the memory in the seeds. The plantation is the production model of the settler, building forts on other people's land and then claiming self-defense; he introduces the cultivation of the strange fruit tree that Billie Holiday sang about as a perennial crop of colonial violence, ensuring the extraction of labor.

Figure 5. Sankara Farm Zines by Ryan Tenney
Seven Seeds of Sankofa Zine (https://issuu.com/agroart22/docs/sevenseedszine)
Sankara Farm Agroecology Zine (https://issuu.com/sankarafarm/docs/agroecologyzine)

Jesús Nazario: *The inclusion of art within agroecology necessitates an adoption of critical praxis. In the realm of photography, scholars and artists have to engage with imperial pasts and ongoing colonial violence as part of their photo-making process. I specifically would disinvite further adventures-with-indigeneity and the fetishization of racialized subjects, whose photograph(s) might lose important context and meaning in the digital world. Such aforementioned practices are still common in many academic disciplines and art spaces.*

Therefore, to use photographs as an artistic medium in academic and public works requires careful and critical consideration as to where the image(s) can land and live. This is one of the reasons why I selectively publish my digital photographs taken throughout my academic research. As an Indigenous self-taught photographer, I intend to disseminate future photographs of Nahua maize farmers with captions that include Nahuatl, in research presentations, and to the farmers themselves. My decision is an academic and artistic choice fueled by an ethic of reciprocity, a recognition that extractive research never materially benefits photographed subjects, and a commitment to honoring place-based contexts as a form of Nahua relationality.

After all, photographic images are more than just visual markers or evidence. They are powerful ways to represent cultures. When seeking to show what arts-based agroecology is, critically using photography can be a litmus test that shows how scholars and artists are actively centering their subjects in ways that are liberating and accountable. Images produced by scholars and artists will always sit within visual economies that dictate the dissemination and interpretation of images. This opportunity is not one we should take lightly. ●

Figure 6. Cintli mopixca. The Land of Fresh Water, Mexico. 2018.
Cintli is the Nahuatl word for Indigenous maize varieties, specifically referring to dry kernels. *Cintli* is different than corn, in that the former is an Indigenous word for maize and the latter is a settler colonial term for the grain; when European colonists arrived to what is now known as the United States, they conflated Native American maize as "Indian corn" (Dean, 2013; Enfield, 1886; Weatherwax, 1918). Today, corn is a stand-in for all maize in the United States. But in *The Land of Fresh Water*, a small town in rural Guerrero, Mexico, where Nahuas view *Cintli* as a gift of life by their ancestors and the Creator, *Cintli* is cultivated (*mopixca*). This is one reason why Nahua farmers from *The Land of Fresh Water* have remained food sovereign through *Cintli* farming for hundreds of years. It is because *Cintli mopixca*.

Mariel Gardner: *The West End Women's Collaborative (WEWC)*[7] *stands as a force dedicated to a singular mission: creating and sustaining artistic, peaceful spaces in the West End in Louisville, Kentucky. Rooted in the healing power of art and nature, we have embodied our mission through unwavering dedication to the corner of 40th and Hale Avenue. Our inaugural Peace Labyrinth installation transformed a vacant lot into a meditative walking path lined with 450 pavers painted by community members with inspirational messages nestled within a pollinator garden. A year later we converted the abandoned home next door into community gathering space shared with folks from across the city free of charge. ELAhouse (Energy, Light, Art) also serves as a gallery highlighting the work of women artists. WEWC envisions our spaces as sanctuaries where neighbors can find solace through the support of a loving community. The inherent sense of belonging that has always existed in Black communities is a catalyst for change addressing deeper societal issues like Black land loss and alienation. Art serves as the tangible expression of one's inner thoughts, yet expressing these thoughts can feel daunting amid the pressures imposed by capitalism and white supremacy (Gardner, 2023). WEWC believes everyone is an artist and each space we curate makes folks feel genuinely welcomed and at ease so that they find the courage to share experiences more openly.*

A reluctance to be vulnerable and share deep personal experiences is hindering the agroecology movement in the United States, as witnessed in my experiences at the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023 in Kansas City.

Art breaks those barriers. This movement will not progress forward without it.

As a 2022-2023 National Young Farmers Coalition Land Advocacy Fellow and a 2023 Filson Community History Fellow (Filson Historical Society, 2023), Gardner believes "wellness lies at the juncture of art and nature and the spaces we curate foster their healing properties" (Filson Historical Society, 2023).

[7] https://www.wlwc4art.com/peace-labyrinth

In gathering many agroecologists, the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023 also brought together many community-based artists—with great potential to center the intersection of arts, agrarian artistry, and agroecology. This fertile nexus merits more attention. We close our intervention by featuring two esteemed agroecological artists, whose visual creativity centers land-based life, agrarian resurgence, and (agri)cultural survival against ecocidal agro-corporate dominance and settler colonial oppression.

For years, the original paintings of renowned Filipino artist and musician Frederico Domínguez, also known as BoyD, have graced, grounded, and enhanced the leading international *Journal of Peasant Studies*. BoyD's intricate, mural-like paintings communicate the beloved landscape of his homeland, under attack by land grabs, agrochemical sprays, monocultural encroachment, and state violence. Meanwhile, the paintings center the resistance and persistence of Indigenous Filipino peasants, agrarian life, and natural forces. BoyD's paintings give dimension, relevance, translational capacity, beauty, and visual common ground to critical agrarian scholarship and help transcend the textual limitations of English language hegemony. Alastair Iles interviewed BoyD, who reiterated the central importance of his identity as a Mandaya Indigenous person originating from Davao, located in eastern Mindanao, Philippines. In this dialogue, BoyD explains that he draws from folklore and stories from his Mandaya lineage. He takes inspiration from other Indigenous peoples to identify a concept to narrate imagery for his paintings. BoyD's folklore utilizes "a repertory of heavenly and environmental spirits, mortals and immortals, and narratives of struggles between malevolent and benevolent protagonists" (Iles, 2022, p. 1349). In this way, BoyD's paintings contain layers of agroecological meaning: "He not only conveys the experiences of rural life, dispossession, and ecocide to people living in urban centres, but makes the presence of peasant communities and Indigenous peoples impossible to ignore" (Iles, 2022, p. 1348). Additionally, BoyD's use of multilayered symbolism and imagery-based narration can be a pathway toward inclusion and accessibility for deaf communities or those who may hold alternative ways of knowing, being, viewing, reading, and understanding the world as a generative actualization of design justice.

Finally, we honor the seedkeeper and artist Vivan Sansour, who founded the Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library, and who deliberately left academic and scientized modes of agricultural biodiversity conservation to actually practice seedkeeping as (agri)cultural survival and to do so through art and art-making (Meneley, 2021). She uses "installations, images, sketches, film, soil, seeds, and plants to enliven old cultural tales in contemporary presentations and to advocate for seed conservation and the protection of agrobiodiversity as a cultural/political act" (Common Ground, 2023, para. 1). She has shown her multimedia, agroecological creations at biennales and major museum exhibits across the world. These can involve preparing, cooking, serving, savoring, and contextualizing a Palestinian meal, as an actualization of the artistic expression (entitled "Eating Our Histories") or engagements with seed, food, and land sovereignty as 'AUTONOMIA,' or planting terraces of Mloukheyeh, "one of Palestine's staple meals that represents comfort and warmth" (Dar Yusuf Nasri Jacir for Art and Research, 2018, para. 2) for an installation in the West Bank called "Home" and for her "Travelling Kitchen" project. She attributes her work "to the generosity of farmers across the globe" because they have "'inspired my imagination as an artist and my ability to love science as a practice of observation that can change the world'" (Sansour, n.d., para. 6).

Concluding Reflections and Next Steps

As we reflect on the role of art in agroecology, we find ourselves at a critical juncture where the profound essence of art conveys and embodies agroecology's relationality, reciprocity, land-based practices, and social movements in ways that are pivotal to anti-colonial resistance, feminist praxis, and social transformation. Recognizing this, we urge the growing call for active integration of art within agroecology, collectively valorizing its emancipatory potential to support social transformation (Cohen & Subramaniam, 2012; Heiss et

al., 2020). The absence of art in the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023 channeled provocation, prompting us to plant seeds of critical reflection on how artistic expressions and approaches can permeate teaching, community organizing, and research in agroecology, especially as agroecology becomes institutionalized in the U.S. In this commentary, we brought you into our intervention and continue to invite you into our open dialogue, urging you to join us in the following actions to grow this artistic agroecological community of practice:

- Acknowledge and valorize artists who have contributed to agroecology movements.
- Allocate funding and institutional support for transdisciplinary collaborations among farmers, researchers, artists, and community members, fostering hope and dialogue in ways that traditional academic publications do not.
- Advocate for a paradigm shift in research funding and approaches, challenging the perception that artistic components are ancillary. Art needs to be understood as essential to agroecological processes, research, and social movement work because of its transformative impact on hope, resistance, and community-building.
- Join and collaborate through the Agroecology Research-Action Collective (ARC) to continue to build a community of practice that supports art-based approaches and methodologies in research, teaching, and community organizing.
- Utilize feminist methodologies such as autoethnography to engage in an active documentation process such as journaling or writing *testimonios* (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012) of a particular phenomenon, such as navigating histories, power dynamics, memories, sensories, place, and encounters with humans and/or the more-than-human world.
- Connect interpersonal reflections with social theory and pursue life-affirming artistic mediums such as drawing, videography, graphic design, and photography.
- Support and learn from Indigenous artisans trained in traditional textiles, which are more than mere crafts, but invaluable texts of agroecological and cosmological significance for (agri)cultural survival and resurgence. 

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