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COMMENTARY FROM THE U.S. AGROECOLOGY SUMMIT 2023

Enantiomorphs no more: Indigenous agroecology and the future of food sovereignty: Reflections on the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023

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I was part of a plenary panel on "Bridge Builders" at the 2023 Colorado Food Summit in Denver in December 2023. Echoing a statement I first made at the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023, I explained how the first "bridge" we are building at The Acequia Institute (TAI) is between Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and so-called Western Science (WS). TAI does this work not to verify and legitimize IK by invoking the presumably more rigorous and mathematical methods and materials of WS. TAI enunciates and practices IK through autonomous place-based food sovereignty initiatives. In this work we have determined how best to integrate the methods and materials of *selected* domains of Western knowledge systems in forms useful for us and the locality. These issues were discussed at the U.S. Agroecology Summit, but in the end they were left largely unresolved. The entire Summit was, as Carmen Cortez and others have rightly observed, plagued by being "Devoid of this spirit of place and people…" (Agroecology Summit 'Outside Empire' Subgroup, 2024, p. 2). In my view, it was a gathering fractured by pre-existing and possibly inadvertent and unconscious acts of epistemic violence reminding me of the difference Michael Redclift (1987) observed between top-down environmental managerialism and bottom-up collaborative environmental management.

Continuing dialogue is important in seeking to implement strategies that address the power/knowledge inequities currently constraining the possibilities for a *BIPOC-led* future for agroecology in the U.S. and especially across institutional

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spheres that reside and thrive outside academia. This means reconceptualizing the problem as involving much more than an academic struggle worthy of support; it points at a shift in focus toward *agroecology as a community-based asset-building movement* serving the larger goals and objectives of environmental justice and food sovereignty. A "net that works" already exists across a broad range of civil society associations, many of them rhizomatic in their cycles of organization and mobilization. They can be hard to pinpoint, which is both a virtue and a political puzzle.

In building our version of the bridge, at TAI we are disrupting the trap of the position of the "Mirroring Other"—the enantiomorph—a positionality that tortures and disappoints so many of the marginalized and subaltern actants caught inside the legitimation games authored and controlled by someone else's institutions, the dominant neoliberal capitalist organizations that include academia and certainly most fields of agricultural studies in land-grant and other universities.

Smashing the hegemon's mirror, we eschew the politics of representation and instead embrace a politics of self-enunciation. Ours is an engagement with a strategy of "epistemic delinking" (Mignolo, 2007) focused on generating and transmitting local place-based knowledge outside and beyond the reductive frames of the dominant forms of scientific inquiry and discourse that reside in academia as a form of coloniality. This focuses our intellectual energy away from discursive game frames structured by dominant settler colonial fields of power/knowledge relations. It moves our focus to the here and now, in this place, and our natural, cultural, and economic assets. We eschew being asked to merely imitate and seek refuge in so-called Western methods and materials and instead seek to participate in the resurgence of place-based institutions of collective action, including those dedicated to the mentoring of the next generation of acequia agroecologists in our bioregion. The university, and university-based agroecologists, can play a positive role, but they are not, strictly speaking, needed for this kind of project whose aim is not purely discursive.

The Acequia Institute focuses on practicing established and evolving place-based epistemes including all the various fields of Indigenous Ethnoecological Knowledge such as agroecology, ethnobotany, ethnoedaphology, ethnohydrology, etc., each with their traditions of emic-based observation, experimentation, and verification. In our case, this requires a focus on careful study and advocacy on behalf of the contemporary resurgence of the social norms and customs of self-governance that have historically defined the acequia watershed commonwealth communities and our heritage institutions of collective action like mutual aid societies, cooperatives, and informal civic associations directly involved in watershed management through the water democracy of the community irrigation system of acequias. You cannot separate knowledge of agroecology from understanding the sociocultural subsystem within a shifting mosaic of evolving institutional norms, customs, and unavoidable political (which is to say economic) conflicts. Should we teach these methods and materials in the universities? If so, how and by whom? And: Is there any acceptable option for rapprochement other than coeval and well-compensated collaborative-participatory pedagogies led by BIPOC practitioners in which scholars and universities respect Indigenous intellectual properties, as is increasingly the case, for example, with archeology and Native American tribes in an unfolding struggle over sovereignty?

I did not see much progress at the U.S. Agroecology Summit on a comprehensive strategy to address the marginalization of agroecology in academic institutions. This, I believe, is largely a result of the deeper failure by those of us in attendance at the Summit to fully address the nuances involved in the continued marginalization of BIPOC activists, advocates, and practitioners within the circles and access to power and resources enjoyed from the privileged positionality of academic agroecologists.

This privileged positionality further raises a threat for opportunism and self-serving careerism in the "mainstreaming" of Indigenous agroecological knowledge domains, which by the way always have a "spiritual" and therefore ethical dimension. We have witnessed this in the co-optation of environmental justice scholarly research and programmatic funding within academia, which has required

special attention by the EPA and other funding agencies to prioritize so-called underserved populations and community organizations that seldom gain access to the level of resource support awarded to academics. We call for an explicit statement of ethical commitment to *coeval participatory knowledge co-production* by university- and college-based scholars of agroecology and related fields. Seed sovereignty is food sovereignty and knowledge sovereignty.

As practiced on the ground by BIPOC farmers and their community-based organizations, agroecology is primarily focused on work that moves toward the goals and objectives of food sovereignty, which is itself part of the broader roots and branches of the environmental justice movement. As a basic tenet, most BIPOC agroecologists view this as simultaneously an environmental and community health movement, a "dirt-to-gut-and-spirit" movement, as I like to phrase it. Food sovereignty serves the environmental justice goal of health equity.

The extent of positive and non-appropriative involvement by academic agroecologists, therefore, depends precisely on how they can democratically negotiate coeval collaborations with BIPOC farmers and their allied movement organizations, and this will further depend on their professional ethical commitments and the much more challenging process of exposure to "socialization" in the history, philosophy (values), and practices of the environmental justice and food sovereignty movements. This type of discussion got a jumpstart at the Summit but needs further concerted and sustained attention.

The greatest challenge to the future of agroecology as a community asset-building movement is not just the inequitable access to funding sources and capital but the epistemic quandaries born of an organizational academic culture that largely remains white and male. There must be a reckoning about what exactly diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies mean since these often serve as perfunctory window-dressing behind which a Euro-masculinist professional cadre remains relatively intact. Academic agroecologists must become community-based and only at the invitation of BIPOC communities. Indigenous agroecologists can assert a profound pedagogical presence within academia but only if our intellectual property rights and dignity are respected. We are knowledge-praxis experts rather than mere subjects of someone else's research.

The spiritual dimension of this matter requires the "scientists" among us, at a minimum, to suspend disbelief in the truth claims of the Other. A post-positivist and critical realist reinvention of agroecology must move academics past Westernized (reductively quantitative) scientific norms, and this must also confront the spiritless nature of the dominant scholarly and pedagogical canons and their social rituals (e.g., conferences, symposia, publications). Such a confrontation means we must understand how all knowledge is intersubjective (emergent) and situated (embodied and emplaced), and so we need to rethink the type of training agroecology students receive in institutions of higher education.

Indigenous agroecologists engage "research as ceremony" (Wilson, 2008). Many Indigenous customary practices give meaning to our farm work. We produce heirloom food crops and in doing so also produce meaning of and relation to the world. This requires mindful prayer, ceremonies, and even ritual practices that we use to name our relations and identify and celebrate the sources of agroecological knowledge embedded in a communal spirit of solidarity with ourselves and more-than-human beings. You can call this ethics if you prefer. Spirituality in this sense involves the principle of interconnection, which is familiar enough to all agroecologists. But in our post-Summit context, this also involves recognition of all subjectivities, including those that reside beyond the solely human or the specialized attributes of professional scientists.

In the end, despite land acknowledgments and prayers at the Summit, I believe many of us who are Indigenous left feeling these were an obligatory courtesy and a form of performative allyship. The Summit organization failed to embrace—from the initial planning stages to the actual gathering—a wholistic decolonizing and communal process that would have fostered the coeval sharing of Indigenous Knowledge in a manner that values the deeper spiritual and

political values shaping a movement linking agroecology to the specific goals of food sovereignty: A democratic agri-food system based on self-management through place-based institutions and the mobilization of resources for mutual aid. In other words, a solidarity economy is itself the expression of Indigenous spiritual values of interconnection and reciprocity.

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