



Green Lands
Blue Waters

Voices From Our Network

The Civic Scientists

The next generation of continuous living cover (CLC) researchers reflect on the current moment in history and reimagine the future.

Katie Black

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When I began my first season of graduate school, my research changed almost immediately due to my cover crops dying. For the rest of the year, I thought that although things had gotten off on a bad foot, research could only get easier. Enter my second spring season of graduate school, which coincided with a global pandemic. I told myself summer would be better, because I could at least do my research outside and socially distanced. June, which brought a busy field season, also brought the largest civil rights protests in my lifetime. I've since stopped trying to predict what this fall and winter will hold.

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Ironically, graduate school is all about imagining what the future holds. The research project that sponsors my graduate education relies on self-driving robotics

technology, and exists because a team imagined what farming of the future would look like. I entered the field of sustainable agriculture because I, like many other young people, have imagined that we can work together to rethink and transform our food systems. Community members took to the streets in a pandemic to demand a reimagining of our public safety.

While I have focused a lot on reimagining the physical environment of agriculture, I have done less work on reimagining the social environment of agriculture. This season has revealed how I have neglected the work of making our food systems racially just. Like others, I have spent the past weeks learning about how I contribute to systemic racism. One of the most shocking things to me was learning about how Black Americans were excluded from the Homestead Acts, which is how many farmers today have accumulated their land. My own family received their land in Karlsruhe, ND, through this act. It is a source of generational wealth and provides my family privileges others have not received.

I'm proud of my family's farming history, but it's my duty to look forward and figure out how we can change the injustices created by people of the past, and those injustices that are perpetuated by people today. Agricultural scientists as a whole have been too quiet about how we can contribute to creating more just communities. In moving forward, I consider one of my responsibilities as a scientist to speak up about the intersection between race and agricultural opportunity. It is also my responsibility to actively create an environment that welcomes and supports farmers and scientists of color.

I have started asking myself how I can apply a racial justice lens to the projects I work on. Is this project advancing racial equity? Is it creating opportunity in an equitable way? Who is it solving problems for, and who do these problems affect? It is imperative that we in the food and agriculture community ask these questions in order to imagine and act on a racially just future.

I encourage everyone interested in transforming our food systems and communities to take a look at what Black farmers and activists around the country are doing. They have been providing me sparks of hope when I question the efficacy of my work as a grad student. The Land Loss Prevention Project, Soil Generation, Soul Fire Farm, and Urban Roots MN are just a few of

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the organizations growing new generations of BIPOC farmers. Learn from them and support them financially if you can. These activists are showing scientists like me the way forward. Their leadership makes me excited to imagine a future where all people, plants, and animals have the ability to prosper.



Katie Black **University of Minnesota**

Katie is a master's student in the Applied Plant Sciences Program at the University of Minnesota. She is co-advised by Drs. Gregg Johnson and Scotty Wells. Her thesis explores how to expand cover crop adoption in Minnesota's corn-soybean agroecosystems. When not working, you can find her in a kitchen trying out a new recipe or in nature exploring with some loved ones.