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:::The following essay is a work-in-progress as of May 2013, submitted to several journals and anthologies for publication. But I wanted to release it in its current version, in hopes of feedback that might influence future versions. Please contact me with comments if you feel so inclined. Enjoy!:::
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*The Farmer and the Witch:
Reclaiming the Seeds of Indigeneity*
By Nala Walla

The world is populated with people who have lost their seeds. They are not bad or useless people, but they are not real until they refind their seeds... In some small, never-looked-at-place in the forgotten wilderness of their souls, their indigenous seeds of culture and lifeways live...

–Martin Prechtel¹

THE SEEDS OF INDIGENEITY

Just as every Red Delicious Apple contains seeds which will revert to a unique wild variety when planted so I hope to remind us that every person on this globe—even the most domesticated among us—contains the seeds of our indigenous origin. Our ability to respond creatively and decisively to rising sea levels, to civil wars, to nuclear meltdowns, is directly dependent upon our ability to recognize this inner Wildness and tap into its rich wisdom.

The patient seeds of our indigeneity are lying somewhere within our bodies, waiting for us to simply step outside our double-insulated, climate-controlled

¹ Prechtel, Martin (2012) *The Unlikely Peace At Cuchumaquic: The Parallel Lives of People As Plants: Keeping the Seeds Alive*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA.

² Thanks to Michael Pollan for this revealing observation in his seminal work, *The Botany of Desire* (2001) Random House.

routines, into the nourishing rain and soil so our seeds can sprout once again.

THE FARMER AND THE WITCH

As I write, the colorful Halloween holiday is approaching, with straw-stuffed scarecrows and spooky lil' ghosts parading across homes and storefronts all over the Northern Hemisphere. It's my favorite time of year.

Crooked-toothed icons of witches on their brooms are plastered everywhere, and I can't help but marvel at how, even after centuries of efforts to hunt and exterminate her, "The Witch" nevertheless continues to capture our imaginations. It's as if somehow, even through the thick synthetic cloak of modern culture, our subconscious selves dimly recognize the Witch—that earthy woman stirring her pot of herbs and flying through a magical nighttime sky—to be our ancestor. Despite pervasive miseducation, and rampant dilution of her cultural history, the Witch endures.

The means by which the long and rich history of Witch Culture was erased include all the typical mechanisms of exploitation that we are familiar with today: terrorism, colonialism, genocide, propaganda. In the middle ages in Europe, Church, State and Media combined forces to develop massive violent campaigns whose purpose was to sever the connection of the peasantry to the land.³ Only slightly different in scope and style today, these are still the favored techniques of belligerent governments and corporations around the globe who want to remove any resistance to exploitation.

Current cartoonish portrayals of witches—virtually devoid of any real meaning—are a testament to the "success" of these terror and slander campaigns, which have destroyed most of the detail about how ancestral European pagan cultures actually functioned, and the extensive knowledge they contained. In just a few hundred years, common representations of the Witch shifted from a revered, medicine woman embodying a living, European culinary, shamanic, and healing tradition, to a warty, cackling buffoon in a pointy hat who exists only in picture books.

A similar fate has befallen another figure who, in the public view, once possessed extensive knowledge about the land: The Farmer. The infantilized image of the witch is reminiscent of current North American depictions of

³ Federici, Silvia (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, Autonomedia, Brooklyn, New York.

farmers, ranchers, herders, etc. as clumsy “hicks” who are, at best, unsophisticated and out of touch with the slick urban “reality” of modern life, and at worst, stupid and irrelevant to the river of progress. As with Witch Culture, the details of rural culture have been glossed over in the creation of the current degrading stereotypes. I was ashamed to find on Wikipedia a whole list of pejorative slang used to refer to farmers and rural people—the very people who live in closest relationship to the land and are responsible for our sustenance:

- boor
- bumpkin
- churl
- hayseed
- hick
- hillbilly
- lob
- redneck
- rustic
- yokel

These slurs wound on several levels, translating to not only to a philosophical disrespect, but an actual biting of the hand that feeds us, as well. Even worse, they demonstrate the thoroughness with which we modern people have internalized our own oppression, colluding with the severing of our original connection with the land, slashing at the lineages of our own Indigeneity. Both the Farmer and the Witch—with their millenia-long roots, filled with knowledge of food, animals, herbs, handicrafts—are symbols of our indigenous ancestors. Yet, currently, any familiarity between the average modern, industrial citizen and the farmer has been cauterized, allowing for a dangerous stereotyping to spread.

GRANDMOTHER WITCH

After our harvest feast, we are headed to the ice cream shop in our little town. My son is giddy with excitement, and as I put my hand on the door, I can't help but notice the illuminated witch-in-silhouette, flying by night across the face of the waning moon. As I consider that he will likely pass through this door many times throughout his childhood, I wonder what he is learning about his own ancestors as he views this image?

For all its tiring over-generalizations, it can at least be said that this long-nosed, green-faced portrait is an accurate representation of how desperately little knowledge remains about my son's own indigenous heritage. And, it is an image eerily well-suited to the bland palate of modern industrial society in general, which is in such poor health that it can hardly stomach anything more than fluff, even as it starves for meaning and connection.

Sadly, it may come as a surprise to many readers that people of European ancestry were (and arguably still are) subjected to the same processes of pauperization, industrialization and commodification which are occurring right now in so-called "developing" countries. In fact, we are so accustomed to seeing "white" people in a privileged, oppressor role, we assume it must have always been this way. We forget to ask, how did Europeans get so disconnected from the land? Is it possible that people of European descent have indigenous roots?

Like indigenous peoples all over the globe, pre-conquest Europeans were Earth-centered, pagan peoples (a term derived from Latin *paganus*, meaning "not cultivated" or "wild") intimately connected to a living, breathing land which they revered as the source of all life. Similar to tribal people worldwide, ancient European tribes had no formal money systems, and had no need for them, as they inhabited a gift culture based on careful stewardship of the commons—that great interlocking web of physical, cultural, and spiritual relationships. Lo and behold! *Europeans* once displayed the same connective qualities and behaviors we attribute to *indigenous people*.

Please allow me to wager upon an act of kinship and solidarity with a larger family of pagan cultures: if the old European clans practice of "wicca" or "witchcraft" (a more modern term) was similar to that of tribes worldwide, then we can reclaim and revalorize the term "witch" as a loose description of any intact, nature-centered culture.

Surely, the witch-hunting authorities themselves did not limit the label "Witch" to European pagans. Snared in that same net—a net cast broadly enough to encompass almost any subversive activity, as "conveniently and strategically vague"⁴ as the word *terrorist* is today—were colonial subjects from Africa to the Americas, at whom were hurled the same accusations of flesh-eating, fornication with the devil, and infant-stealing, and who suffered the very same

⁴ Silvia Federici, Audio Lecture (2004) Fusion Arts, NYC
<http://silviafederici.littlerednotebook.com/>

torture rooms, pyres and gallows which so efficiently broke the communities of their European counterparts overseas. Previously just a description of European pagan culture, the brand "Witch" was appropriated and used as a four-letter-word to describe anyone viewed a threat to authoritarian control. Just a handful of generations ago, then, before mechanization, before colonization, before Christianization—we were *all* witches.

Amazingly, even after centuries of terrorism heaped upon The Witch on at least four continents—despite her constant demonization, degradation, minstrelization, and Disneyfication—her image continues to haunt the collective soul, even penetrating the bubbliest halls of pop culture. The sheer persistence of The Witch to this day is, to me, indicative of an archetype not easily forgotten. The Witch is everywhere, because she is our Grandmother.

THE COP IN THE HEAD

As my son and I slurp our creamy treats, and I overhear a woman describing an argument with her friend, exclaiming "Geez, what a *witch!*" I cringe at this stark revelation of internalized oppression, as she not only denigrates a fellow woman in this small community, but also slanders her honorary Grandmother. One of the main symptoms by which people in advanced stages of colonization can be recognized is that they have been recruited to participate in their own degradation and destruction, mostly unwittingly.

Using a marginalized person or group (such as "witches," "terrorists," or "jews," for example) as a scapegoat upon which to blame virtually anything is an all-too-common human response to stress. And it is one that elite classes have long encouraged, since it successfully diverts attention away from the real source of the stress: the concentration of wealth and power into the hands of the very few. And because scapegoating is but a mere temporary release-valve for tensions, it eventually backfires, as the original problem boomerangs back upon the thrower. Today the "isms" are being hurled on a massive scale in the form of rampant racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, anthropocentrism, etc., destroying relationships, families, communities and ecologies.

Indeed, the breaking of the power of communities to resist subjugation and appropriation of their resources is the original and primary goal of all the "isms." The campaign of terror against witches was designed with this exact intention in mind—to attack the women who were the foundations of pagan,

peasant communities, as well as the backbone of the resistance to the “Enclosures”—the medieval version of the Privatization of the Commons that continues to this day. As women presently form the core of leadership in the Occupy Movement, we them again forming a similar “backbone of resistance” pattern,⁵ and we might thus keep our eyes out for attempts to target them.

In her book *Caliban and the Witch*, scholar Silvia Federici reveals how persecutions of witches during the Middle Ages in Europe were overwhelmingly aimed at poor, working-class women. Old women in particular were targeted, since they were the most likely to embody the cultural knowledge and heritage of the ancient ways that preserved the health and independence of the peasantry—raising crops and animals, herbal remedies and healing, midwifery, community building, etc. This is why, even today, the stereotypical Witch is still represented as an old, wrinkled woman dressed in tattered clothes. And for the same reasons, why people who work with the land, such as farmers, herders and ranchers, are represented by degrading stereotypes that belittle their extensive knowledge.⁶

Because of their age-old abilities to independently feed, clothe and generally sustain themselves, European peasants (again, like indigenous peoples the world over) had no need for wage-labor. This self-sufficiency was extremely threatening to merchants and elites in the Middle Ages who wanted laborers for growing mills, mines, and factories. Thus Land Privatization served not only to separate peasants from the actual land which had been commonly held, land but also to create a dispossessed population who would have no other option than to take these jobs.⁷

Today, the mechanization of industrial agriculture ensures that a minimum of people know how to grow food or medicine, and the rest are completely dependent upon service and high-tech for their work and their sustenance. During any current election year, we can hear how thoroughly modern people have been disciplined to accept our roles as “workers:” Note how common it is for people to clamor for “More Jobs!” whereas in the early sixteenth

⁵ See article, “Where Are the Women at Occupy Wall Street? Everywhere—and They're Not Going Away” in *The Nation* (26 Oct 2011)

<http://www.thenation.com/article/164197/where-are-women-occupy-wall-street-everywhere-and-theyre-not-going-away>

⁶ Federici, Silvia (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, Autonomedia, New York.

⁷ Ibid.

century, a peasant would rather risk the gallows than submit to wage labor. The wristwatch—once a symbol of slavery and an artificially imposed time disconnected from the natural rhythms of the land—has today become a status symbol.⁸

The horror of separation from the land—the original source of sustenance—created the stressful conditions ripe for scapegoating. As mistrust was sown within pagan communities, peasants began accusing each other and cooperating with their own marginalization. This is the terrorized and disturbed ground in which the -isms took root, and continue to “flourish” today. In modern, industrialized peoples for whom a subsistent, nature-connected life is already long gone, these -isms have become perhaps the preferred method of social control: an internalized, instead of overt, oppressor with whom we cooperate in the effective policing of ourselves. Much tidier, and a lot cheaper than inquisitions and bombing, we become, as Brazilian activist Augusto Boal describes in his *Theater of the Oppressed*,⁹ our own “cop in the head.”

During the harvest season where I live in the Northwest USA, I see examples of this self-inflicted oppression everywhere, as people routinely consume and propagate over-simplified, ‘pin-up’ versions of witches and bucktoothed, smiling farmers holding baskets of corn. In an astonishing ignorance of our own pagan and agrarian past (and future!), we cooperate in the turning of witches and farmers both into cackling, guffawing minstrels.

And yet, we are beginning to understand that large-scale human estrangement from the land is threatening the extinction of our species and many others. Instead of taking boorish potshots at Farmers or Witches, perhaps it is wiser for those of us who have lost our connection to the land to actually seek out the people who have been safeguarding it against all odds, for centuries? Perhaps we might recuperate this wisdom—preserved within each of our indigenous lineages—and do our best to enact it, learning more about our food systems, our ancient healing remedies, about working with animals and the cycles of the moon?

In the shallow images of the Farmer and the Witch lie the remnants of our ancestral cultures and lifeways that deserve some much deeper attention. And

⁸ Federici, Silvia (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, Autonomedia, New York.

⁹ Boal, Augusto, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1993) Theater Communications Group.

as we approach them with an attitude of openness and curiosity, these lifeways may even reveal the solutions to some serious cultural and ecological problems. Could our heritages, in fact, contain the key to reversing climate change?

BRING BACK THE BUFFALO: FARMERS, ANIMALS, AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Perhaps this is the first time that you've seen the words, "Farmers, Animals and Climate Change" in one sentence, but I hope it won't be the last. What follows is just one example of how stunningly straightforward reversing climate change could well be.

The research of Allan Savory¹⁰ has not yet made it into breakfast-table conversation in modern, industrial society, as we gorge ourselves instead on pop culture and trivia, but he and his colleagues in the field of Range Management have discovered something of extreme importance for anyone interested in the climate change: a method for swiftly and drastically reducing atmospheric carbon levels that uses *no technologies other than livestock*.¹¹

Livestock? How could ranchers and cowpokes—those backwards, lazy, know-nothings—actually reverse climate change?

All Grasslands—prairies, savannahs, steppes, etc.—originally coevolved with dense herds of grazing animals whose natural ranging behaviors provided the mowing, mulching, fertilizing, soil aeration, seed dispersal, essential to the health of these ecosystems. For decades, in a misguided attempt to stop "overgrazing," land-management policies worldwide have been to remove herds—and the herding peoples whose life was intertwined with them—from these lands. And the result has been a drastic *acceleration* of desertification and therefore, of climate change.

Why does desertification have to do with climate change? As enormous amounts of carbon previously contained in the grasses and soils is released into the atmosphere, Savory emphasizes that desertification is as big or bigger of a contributor to global warming as burning fossil fuels. So, he and his colleagues have been assisting people on *40 million acres* in Africa, Australia, Europe and the USA to bring back the herds, recreating, out of barren desert,

¹⁰ <http://www.savoryinstitute.com>

¹¹ Malmberg, A. (2013) "Restoring the Climate Through Capture and Storage of Soil Carbon Through Holistic Planned Grazing" The Savory Institute, Boulder, CO.

both healthy grassland ecologies *and* right livelihood for pastoral peoples. Simply by returning the animals to desertified landscapes, and using Holistic Management techniques to ensure their natural movement patterns in the landscape, the Savory Institute estimates that we could store so much carbon in grassland soils, that we would again achieve *preindustrial levels of atmospheric carbon*.¹²

Amazingly, scientists are now revealing pastoral skills to be an integral part of reversing climate change, as carbon moves out of the atmosphere back into grassland soils. It seems that a restoration of respect for these skills is as important as restoration of the land itself! If we are serious about reversing climate change, herding animals will have to become, again, a respectable occupation. Imagine shepherding as the preferred profession for the hip and fashionable, the next “cool” thing to do!

As more and more people embrace the instinctual impulse towards respect of the land that is the source of all sustenance, reestablishing holistic and sustainable relationship to it, all kinds of resolutions to ecological impasses like the example above will arise. And we can start at anytime by recognizing the stereotypes we hold for what they are: examples of internalized oppression, a disrespecting of our own ancestors, the Witches and the Farmers. It is time for every citizen of this precious planet to identify as a creature indigenous to Earth, and begin to behave as such. Can we imagine a world where each one of us is able to participate in the simple pleasures of growing food, and where we actually encourage our children to cultivate “careers” in things like ranching, dairying and herbalism?

RECONNECTING WITH THE LAND: THE KEY TO ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

Since moving to a rural island over fifteen years ago, my own experience with farmers—especially small farmsteaders seeking to steward their lands organically and sustainably—has consistently contradicted the stereotypes I grew up with in suburbia. Far from naïve simpletons, most farmers and ranchers I know are astoundingly savvy and resourceful, in addition to being

¹² Savory, Allan, 2013. "How To Green the Worlds Deserts and Reverse Climate Change" TEDx Talk, Somerville, MA. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/allan_savory_how_to_green_the_world_s_deserts_and_reverse_climate_change.html

some of the most politically conscious people I have ever met. And, as fellow citizens of the Information Age, farmers are now required not only to become expert in all things having to do with raising plants and animals, but also are expected to maintain a website, intern programs, community outreach calendars, as well as possess enough shrewdness to navigate impossible health and food regulations, cutthroat subsidies and marketing climates. One local farmer in our valley got an MBA before starting his farm, and our local butcher is also working surgeon. So much for the stereotype of the dumb farmer!

And I have still more good news to report. Against all odds, the rural county I live in has recently seen an encouraging reversal of the demographic trend that has been in place since the beginning of land privatization and the industrial revolution. Swimming upstream against the torrents of refugees fleeing the countryside to seek the wage in cities, a steady flow of young people are returning to our neglected farms, fields and forests. Having seen through the thin gruel which our materialist society tries to pass for sustenance, they are rejecting the dominant cultural memes of our time that denigrate working with ones' hands. After observing a generation of parents growing hunched and pale in front of their computer screens, they are choosing to buck the technological tide by embracing traditional skills—starting small dairies, organic farms, natural building co-ops, wildcrafting herbal medicines, and relearning vital skills like tanning, smithing, orcharding, shepherding, masonry, and boat building.

Importantly, in revaluing these age-old skills, these young folk are growing real roots into their communities, and into the soil, gaining a visceral understanding how the fate of the trees, the animals, the plants, the waters are bound up with our own. In working with hands, wood, and soil, they are making it possible for the seeds of indigeneity that have been dormant within their bodies since their culture was uprooted (perhaps hundreds, or even thousands of years ago) to tumble out and sprout once again. And, as we instinctively know, people connected in a tangible way with the Earth are much more likely to act in reverence and stewardship of it. As Wendell Berry explains:

In [a] state of total consumerism - which is to say a state of helpless dependence on things and services and ideas and motives that we have forgotten how to provide ourselves - all meaningful contact between ourselves and the earth is broken. We do not understand the earth in terms either of what it offers us or of what it requires of us, and

...people inevitably destroy what they do not understand.¹³

Only when we risk rekindling a messy love-affair with our estranged beloved Earth will we gain the inspiration and the courage required to act resolutely when confronted with challenges such as melting sea ice, species extinction, massive pollution and “permanent” war. Thus, a human race moving robustly into a healthy, ongoing future, is destined to be a life which involves a reclaiming of our Indigenous Heritage—the basic right, and the basic pleasure of working with Earth. For more and more people, a healthy life will be determined by how much dirt we have under our fingernails.

THE WHEELBARROW ACTIVIST

Sometimes, on a windy October night like this one, I can actually catch a glimpse of the ghostly forebodings of my immigrant forefathers wafting around “Gotta get into a good school. You don’t wanna end up a ditch-digger, or grease-monkey, like your father!” “You’re smart enough to be a doctor or a lawyer!” In these voices, which are threaded deep into the fabric of my personality, I can hear the echoes of a long history of exile from the land. Even after over a decades of living knee-deep in the forest, I can still perceive the cop in *my* head trying to convince me that working with the land is despicable, suitable only for “peasants,” or, more accurately in Racist America these days, for “Mexicans.”

In response, I heft my wheelbarrow full of leaves and manure into our garden, and ready the beds for their winter slumber. I laugh with my toddler as he calls the pile “big poop!” and help him learn to use a shovel. I thank the cleansing winds as those voices catch an updraft and blow out to sea, and replace them with gratitude for the chance to work with Earth—a privilege for which our ancestors sacrificed their lives, and which people everywhere are still fighting for—from Indian farmers resisting the exploits of Monsanto, to Amish farmers battling for their right to drink fresh, raw milk from their own cows, to modern herbalists preserving their grandmother’s healing recipes despite increasing regulatory pressure from Big Pharma.

Like the green leaves that can always be found pushing their weedy heads through cracks in the sidewalk (no matter how many times they are torched, weedwhacked, herbicided, or pulled up by the roots!), the unceasing sprouting

¹³ Berry, Wendell, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*, (2003)
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of human creativity and wild ingenuity consistently thwarts every authoritarian attempt to pave it over. Instead, the twisting vines of Indigeneity will climb even the boot of the tyrant if he stands still for too long. For modern people to recognize and resist the severing of our connection to Earth is perhaps the pivotal task of our generation. It is for this reason that I stand in solidarity with Farmers and Witches all over the globe, and reclaim them as titles of distinction and pride. I am a Farmer, and I am a Witch.

A WORLD WORTH LEAVING FOR OUR CHILDREN

The preceding words are my attempt to piece back together what Martin Prechtel calls the “tribal shards of the original magic of human culture.”¹⁴ I write because I truly believe these shards can yet provide the blueprint for a sturdy cooking vessel, a pot we can use to simmer up a response to the rowdy ecological and social crises currently seated at our dining table. Only the healthiest, and most delectable cultural stew imaginable will be sufficient to please these demanding, if uninvited, guests. Each of us can recover the shards that we hold in our possession. Each of us can reach out to the Farmer and Witch exiled within, and welcome them home. When we do this, we will recover the magic we need to digest and transform catastrophes into a beautiful a world worth leaving for our children.

¹⁴ From Martin Prechtel, *The Unlikely Peace at Cuchumaquic: The Parallel Lives of People As Plants* (2012) North Atlantic Books.