



**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.

**Regenerative ambitions of agroforestry  
must intersect with anti-racist work**

**Maria Hetman**  
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As an agroforestry student, I investigate the integration of trees and shrubs into crop and animal farming systems to create environmental, economic, and social benefits. I flew into the arms of agroforestry from the nearly uninterrupted flatlands of soy and corn monocultures encircling the City of Chicago where I grew up, searching for answers to how we could regenerate devastated land and communities in the Midwest and elsewhere. In recent months, as social justice movements have become increasingly visible in the US, I have been reflecting on my intentions in the space where I chose to land and identifying neglected parts in my thinking about regeneration – particularly when it comes to the intersection of agroforestry and anti-racism.

When one examines history honestly, it is difficult to disentangle the history of agroforestry from racism. For example, though the term “agroforestry” is relatively new, the intentional integration of woody perennials into agricultural systems was practiced by Native Americans and other Indigenous people around the world for thousands of years, well before white researchers gave it a name. Native Americans in the Midwest and elsewhere were active land stewards, regeneratively managing and transforming forest ecosystems for food, fiber, and fuel while supporting an abundance of biodiversity. The vast prairies and grasslands of the Midwest – once considered to be natural occurrences – are now thought to be the result of strategic interference in forested lands, as Native Americans created space for forage to flourish, thus sustaining the large game animals that were an important part of their diet. Native Americans also consciously managed crops, including selecting and cultivating preferred trees for mast and fruit for their

own gastronomic needs. This led to the predominance of certain tree species in the North American forest ecosystems we know today.

With colonization, Native American communities and the complex perennial land use systems they expertly managed and called home were destroyed. It was a genocide perpetuated by white Europeans, who used stolen lands to enrich themselves, exploiting them unsustainably. The intricate agricultural, ecological, cultural, and other knowledge the Native Americans had cultivated over countless generations was also violently eradicated to a large extent, in part through forced “reeducation” programs in white supremacist-run boarding schools.

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It was only after white scientists coined the term “agroforestry” in the 1970s that the earth-based concepts and practices Native Americans had once been vilified for and forced to abandon became legitimized by powerful, agenda-setting institutions. While agroforestry science, broadly speaking, does make attempts to value the knowledge and practice that Indigenous people cultivated and still do cultivate in many areas of the world, it is often still approached as a side note in many contexts, and falls egregiously short of justice.

I once observed the marginalization of this history and this knowledge in agroforestry circles with sorrowful resignation, believing there wasn't much I could do in my position about Indigenous/Native American issues. But as I reflect more wholeheartedly on my self-proclaimed commitments to social and ecological renewal, it is clear that this mindset is an abdication of the very sense of responsibility and transformational hopes that brought me to this field in the first place.

Violence against Native Americans is not just ancient history, and the current violence they are subjected to is not limited to the sphere of knowledge. Native Americans – pushed to the sidelines of US society – are still fighting today for recognition, protection of sacred places, for visibility, and for reparations. They are also fighting for access to clean water, quality land, and healthcare, among other fundamental rights. Data from a 2017 study showed that Native Americans were killed in police encounters at a higher population-adjusted rate than any other racial or ethnic group between 1995 and 2015 – a topic which has been nearly absent from the mainstream media. As for agroforestry, their voices and their demands for justice are only marginally heard in the largely white academic space, even if the woody perennial crops and land ethics they cultivated are sometimes referenced nostalgically, and while Native-Americans are simultaneously carving out their own spaces for cultivating and studying perennial agriculture. Field trials and farming continue on unceded land, but there is usually merely an apology or a symbolic acknowledgement of this at best.

While this painful history must never be forgotten, there are also powerful growing movements of Native Americans pushing back against these injustices, which include reclaiming rights to self-determination when it comes to land, food, community, health, knowledge, etc. Going forward, I will be paying closer attention to Native American movements as I grapple with how I can actively work for racial justice in the sphere of agroforestry, which includes doing my part to end the replication of white supremacist domination in education and land use. This grappling extends beyond Native Americans to other communities of color in the US and globally – including Black people – who are also victims of related systemic racist violence and whose contributions to agroforestry over millennia have also often been ignored or depreciated in white dominated spaces. If I came to agroforestry, as I believe many of my colleagues did, because I was motivated to do work that could help heal land and communities, then paying closer attention and acting as an ally is not optional for me. Nor is it optional for any of us who have benefitted from white privilege in science and practice, and who, through negligence and silence, may continue to perpetuate the ongoing cycle of violence ignited by colonization. At the bare minimum, this work starts with naming injustice when we see it, using our influence where we have it to elevate the knowledge, voices, and activity of Indigenous and other POC that have always been there, and recognizing and amending our own behaviors that may reinforce systemic oppression.



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*Maria Hetman has a deep interest in sustainable agriculture, especially regenerative agroforestry, agroecology, and food sovereignty, and is currently investigating these issues at the master's level at the University of Missouri-Columbia and the University of Hohenheim in Germany. She has built practical experience as a researcher and by working on farms in various countries. Previously, Maria had an international career with organizations focused on independent media and social justice, where she held leadership roles. She also holds a MA in Sociology and Social Anthropology. Maria was born and raised in Chicago and has lived in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, and Germany.*