

What if the Earth is NOT Our Mother?

The following conversation begins with a provocation from Keith Hennessy and is followed by responses from Kirk Read, Rachel Kaplan, Jack Davis, and Ravyn Stanfield.

The goal of this polyvocal text is not to resolve an issue or come to consensus but to create some queer friction or turbulence that might yield fresh intelligence and ritual experimentation.

A PROVOCATION

by **Keith Hennessy**

I want to trouble the relationship between gender and deity.

I was raised Catholic, taught to call my dad, all priests, and God, "Father." Feminists and other critics of monotheistic and patriarchal religions have challenged this triple conflation.

Through these critiques I learned to recognize the structural network of home, society, and universe as a series of male-dominated "families." The one God becomes the ultimate head of global household. He might be a loving father or a stern father, but he's

our daddy. We accept as normal a vast network of psychological and political dynamics held in patriarchal place by the language, metaphor, and icon of Father.

In the Bay Area during the mid-

to late-1980s, I was part of a vibrant culture created by anarchists, feminists, direct action activists, collective houses, worker-owned businesses, politically engaged artists, and hybrids thereof. Among the many influences and participants in this network were

people who identified as feminist Witches, or simply Pagans. Many of these activist Witches gathered within and around the collective called Reclaiming. We *reclaimed* deity as feminine and feminine as sacred, and we brought ritual performance to all spheres of political action, creative work, and daily life. A new world felt not only possible but actual. And this new world, following the beliefs of both Native Americans* and (neo) Pagans, would be called Mother.

As an assertive

response to 2000 years of Father God, today's Pagans claim a much longer history, however hidden or marginalized, of goddesses, Earth Mothers, and Mother Earth. But this feminist move, dependent on essentialist tropes of mothers and fathers, can never fully reverse or topple a gendered hierarchy that is structurally enforced.



* - Variations of Earth Fathers exist in at least a few indigenous or ancient cultures. In Egyptian mythology Geb is the Earth-god or Father Earth and Nut is the mother or goddess of the sky. Neil Maclean, an Ohlone solidarity activist, told me that the native people from San Francisco, before contact with Europe, called the Earth their father and the sun their mother. For further research, I suggest Malcolm Margolin's well-researched *The Ohlone Way: Indian Life in the San Francisco-Monterey Bay Area*.

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What happens when we anthropomorphize the Earth, when we give it human names and social roles? How does it serve either a Pagan or ecological project to assign a gender and a social role to the Earth? What do we gain and what do we lose when we refer to the Earth as Mother? How are we influenced in terms of perspective, experience, wisdom, ambitions, or motivations? Is it possible to experience the Earth as alive without linking it to our own perceptions and politics of mortality? Maybe s/he is neither alive nor dead, neither great provider nor great destroyer. Clearly, the Earth and the human are not separate events. Might we consider new language (or less language) to frame ecological and Pagan perspectives and action?

I grew up reciting a prayer, which begins:

“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy Name.”

In my late 20s, already having identified as both an ex-Catholic and a recovering Catholic, I heard a version that is allegedly a closer translation of the original Aramaic text (the language of the historical Jesus):

“Dear you, from whom all light and sound vibrations emanate.”

I was changed forever with the potential of this revelation, despite the fact that its mystic inclinations are considered by conservative Christians to be more conjecture than translation. Replacing “father” with the source of sound and light vibration destabilizes the conflicts between science and religion, between mono and poly, and supports my conviction that neither god nor Earth is best considered in gendered human terms.

Twenty years of developing the

tools of queer and feminism for inspired analysis and action have prompted me to challenge Pagan friends and networks. How can we say mother without invoking “father”? In the myth/story of Mary and Jesus, the virgin birth is a non-consensual fertilization by the Holy Spirit, a proxy of God the Father. Are we silently calling an all-powerful father god every time we call Mother Earth? Feminist and queer perspectives remind us of the hegemonic damage of continually reasserting the heterosexual nuclear family as a universal norm. Mother plus father does not have to be



the only frame for creativity, life, law, generation, or genius.

There can be significant patriarchal disruptions and spiritual inspirations when calling the Earth a mother. But the ambivalent subtexts, both heterosexist and human-centered, suggest that we reconsider. What if the Earth is not y/our mother?

THE EARTH IS A COMMUNAL ORGY

by Kirk Read

I get queasy with the girl and boyification of nature in general. The insistence on Mother Earth and Father Sky and the way water is always equated with wombs and menstruation. Enough with the Pagan clichés already! I’ve been reading a lot about plants lately.

And earthworms. Socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity don’t make sense in a compost heap. I mean, we can call them male and female plants, but they’re nothing without bees. And where do bees fit into the binary gender map? Gender is best left to humans checking boxes on match.com. I’m worried when my transgender friends recreate the worst imaginable cartoon archetypes of gender, as well as lesbian friends getting super-entrenched in pop culture and fashion. Gay men have been on a hypermasculine trip for a long time, which is intimidating to me

even though I fall under its spell pretty easily. What I’m trying to say is that people often identified as gender pioneers are huffing the same gnarly fumes of gender stereotypes as everyone else. I don’t think the answer is to dig ourselves further into the gender ditch by referring to trees with alternative pronouns like zie and hir. Sometimes a tree is just a tree. Not to get all Gertrude Stein on you.

I resist Goddess language and gendered language because it

transfers gender maps as understood by humans upon an Earth that is far more complicated than we’re collectively able to imagine. This language turns the Earth into a nuclear family, with a mom and dad and babies. And the Earth is not at all a nuclear family. The Earth is a big communal orgy of vines growing out of dead bodies on top of poop, then getting inoculated by some floating spore carried in the fur of a squirrel.

GENDER IS A STORY

by Rachel Kaplan

As I sit to write, the wind is whipping through the green trees outside, another storm heading from the sea to me. It has been a wild winter and the wonder

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of water continues... do I need or want to think of this gift of life-bringing rain as female? No, I do not. Do I need to think of the destruction taking place everywhere, everyday, of the Earth and its inhabitants, as male? No I do not. But is it simpler by far to rest in the "hegemonic structuralism of gender"? Yes, it is. Does it serve us in recreating the world? I am not sure, but I am not sure either that I have another way.

As a permaculturist,

I am trained to look at the natural systems around me and to use them as a template for action.

I cannot help but notice the gendered reality that pervades the natural world.

These differences are unstoried in the natural world in a way that is never true for the human world.

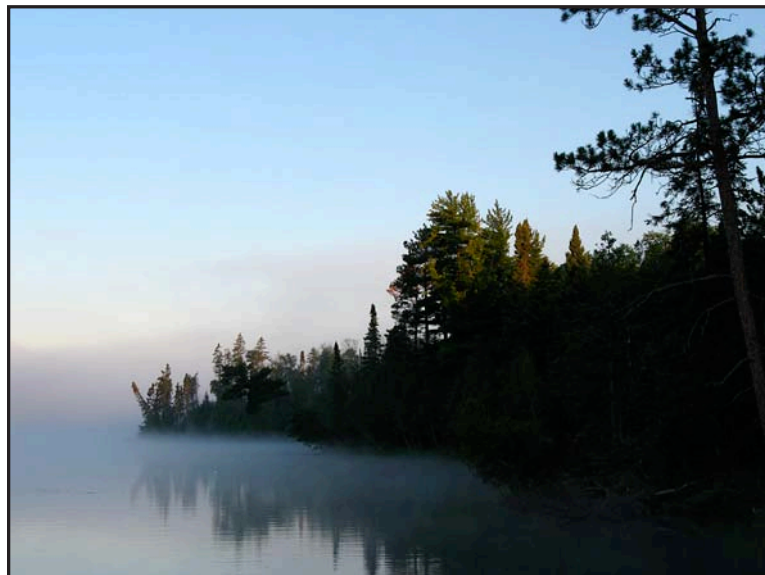
Perhaps it is the story that is the problem

(which is what gender is after all),

rather than the reality of the biological difference between us. But if it is true that biological differences — which we call gender — are part of the natural world, and our dis-ease in culture comes from separating ourselves radically from the natural order of which we are a part, how else are we to understand our lives, our actions, our selves? If we could get to the place where nature is — a sense of being-ness without the story of meaning — then gender wouldn't be an issue at all. But our differences, and what they tell us about our purpose and how to act, would still be there, inherent within us.

After a stint as a radical lesbian feminist, I became active in the Bay

Area artistic-anarchist-Pagan culture that Keith Hennessy describes above. But a key difference in coming from a Jewish background, rather than a Catholic or Christian one, is not in the way god was personified, but in the way people were. We were victims of culture and history, rather than the victors, making it simpler for us to identify with the oppressed, the downtrodden, the dispossessed. From there, and living in a woman's body, it was an easy step to feminism, lesbianism, Paganism, moving ever outside the reach — or so I



Photos by Marcia Rayene

that can be modified and tricked out, as in tranny love and queer procreation — we are left with a gendered universe that dictates some of our decisions, actions and ways of being. Is our alternative as simple as telling a different story? Who tells a story outside the box in which they live? Not too many people I know.

I worship the Earth as the vehicle of regeneration, the wheel of death and rebirth, the altar of reality, rather than the distorted lies of religion and people's stories. As a permie, I witness the power of the Earth in destruction

and regeneration. I dig that.

Is it a female power? Maybe.

I certainly identify with it in myself, as a woman. As a mother, I am living out a story of my gendered body — procreative, protective, maternal, fierce, nurturing... Do I see my partner living out many of these same aspects? Yes. Is it equal? No.

And the beat goes on...

FAGGOT MAGIC

by Jack Davis

I recently co-facilitated a class in elements of magic for gay men. One of the questions we posed: What does it mean to be a gay man involved in

goddess spirituality?

We created invocations that were not directed to a specific deity and called upon the aspects that we desired from a queer god. Our chants embraced:

copious amounts of jism...

gentle and animal fucking...

sweet faggot god...

weirdo...

your mighty cock...

and bring it girl!

Sometimes deity is the goddess because she is not the god, the god is the colleague and not the consort of the goddess, the goddess is a man in a dress, deity has no gender, or deity is all genders.

Maybe thinking of deity can be like shopping at a thrift store, picking and choosing, holding out for exactly

hoped — of god the father. Did it work? Not really. I am subject all the time to patriarchal reality, patriarchal decision-making, both internal and external.

I fight all the time with my feminist-raised boyfriend/husband who wants all things to be "equal" between us, who has somehow swallowed the fantasy that there is even such a thing as equality between men and women, or between people and one another. Biology showed us, in the form of our daughter, that there is a reason why culture evolved the way it did, and that in fact, there is a destiny inherent in our biologies. Can you imagine? It took having our daughter to realize that biology on some level is destiny. If we live in a differentiated universe because our bodies and their capacities simply do different things — even in an age where

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what you want. During the class, it was revealed to us that if, as Dion Fortune says, magic is the art of changing consciousness at will, then faggot magic is the art of changing costumes at Goodwill.

SYMBIOSIS OR DOMINATION?

by Ravyn Stanfield

“The Earth is our Mother, we must take care of her.” This is a chant that I learned in my twenties through the feminist Earth-based spirituality movement. It was attributed as a traditional Native American chant.

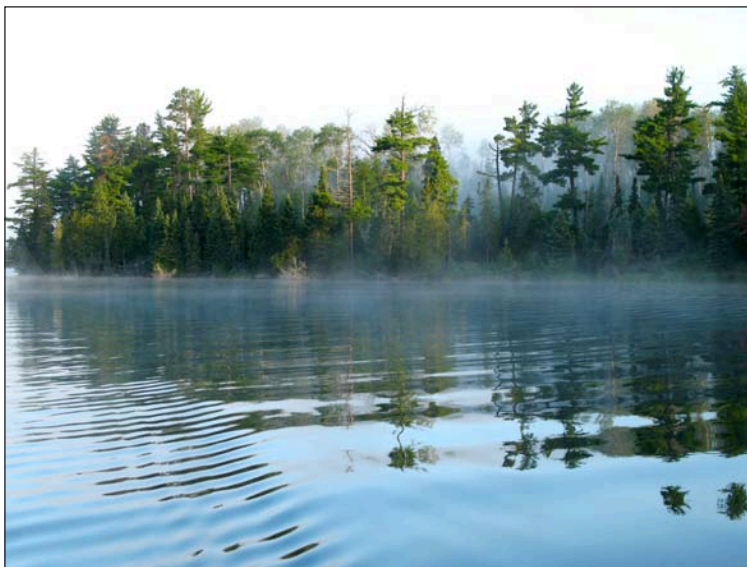
While attempting to avoid the romanticizing of indigenous cultures that white folks like to do, there can certainly be an argument made that people who lived in North America prior to European colonization placed a value on relationship with their landbase. One could further argue that most people in contemporary Western culture are several steps removed from the ways that the land provides staples for our continued survival.

The Earth Mother archetype perhaps shook that up, muddied the waters, asked us to relate to our planet in a way that evoked a primary connection with nourishment. I see/saw it as an attempt to give a face to the faceless, to make the vast spaces of the planet accessible through familiarity. Perhaps it was also an attempt to offer an alternative to flesh mothers who may have failed in small or large ways to nurture us in the ways we wanted. At any rate, “we must take care of her” was a statement asserted without question, a

mission/invitation/provocation.

Identifying the Earth with the oppression of women in all countries, pasting genitals and gender roles on the planet, was a bold political move of its time, a strong blow in the struggle to capture the imagination of the people. We could have easily called the planet Native, African, Jewish, Irish, Queer or Muslim at various times of our collective evolution, and it would have made the same point.

So has Earth Mother passed her prime, so to speak? I see ways that this archetype/identity is still useful, inviting humans to seek healthy relationship with the planet within a parasitic culture that consumes everything in sight and has nothing at all to do with functional communion. I can also see the false



ways that we can glorify the “feminine” and continue to expect female-bodied people to do something magical to “save the Earth” as if living well on the planet was not the responsibility of all humans. I can see the false ways that MotherFather gods still keep humans infantile and powerless in the face of authority, as well as continuing a heterosexist reality.

What is our goal in moving out of the oppressed “feminine” identity that we have politically associated with the planet? I haven’t fully uncovered the answer for myself yet, I think that releasing our oppressed identities is one

of the most difficult tasks that humans can accomplish. Recognizing that we belong to a group that is stigmatized by a larger culture is vital to resistance and liberation efforts. However, when does this identification end? Is it when the group itself feels free? Is it when the tangible liberation goals of the group have been accomplished? Is it when another group points out that this group is “free enough”? This gets tricky for me because I know that for every one of us who grows beyond strict gender cages, there is a girl who survives a rape and identifies with the feminist movement for the first time.

Are we free enough yet to let go of the planet as our Mother and say that the goal has been accomplished? To continue the metaphor, would it mean that we would simply move out of the house or live far away?

The war on qualities that we/they assigned to the “feminine” is real, and the gender-role socialization that kills continues to unfold as soon as people get the gender results of the ultrasound. Those born with the biological bodies of boys are still told that they must separate from intimate relationship with others (and ultimately the planet) to be seen as strong. Those born with the biological bodies of girls eventually see that this ability to separate

seems to be a way to success and status. Interdependence is not a consensual teaching that we offer children in Western culture.

For me, the question is not masculine or feminine, pussy or prick, queer or hetero, it is about whether we are living in a relationship of symbiosis or dominion with the planet. I welcome our questioning of whether or not we need the Earth Mother archetype to help us shift the reality of dominion. I also see Western civilization in active opposition to symbiosis. I wonder what will the Earth be to us instead? Our vital home or a silent lifeless rock?

Photos by Marcia Rayene