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COMMENTARY FROM THE U.S. AGROECOLOGY SUMMIT 2023

Agroecology beyond the statist quo? Transforming U.S. imperial agricultural policy

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Agroecology—with its diverse, multifaceted, and liberatory principles, methods, and commitments—seems incommensurate with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), with *its* settler colonial origins, imperial histories, racist legacies, neoliberal hegemonies, and contemporary reproduction of the unjust and ecocidal agricultural status quo. And yet, is it possible to make use of what the behemoth department has to offer, in its attempts, albeit paltry, at reform and restitution? More pressingly, can we engage and demand more from the non-monolithic ministry—call for it to stave off further corporate capture of markets, land, germplasm, data, and water? Can we pressure the USDA to protect farmworkers from exploitation, animals from abuse, cooperatives from corporate co-optation, and small-scale farmers from farmgate price degradation? Is abandoning the USDA tantamount to ceding its resources to agro-industries intent on dispossessing Black, Indigenous, and other essential agricultures? Shouldn't we at least attempt to obstruct the USDA's obstructionist international stance, as it thwarts the right to food, climate justice, labor rights, and redistributive reforms globally?

In May 2023, the U.S. Agroecology Summit took place in Kansas City, Missouri, where the USDA, under the Trump administration and Purdue secretaryship a few years prior, had forcibly relocated both its research funding agency, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA),

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and its economists, the Economic Research Service (ERS). The relocation was announced just after NIFA had funded a batch of research projects on climate change (a taboo word at USDA under the Trump/Purdue rule), while ERS had published reports on the severity of food insecurity in the U.S. and how tax cuts enrich the largest landowners (Morris, 2021). Both agencies, in the retaliatory move, lost more than half of their staff. Although overall staff numbers rebounded following rehiring, racial diversity—already weak—has since plummeted. The federal Government Accountability Office (GAO) recorded that the proportion of Black staff decreased from 22% to 9% at ERS and from 47% to 19% at NIFA. The number of white staff doubled to over two-thirds at NIFA and rose to three-fourths at ERS in just three years (GAO, 2022). The racist intentions panned out, both proving the USDA's notoriety as "the last plantation," and also divulging an important counter-reality: employees on the inside of this massive bureaucracy struggle to serve (to at least some extent) diverse communities and suffer backlash for their breakthroughs.

The USDA warrants skepticism, particularly from critical anticolonial, anticapitalist, antiracist, and antipatriarchal perspectives. As many believe, inspired by the Audre Lorde (2015) phrase, the "master's tools" (in this case, the USDA and its programs and funding) are so steeped in harmful ideologies and structures that they seem highly unlikely to successfully dismantle the "master's house" (the capitalist-colonial agrifood system).

And yet many communities impacted by USDA's harms *do* continue to seek changes to policy, often as a defensive imperative required to avoid even worse and continued dispossession. Compromises compose the contradictory work of demanding changes from institutions built off of your community's back, including sometimes working with people whose politics are incompatible with your own. Many food and farm justice movements continue to feel that the need to engage outweighs the problems and harms entailed.

We see the twin tasks of social transformation as midwifing the new while hospicing the old: we must attend to building toward what Robin Kelley (2003) calls "freedom dreams"—a world without capitalism, white supremacism, colonialism, and their state apparatuses—all the while dismantling and defensively engaging these oppressive institutions. As authors, not self-appointed movement representatives, we see this commentary as merely our dreaming together of what could be—not comprehensive, not a prescription, but simply our contribution to a longstanding dialogue about "the limits of a politics of recognition" (Wright et al., 2020, p. 228), about if and how the last plantation could ever play a role in building agroecology.

Inspired by what we have learned from working with frontline grassroots agrarian justice organizations, we have committed our research, teaching, and organizing to pragmatic questions of "what is to be done" in and through agricultural policy, while maintaining a strong affinity and heart for what lives way beyond "policy."

The U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023 aimed to develop a research roadmap for agroecology, in part, to inform the USDA's ostensible shifts from authoritarian suppression of topics like climate change, hunger, and wealth disparity toward food and environmental justice. Immediately upon gathering, however, participants in the summit chafed at the premises of (white) academics speaking on behalf of agroecology and subsuming its decolonial potential into U.S. governmental or academic frameworks. A Day 2 breakout session, slotted for the "Empire" Conference Room, literally broke out—outside, into a big impromptu circle of thirty-plus folks sitting on the ground, under trees and sunshine, ready to ask deeper questions about agri-colonial legacies of power and knowledge: how do we support agroecological healing, "Outside Empire" (a play on words describing our escape from the conference room, and our desired escape from empire itself)? From this reckoning with the (Indigenous and Black) practitioner- and movement-based foundations of agroecology, came questions of accountability, expertise, and a declaration (see contribution in this issue).

Although agroecological movements in and beyond Turtle Island and Abya Yala necessarily transcend and even transgress nation-state scales of reference, we return to the question of how to engage ministries of agriculture at large, and the USDA in particular. Firstly, BIPOC agroecologist

elders, movement leaders, and coalitions should be the people to author and lead USDA transformations, and these transformations need to center Indigenous territorial sovereignty, from Anishinaabeg to Hopi lands, and across the neocolonies of Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, Mariana Islands, the Virgin Islands, and Inuit Alaskan region.

From there, a whole array of big changes would need to happen, as laid out by frontline grassroots networks like the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, Rural Coalition, National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), National Black Food & Justice Alliance, HEAL Food Alliance, Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, Latino Farmer Rancher International, National Young Farmers Coalition, and many more. Changes should include farmworker protections, Black farmer debt cancellation, redistribution of vast corporate landholdings, proactive regulation of toxic pesticides, moratoria on concentrated animal feeding operations, among so much more. Internationally, the USDA for decades has pressured agricultures around the world into dependence upon U.S. commodity crop surplus exports, even while it has criminalized other countries, via World Trade Organization lawsuits, from protecting their food systems from agri-biotechnologies and grain "dumping." As the Institute for Agriculture & Trade Policy has demonstrated (Wise, 2024), U.S. trade representatives' and USDA's pressure on Mexico to drop its ban on genetically modified corn amounts to coercion; their promotion of agri-biotechnologies, ag-data surveillance, and toxic pesticides—in the same breath as "community benefits"—laces this inequity with hypocrisy. The USDA's stated Science and Research Strategy 2023–2026 fails to recognize agroecological sciences and all their social, nutritional, agronomic, ecological, and cultural benefits and potential (USDA, 2023).

Participants sit in a circle outside (of the "Empire" conference room) to hold dialogue about moving Outside Empire altogether.

Photo by Antonio Roman-Alcalá, May 23, 2023.

Within the U.S., "land access" appears on food movement organizations' agendas, but the more radical "land *reform*" remains a less common demand (Roman-Alcalá, 2024). Indigenous "Land Back" movements and Black reparations efforts are gaining ground, but move uphill against massive obstacles. Truly transforming agrifood systems requires transforming the existing private-property basis for land allocation and management decisions. This means, yes, increased land access mechanisms for young and beginning farmers, but also deepened land back processes for Indigenous nations, and more substantive methods—outside of and against the neoliberal incentive-based policies that seem to dominate land access policy discussion—to liberate land from extractive and harmful industrial pro-

duction. The prospect of land expropriation must be raised. Eminent domain has a problematic history,[1] but it would be essential to any government effort serious about shifting established land use patterns away from degrading for-profit uses.

Another angle, largely missing from demands of the USDA, concerns corporate capture of farmgate prices. The issue of fair prices (coupled with coordinated supply management to prevent cycles of overproduction) serves as an overlooked linchpin for small-scale and cooperative agrarian livelihoods and land tenure, as the vast Indian Farmer Uprisings for Minimum Support Prices proved. The whole farm bill began exactly for this "parity" program. Although it was deployed for racist exclusions of Black tenant farmers, Black farmers were nevertheless able to make use of it to stave off racist price degradation and keep their land in the South (Pennick & Gray, 2006). In short, small or midsize farming in the 20th century U.S. existed only through such parity programs. After the erosion of these programs, farming ceased being a livelihood on its own terms: median farm income has been below zero since the 1996 farm bill and the establishment of the World Trade Organization in 1995; mass consolidation ensued; and now the fewer, richer farmers who remain garner their income off-farm, through subsidies and large land assets (Graddy-Lovelace et al., 2023). In 2019, Garrett worked with NFFC and other organizations on Disparity to Parity,[2] a community-based action-research project to pool knowledge on the powerful precedent of farmers as collective pricemakers and corporate buyers as price-takers. The project asked (how) could supply management, price floors, grain reserves, nonrecourse loans,[3] and cooperatives be updated for racial equity and for diversified production? Many Disparity to Parity collaborators used the term agroecology (Naylor, 2021), and we grappled with the tension of resisting the longstanding commodification of food while securing dignified livelihoods for young, diverse agroecologist farmers. When "parity" or fair prices did not get included in any of the marker bills for the 2024 Farm Bill, NFFC decided to pause the website project to focus energy on the changes possible in existing marker bills.[4]

There are always important battles each farm bill season, including determining the very research agendas and funding availability debated at the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023. Participants reflected on how funding agencies like USDA NIFA need to change what is considered "science," who conducts it, how it is funded, *who* gets funded, how data is used, managed, and "owned," and—perhaps most fundamentally—who is served by the research.

Advancing agroecology through policy means changing policies and institutions that actively thwart, appropriate, or even criminalize agroecological traditions, practices, movements, and exchanges. This entails a direct focus on the USDA, but also on a whole range of laws, agencies, departments, and governance paradigms across the U.S. government and beyond, to international organizations and policies—which must also be transformed to enable a global shift toward agroecology rooted in food sovereignty. This means, centrally, an end to governmental subsidization of fossil fuel and agribusiness capital and primary resource extraction, combustion, and destruction; it also would mean dismantling the behemoth transnational fossil fuel and agribusiness corporations themselves. Existing antitrust laws remain sorely inadequate to this governance task. Alongside this megaregulation must proceed a process of repayment of global ecological debt, from the imperial

[1] Like most government policies around land control!
[2] https://disparitytoparity.org
[3] Loans where the farm is not considered collateral.
[4] A related project, Pointing the Farm Bill toward Racial Justice, centered the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF) Advocacy Institute's two years of member listening sessions and culminated in a large summit, a farmer fly-in to Washington, D.C., and a congressional briefing in May 2023 and subsequent 2024 toolkit. The summit also catalyzed the Ujamaa Cooperative Farming Alliance's new Seed & Farm Bill Policy Working Group, which aims to transform the U.S. National Plant Germplasm System and intellectual property regime to support Indigenous and Black-led agricultural biodiversity regeneration and seed sovereignty. The summit also led to the *Pointing the farm bill toward racial justice toolkit 2024*, authored by FSC/LAF, summit participants, and American University's Antiracist Research & Policy Center (FSC/LAF & ARPC, 2024).

beneficiaries among global North elites and the international financial institutions themselves, to the sites of extraction, labor exploitation, and immiseration in the global South. Such repayment and reparation processes have long been called for by campesine or peasant and Indigenous communities in the Global South, whose struggles must continue to be learned from, amplified, and supported by food and farm justice movements in the Global North (see Ajl, 2021).

One step toward repair from over 500 years of colonial harm would be debt cancellation[5] for countries faced with burdensome loan repayments to U.S.-dominated international finance institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems [IPES-Food], 2023). Multiple forms of global reparations would support ecological and agroecological restoration in both the North and South by directing resources to support self-determination in frontline communities, agroecological transitions, and degrowth in the North, to counter dominating modernist models of "development."

Crucially, this would, in turn, disempower the military-industrial complex, enabling a much-needed defunding of the Pentagon and demilitarization of U.S. society. And, of course, addressing militarism also addresses food and farm injustices. This long-simmering interdependence of war and the agro-economy erupts clearly in the U.S.'s recently authorized US$14 billion in military aid to Israel (atop the US$3.8 billion in yearly arms aid) while that allied settler state metes out the collective punishment of Palestinians, monumental bombardment, chemical warfare, and genocidal deprivation of food, water, medicine, fuel, internet, or egress from the "open air prison" of Gaza. This onslaught erupts atop decades of "slow violence" (Amira, 2021) of Israeli settler destruction of Indigenous Palestinian agricultures (Abdelnour et al., 2012) and systemic dispossession of their sea, fisheries, water, lands, orchards, olive groves (Asi, 2020, Sasa 2023), and seeds (Sansour, 2022). Beyond "security" apartheid walls rimmed with barbed wire, surveillance, and AI weaponry, what food and health systems would be made possible were those billions of dollars invested otherwise?

Another related and critical aspect of the transformation of U.S. agricultural policy that goes beyond the farm bill (and its glaring omission of farm labor) is immigration. Dominant U.S. agriculture requires a cheap labor supply—and thus, lives and bodies are cheapened all along. An entire legal apparatus maintains this labor supply—rendered fungible through racism, class oppression, and state-sanctioned violence, and backed up by the coercive powers of imposed borders, bigger walls, homicidal Republican river barriers, and migrant detention centers. In short, agroecologists need to work on "undoing border imperialism" (Walia, 2013). Ending ICE deportations and dismantling the militarization of border "security" and widespread surveillance lay the groundwork for a truly agroecological future, where farming labor becomes respected and valued and the global working classes are not pitted against each other for paltry wages.

While some moves suggested here might seem unlikely and overly ambitious, others remain too minor; talk of "science" as a solution to such vast social and ecological problems feels inadequate. Yet, we need many tactics and avenues. Building movements must be prioritized over building careers, but sometimes the right person in the right position is key for concrete policy changes to take place. We advocate a kind and compassionate, yet structurally critical, approach to advancing a diversity of tactics and goals in, through, and beyond the USDA. And to that end, as called for repeatedly at the summit, we need diverse and grounded agroecologists—more practitioners than scholars of it—to focus energies on relationship building, intentional and spiritually rich processes of gathering and sharing, building of shared analysis, and learning to act collectively—and remain accountable—at various scales. Agroecology in practice upends the dichotomy of practitioner and scholar, yet a powerful insight from the summit was the limitation of conflating those of us who love, study, and write about agroecology (via academia) with those who actually wake up each morning to

[5] https://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/DebtFoodCrisis.pdf

do it as their life, livelihood, and community survival. Agroecology beyond the statist quo entails the epistemic honesty that the former learns from the latter.

In closing, we want to recognize that focusing on state policy risks centering the state as a means toward change, which is intellectually, socially, and politically quite limiting. Embedded in the sociological system of state policy lies a hegemonic culture laden with supremacism,[6] a value system sutured to profit-making, and multiple modes of domination justified by hegemonic conceptions of how power *should* operate. These hegemonic forces enroll willing participants in state reformism into often regressive roles, reinforcing white supremacism, coloniality, and other pernicious, ecocidal forces. Engaging the state requires extreme caution, community, coalitions, and vigilance, so as to stay grounded in the social forces outside it. This can advance policies that allow agroecology to extend and expand, flourish and nourish, well beyond the statist status quo.

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[6] In her leadership of the Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation framework (https://healourcommunities.org/), her workshops and 2022 book *Rx Racial Healing: A Guide to Reclaiming Our Humanity*, and in her keynote at the 2023 Pointing the Farm Bill toward Racial Justice Summit, Dr. Gail Christopher shows the power of language in racial healing. She counsels against using the term 'white supremacy,' which semantically re-entrenches racial hierarchy even though intending to expose it.

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