

COMMENTARY FROM THE U.S. AGROECOLOGY SUMMIT 2023: INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL SECTION

Toward care-full plural agroecologies: Lessons from the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023

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In May 2023, approximately 100 people gathered in Kansas City, Missouri, for a national convening on scaling agroecology in what is now known

as the United States. The gathering (referred to throughout this special section of JAFSCD as the Agroecology Summit or simply the Summit) was

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convened by people working at research institutions throughout the U.S. The organizing committee aimed to identify how research can support the growers, organizations, and communities enacting agroecology in the U.S. Initially funded by a US\$50,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the committee also hoped to create a “roadmap” for agroecological research in the U.S.

While a co-created research agenda for agroecology is arguably an important long-term goal, what unfolded at the Summit indicates that pursuing this goal was premature—putting the research cart before the agroecology horse, so to speak. Many summit participants from civil society and social movement spaces pushed against the idea of a roadmap. Some pushed against the idea of working collectively on a goal that was not collectively identified or co-designed; others, against the idea of engaging in collective work without first establishing trust, especially where deep reparative work between and among communities and institutions is still needed. Bringing together people who span diverse identities, positionalities, and ways of knowing is both an epistemologically and ethically complex endeavor. Given the diversity of historical, cultural, and practical orientations to agroecology, it is unsurprising that the Summit revealed tensions. Two editors on this special section (Roman-Alcalá and Horner) were on the summit organizing committee. Roman-Alcalá and Horner shared that it was not always comfortable for Summit organizers to receive some of the critiques voiced before the summit (as shared by Wills, Tovar-Aguilar, and Naylor in this issue), at the summit, and further articulated in this special section. However, the necessity of ongoing dialogue—of engaging in generative discussions across points of difference—was and is evident (Roman-Alcalá, 2022). Although the Summit did not ultimately yield a research agenda or roadmap, it was not an unfruitful event. Participants did not coalesce around a singular goal. Instead, they gave voice to the many goals, needs, and visions driving agroecology in the U.S. The commentaries in this special section highlight some of the research, policy, organizing, and reparative priorities that emerged during and after the Summit.

Reading the commentaries in this special section, one cannot miss the diversity of approaches to knowing, engaging with, and practicing agroecology. In this issue, Costello proposes that integrating multiple approaches to sustainable agriculture can propel life cycle assessments and material flow analyses toward equity, justice, and representation of diverse values. On the other hand, Perfecto and Vandermeer (in this issue) focus on the intersection of ecological complexity science and agroecology, naming six research priorities where work is needed to strengthen agroecology in the U.S. In other instances, diverse orientations to agroecology are evident in pieces that explore similar topics but do so from different vantage points. For example, both Peña and Horner, Caswell et al. address the difficulty of reconciling knowledges and lifeways inside and outside academic contexts. Peña, however, engages this topic through an Indigenous worldview, reflecting on the role of universities in supporting community-based agroecology, environmental justice, and food sovereignty to center pluriversal Indigenous knowledges via ceremony, spirituality, communal values, reciprocity, interconnectedness, and mutual aid.

Indeed, honoring and navigating diverse cosmologies and epistemologies, and the implications of this diversity, are central to several commentaries in this special section. Peña, Horner, Caswell et al., Blesh and Schipanski, and Murakami (all in this issue) all engage with the politics of knowledge, albeit in distinct ways. These pieces illuminate the necessity of putting diverse future visions into conversation with each other to support a collective movement toward epistemic justice and complementarity. Glimmers of epistemic complementarity can be seen in other commentaries, such as those by Crews and by Blesh and Schipanski (in this issue), who advocate for ideological and practical shifts within grain production and soil science, respectively. While they, and contributors like Jordan et al. and Maxwell and Duff (in this issue) focus on biophysical dimensions of agroecological science, they situate their work amidst wider social realities, which contributes to dismantling the false divide between the ‘natural’ and the ‘social.’

During the Summit, the diverse orientations to agroecology evidenced above seeded critical dialogue, debates, and reflections. Often, differences led to diverging conversations, despite many participants sharing a common mission to advance agroecology. Yet throughout the Summit, moments of convergence emerged from conversations underpinned by efforts toward transparency, relationality, reflexivity, and accountability. These moments offered hope that ideas, actions, and priorities could be brought together toward an agroecology research agenda in the U.S.

In much the same way that diversity strengthens agricultural systems, the richness and abundance of diverse ways of knowing and engaging with agroecology, while a source of tension, also has the potential to strengthen the agroecological movement in the U.S. The power of diverse approaches is centered in the work of Fochesatto et al. (in this issue), who remind readers that various art forms can move people in ways that peer-reviewed publications might not. Murakami (in this issue), for example, moves readers by sharing poetry from his Japanese heritage and foodways. Similarly, Indigenous summit attendee Jonny Bearcub Stiffarm powerfully questioned the level of trust and addressed the lack of spirit at the Summit. Her moving words are captured in “A declaration of commitments toward agroecology pluralities: A critical gaze on the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023” (by the Agroecology Summit ‘Outside Empire’ Subgroup, in this issue) and exemplify how status quo procedures in academia do not reflect agroecology’s diverse philosophical bases. In echoes of Jonny’s words, Graddy-Lovelace and Roman-Alcalá (in this issue) call out the ongoing harm inflicted by existing colonial-statist systems and their counter-agroecological nature. Yet these authors touch upon an important question for conversation: whether and how to use that colonial system’s ‘tools’ to prevent further destruction—reflecting on Audre Lorde’s (2018) famous contention that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Graddy-Lovelace and Roman-Alcalá bring us to an important signpost reflecting the U.S. Agroecology Summit 2023, arguing that social transformation is an ongoing living process rather than a binary before-and-after, or an “it is or it isn’t” scenario.

The Summit highlighted the inherent difficulty of building diverse coalitions to scale agroecology across different contexts. Working toward shared goals is complex; it entails critically and iteratively identifying, accepting, and supporting many pathways toward those goals. Only by embracing plural pathways can we honor the diverse histories, needs, capacities, and struggles that people bring to the work of scaling agroecology. As Mariel Gardner reflects in Fochesatto et al. (in this issue), “A reluctance to be vulnerable and share deep personal experiences is hindering the agroecology movement in the United States, as witnessed in my experiences in Kansas City.” Along similar lines, Horner et al. (in this issue) emphasize that reflexive, transparent, and accountable dialogue is foundational for healing, building trust, and co-constructing more just and resilient futures. This special section is intended to be an avenue for highlighting the complexities of scaling agroecology and celebrating the diversity of orientations to agroecology.

Agroecology celebrates polycultural diversity, but the path toward a *diálogo de saberes* (or a dialogue of diverse knowledges) is not always evident. Both within and outside the academy, there is often uncertainty around how to integrate polycultural approaches to addressing agroecology’s wicked problems. Dismissiveness and demonization can be lobbed both ways, from academia towards “community,” and from various communities towards academia. In either case, painting with broad brushstrokes can preclude dialogue grounded in individuals reciprocally recognizing each other’s full humanity. What processes and practices are needed to hold space for the multiple, embodied, and collaborative ways of knowing and enacting agroecology in the U.S.? To advance plural agroecology, we need practices that honor the coexistence of epistemologies (ways of knowing), ontologies (ways of being), and realities based on multiple truths.

Making space to share diverse histories, practices, and visions for the future seems like a vital first step in convening and collaborating across difference. In both the Summit and this special section, we have witnessed people determinedly carving out this space—space to share and

(hopefully, eventually) to come together. There is likely to be tension in such spaces. This stems from the fact that there is deep love and hope woven into people's visions for the future, and yet there is also deep pain woven into the histories that inform those visions. In short, there is deep feeling, which we might also understand as deep caring.

The pains and hopes embedded in many agroecological processes indicate that the work of coming together to scale agroecology must be careful. Inspired by the work of Moriggi (2022) and their three caring dimensions (ethically informed practices, relational response-ability, and emotional awareness), we suggest that engaging care-fully within agroecology spaces entails offering critiques in good faith and with compassion and receiving critiques with curiosity and open-heartedness. Demands for humility and accountability, important as they are, must be accompanied by an equal willingness to reciprocate—to be humble and accountable in return.

While there are many points of convergence, people have different approaches, methodologies, and lenses through which they engage with agroecological visions. It is important to recognize that in this work, people are not only defending their ways of life but are also actively forging new connections (human and beyond human) and strategies to grow agroecology while seeking to leverage resources that they think will advance those strategies. For example, Lloyd, Treacle, and Hendrickson (in this issue) call for vigilance in policy-making processes to ensure that politics and power dynamics do not suppress local grassroots communities, while also advocating for agroecology to imbue new perspectives and energy into national policy discussions about consolidation and wealth disparities.

Love—for land, foodways, culture, ancestors, and community—can motivate defense. Defense can also be motivated by trauma—the trauma of land dispossession, separation, colonialism, genocide, racism, heteropatriarchy, and struggles to materially survive under competitive and alienating capitalism. In other words, it can be a response to experiences and systems of “othering.” And while this defense is necessary, especially in the face of oppression and asymmetries in power, it must be

accompanied by reparative processes to truly heal and transform relationships. Reparation involves acknowledging and addressing historical and ongoing harms and working to rebuild trust and create more just and equitable systems. Without these reparative processes, defense alone can hinder identifying where there is alignment and solidarity with one another despite differences. As influential Black feminist scholar-activist bell hooks (2000) noted, defense and counterattacks solely rooted in pain can sever bonds in relationships rather than maintain commitment and build bridges with one another. Severed bonds are unlikely to underpin the strengthened agroecological movements needed to bring about a truly transformed status quo for food and farming. Professor John A. Powell (2022) notes that the act of bridging is key to co-creating systems, movements, and institutions centered on belonging, the antithesis of othering.

Building bridges across differences requires creating spaces for open dialogue that help communities recognize each other's histories, approaches, and intentions. This special section offers a small but valuable platform for fostering this dialogue within North America's agroecological movement. What we see and hear, as summit participants and editors of this special section, are divides that desperately need to be bridged. One apparent division is between Western scientific research and the political focus of social movements. A wider lens, however, reveals ontological, epistemological, and axiological differences that manifest as divisions. In this introduction, we propose care-full collaboration and bridging as two practices that we believe hold promise for illuminating pathways towards coalition-building and collective action despite these differences. Perhaps these practices can even help harness the power of differences. The extent to which this is possible seems linked to collective capacities to listen and care deeply, and to critique with the goal of bridging. Citing Noddings (2013), Moriggi notes that, “caring is an iterative practice”; it also entails failure, which is a vital site of learning and growth.

Questions remain, however, regarding how we move forward in the face of such failures and their attendant harms, particularly when these failures re-enact painful pasts. How do those of us com-

mitted to agroecology avoid reproducing the othering we have experienced—as women and femmes, as queer people, as Indigenous people, as people of color? And what of experiences of epistemological violence, as Peña draws attention to? Undeniably, Western science and universities have incriminating pasts, many aspects of which extend into the present. But these spaces also house people who have much to offer in terms of capacity to support farms, farmers, farmworkers, and movements. How can we avoid throwing the proverbial baby—a fragile being deserving of love and care—out with the dirty bathwater of historical violence and injustice? How do we foster plural agroecologies that decry and address epistemic vio-

lence and injustice while also leveraging the value of various scientific approaches, such as participatory entomological research, among many others, to improve on-farm outcomes and livelihoods?

As editors, we invite further generative dialogue transcending the academy and moving us toward plural agroecological imaginaries. We hope the commentaries in this special section constitute seedlings of ideas that can be stewarded and nourished into an even stronger agroecological movement in the North. We believe that to dismantle industrial agriculture, this movement must encompass ongoing introspection and critique motivated by relationality, communal care, and collective power.



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