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## **On Witches, Shrooms, and Sourdough: A Critical Reimagining of the White Settler Relationship to Land**

By Abby Maxwell<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Through an exploration of witches, mycelium, and fermentation, this research seeks to forward a critically anti-colonial project of reimagining the white settler relationship to land. The centuries-old socio-ecological crises being unveiled today are secondary only to the reigning logic-project of whiteness, which operates through gendered and racialized erasure, displacement, and subjugation, always toward the further spreading of whiteness. To unlearn this logic, white settlers must attune to the pulse of another substrate; unearth other stories as a means of unlearning and reorienting ourselves. In my position as a white settler and cis queer woman living and learning on the territories of the Lekwungen and WSÁNEĆ peoples, I argue that the regeneration of community and ecosystem wellbeing must be prefaced by two-fold projects of decolonization – the unsettling return of land, resources, and power, and of anti-colonial white settler reconnection to land – the renewal of a kinship with the more-than-human, with place, with each other – without appropriating Indigenous ways of relating. White settlers must craft a relationality that is ours, which positions us within and of our ecosystems. By looking back at European histories of people and plants, and around to ecological patterns as loci of reimagining, this paper dreams up a white settler relationship to land defined by reciprocity, accountability, and care. I explore Euro-descendent forms of earth-based spirituality and relationality as associated with various ecological models such as mycelial networks and fermentive microbial processes with a geographical focus on Turtle Island.

*Keywords:* whiteness, right relationship, Euro-descendent earth-based spirituality, mycelium, fermentation, plant association

### **Introduction: Unlearning Whiteness**

With a molten undercurrent of white supremacy, the global organism cycles on, sputtering. Etched into our neural network, carved into the surface of the earth; infecting through time and space, the logic of whiteness is itself a pattern within our earth. And under this logic the masculine, white, and able body holds a power unlike all: the power to inscribe, to obscure, to isolate. The roots of this logic run deep, concealing their origin: an insidious and permeating force. But despite its seemingly intangible conception, its implications are visible in flesh and fibre. And here we are. Our chaotic climate is simultaneously plausible under this revelation, and profoundly world shattering in its implausibility. The centuries-old socio-ecological crises being unveiled today are secondary only to the ongoing logic-project of whiteness, where whiteness extends past phenotype to name the logic of white supremacy, a way of being in the world: “white in the security of their unspoken claims, white in the confidence of their apparent neutrality, white in the belief that theirs

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<sup>1</sup> The author writes as a white settler on the territories of the Lekwungen (Songhees and Esquimalt Nations) and WSÁNEĆ (Tsartlip/WJOLELP, Tseycum/WSIKEM, Tsawout/STÁUTW, and Pauquachin/BOKÉCEN Nations).

is the image of the world worth living” (Manning, 2018, p. 9-10). This logic oversees manifold projects of gendered and racialized erasure, displacement, and subjugation, working constantly toward the project of spreading whiteness – as in literally producing, enriching, and empowering masculine, white, and able bodies. A key operation of whiteness is racial capitalism (termed by Cedric Robinson, 1983) an economic system that relies on the subjugation of (predominantly black and brown) laborers and ecosystems for the accumulation of capital, and the concentration of wealth in the pockets of those on top. Whiteness also fuels projects of settler-colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and human exceptionalism (human/nature), and is upheld by entities such as the state, the church, and western science. The logic will be felled eventually – the condition of our ecosystems makes that clear – but only in felling both its beholders and the beheld. To accelerate a logical shift, we as white settlers must tune in to the pulse of another substrate: to living knowledges of right relationship – defined by reciprocity, accountability, and care – situated on the margins, and in more-than-human realms.

Amidst the interweaving of plant biology and traditional knowledge, Potawatomi scholar and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* posits a call to action. Guided by the teachings of plants and other ancestors, she argues that the regeneration of our ecosystems must first begin with a settler reconnection with land: the renewal of a kinship with the more-than-human, with place, with each other. Whereas many western environmentalists place focus on projects of ecosystem restoration, “restoring land without restoring relationship is an empty exercise. It is relationship that will endure and relationship that will sustain the restored land” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 338). Kinship inspires love: a sense of reciprocity, of community. However, she also cautions her white settler readers of the colonial violence inherent in appropriating Indigenous ways of knowing and relating to land. This unlearning process must reject cultural pillaging: it must denounce whiteness and unearth other stories. Such ways of knowing already exist; we need not invent something new but, rather, engage in praxis of noticing, of being-with. Further, under this regime, a vital and revolutionary act lays in a quiet site: the realm of the imaginary. By looking back at European histories of people and plants, and around at ecological patterns as loci of reimagining, this paper dreams up a white settler relationship to land defined by reciprocity, accountability, and care. Taking into serious account my position as a white settler and cis queer woman living and learning on the territories of the Lekwungen and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples, I posit this worlding project in connection with but distinct from the necessarily unsettling work of decolonization. As Tuck and Yang make clear, “decolonization is not a metaphor. When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future” (2012, p. 3). Decolonization demands Indigenous sovereignty and futurity, and requires the return of land, resources, and power. It “implicates and unsettles everyone” (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 7). Alongside, I position this work as an anti-colonial project of reimagining white settler ways of relating.

The paper proceeds in two sections. In *Looking Back*, I explore the history of the witch-hunting era, arguing that the Church’s authority, an institution of whiteness, hinged upon destroying networks of healer communities led by peasant womxn and queer peoples. I then look at contemporary expressions of Euro-descendent earth-based lifeways, seeking out aspects of these earth- and community-oriented ways that could source inspiration. In the following section, *Looking Around*, I inquire into relational expressions in more-than-human worlds, focusing in on modes by which interdependence and reciprocity promote resilience, transformation, and flourishing amid networks of mycelium, microbes, and crops. Taken together, these sections allow

for the cultivation of a politics guided by Indigenous leadership and attuned to anti-colonial, anti-racist, queer, feminist, and ecological values toward a reimagining, world-building process.

Unlearning necessitates rediscovering the capacity for right relationship – for interdependence, accountability, and care – within and across diverse communities and species lines, which has been extinguished by whiteness. Amid the patterns produced by the logic-project of whiteness, we have lost sight of all that which keeps us alive. In the words of Black feminist writer adrienne maree brown, we must “[let] go of patterns that do not serve” (2019). Molding over the etched pathways traversing our organism, enfolded in this shared body, makes space for the possibility of something new, something more livable. In this world-building project, our own histories and the more-than-human realm guide us toward being-with one another, in right relationship.



## Looking Back

### *A History in Flames*

For centuries, popular interpretations of certain Christian texts have justified harmful narratives that govern western cultures, such as anthropocentrism and heteropatriarchy. The manifold arms of the Christian institution have long ruled western socio-politics, sanctioning genocidal, settler-colonial, and ecological violences – requisites for the spread of whiteness. But long before the reign of this institution there existed occult, earth-based spiritualities, manifesting across Europe as decentralized networks of healer communities led by peasant womxn and queer peoples. The term ‘paganism’ is often used as a catchall term for the multiplicity of pre-Christian earth-based spiritual livelihoods – ways that remain present, though often marginalized, all over the world. Whereas these religious forms tend to evade dogma or declared leaders, “the shared pagan values of acceptance of diversity, immanent divinity, and reverence for life on Earth are

expressed by the many actions and lifeways of these many traditions and practices” (Pizza and Lewis, 2009, p. 3). Throughout the medieval era, and particularly in post-Reformation Europe, a culture led by peasant womxn and queers carrying powerful knowledge of medicine, botany, biology, and astronomy, was a potent threat to both the Catholic and Protestant churches, which were already trembling under the pressure to uphold public support. Between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Church-sanctioned witch-hunt, also known as the Women’s Genocide, proceeded across Europe and settler colonies on Turtle Island. Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel posits that this operation sought to attack “women whose autonomy, leadership and knowledge threatened Christian theology, Church authority and the power of the aristocracy” (2013, p. 86). In order to progress the Church’s early capitalist expansion projects, it was necessary to destroy these knowledge systems and the relationships that powered them. Whereas other genocides/epistemicides committed by the Church hinged upon the destruction of knowledge systems through book burnings, the ‘books’ in European pagan communities “were the women’s bodies and, thus, ... their bodies were burned alive” (Grosfoguel, 2013, p. 86). The vast range in death toll estimates exposes the trial authorities’ negligence: some estimate in the tens of thousands, some have argued millions (Read, 2009). The ambiguity and informality innate in witch-hunt era killings hinders any accurate attempts at estimation. As political theorist Silvia Federici explains, “the witch-hunt destroyed a whole world of female practices, collective relations, and systems of knowledge that had been the foundation of women’s power in pre-capitalist Europe, and the condition for their resistance in the struggle against feudalism” (2004, p. 103). Sustained by a “campaign of terror”, the destruction of bodies carrying such knowledges necessarily preceded the capitalist project (Federici, 2004, p. 102).

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the industrial-capitalist regime had settled in to the stolen landscapes of the so-called new world, entrenching into the psyche of European settler colonies an ethic of productivity that worked to justify the unspeakable violences of the whiteness project. Witch-hunting signified the near-eradication of a Euro-descendent relationship to place, to the more-than human – a bloodstained rupture that has long served racial capitalism. Further, this erasure adhered to the cultural mythology of “human/nature” – where humans are separate from and superior to nature. Witch and activist Starhawk writes that “to destroy a culture’s trust in its healers is to destroy that culture’s trust in itself, to shatter its cohesive bonds and expose it to control from outside” (1997, p. 203). The attempted obliteration of European pagan cultures reveals both the existential fear held by the Church and its logic-project of whiteness, as well as the subsequent depletion of life-sustaining relationship and practices among Euro-descendent peoples.

### *Lessons in the Ashes*

Despite the Church’s exhaustive efforts, the resilient networks could not be incinerated: today a multiplicity of pagan-like lifeways remains. Whereas the survival of certain pagan organizations like traditional Wicca has been accredited to white men such as Gerald Gardner, other contemporary pagan womxn have created separate movements like Dianic Witchcraft and Starhawk’s Reclaiming. These movement communities work to mend their disrupted relationships with place, and to demonstrate ways of being “reverent toward the Earth and the life forms it contains” (Pizza and Lewis, 2009, p. 3). Capitalism works to deepen the rupture between its laborers and the land on which they work, dismembering the network until we cannot recognize our own kin. Under this system, pagan communities have been reconciling “the issues of how to retain meaning, enchantment, and sacred relationships within a world that seems to be growing more alienated, automated, and meaningless” (Pizza and Lewis, 2009, p. 3). The teaching of

immanent divinity demands that the Earth be valued above all else: it demands relationships of interdependence, and of awe.

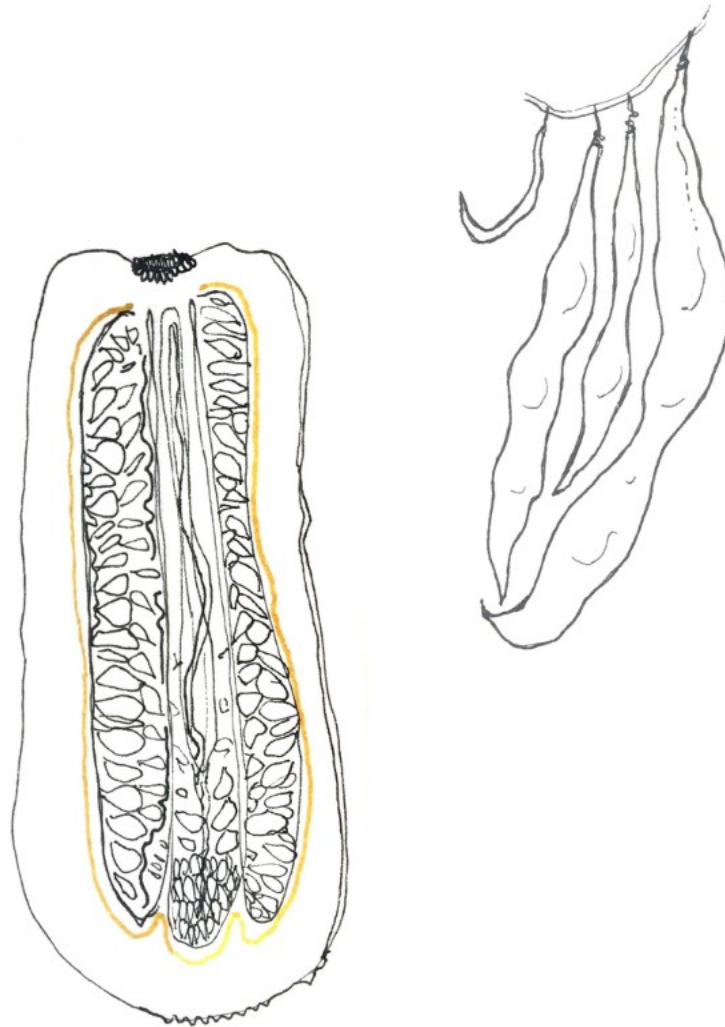
Perhaps a symptom of its dis-organization, the label of ‘neo-paganism’ has also been claimed by groups that engage in violently appropriative, essentialist, and otherwise bigoted practices. Without a bureaucratic body “to determine orthodoxy, people can simply declare themselves to be pagans or witches” (Berger et al., 2003, p. 3). But if just anyone can fly the banner of paganism to defend uncritical and violent actions, how can any potentially emancipatory teachings and practices be distilled – how can this religion feasibly be a site of anti-colonial imagining?

Witch and author Ann-Marie Gallagher takes a critical look at race and appropriation in ‘neo-pagan’ communities, asserting that “essentializing, romanticizing, and imbuing with mysticism is, in fact, racist” (2009, p. 581). The appropriation of nonwestern cultures and ways of knowing by white people is yet another imposition of the colonial project: the abstraction of an item, belief, or practice from its historical and cultural context to further empower and enrich the oppressor. Starhawk writes of her experience of becoming aware of her own cultural appropriation, explaining that her community of Reclaimers “listened to what Indigenous voices were saying. [They] put away [their] smudge sticks and purged [their] chants of anything questionable. [They] became more acutely aware of how [their] different cultural interpretations might cause pain or harm to others” (2002, p. 202). But, she goes on to complicate the notion that entitlement depends solely on ancestry, begging the question of how she “as a Jew [has] the right to call on the Irish Goddess Brigid any more than the Pueblo Spider Woman” (2002, p. 202). The nature of pagan spirituality also lies in its diverse teachings and rituals, through centuries of accumulation of shared knowledges and ideas. How is entitlement granted – through bloodline, or consent? It seems that the distinction between appropriation and sharing depends on structures of power. Gallagher shares the words of John H.T. Davies, a Welshman, who articulates his absolute disinterest in encountering an “expensive workshop leader who can’t even pronounce, let alone speak, any Welsh; whose only qualifications are a set of distinctly cranky ideas, assembled from fragments torn loose from our heritage” (2009, p. 581). Apart from systems of domination, the sharing of spiritual practice could surely be enriching rather than harmful, but, under whiteness, accountability is widely absent: this logic teaches us away from right relationship. However, Gallagher goes on to explore elements of earth-based movements that could provoke relational transformation, centering the web, a significant pagan symbol, as a visual model:

Within the structures of our practices and symbols, our acknowledgement of tides, cycles, and seasons, lies the potential to challenge political hierarchies and provide an agency for positive change in our society and on our planet. This means acknowledging diversity – of needs, of experience, of the cultural, social, historical, and geographical contexts of people’s lives. One of the most compelling and powerful symbols we have is that of the web ... it provides a model via which we might see varied forms of oppression, different spiritualities, economic means, and different identities as contingent upon each other and touching at various nodes of the web. But perhaps we may see it as many webs, each touching and interconnecting but varying with location, experience, political agenda, and worldview. (2009, p. 587)

This visual of many webs, cohesive yet varying, signifies the form of radical interconnectivity necessary in building relational worlds as white settlers. As Gallagher suggests, the introduction of a strong politic of intersectionality is vital here. Resolution does not lie in the disentanglement of one's own community from a centralized power, but in the "potential for transformation which can spread from [one] web to others" (Gallagher, 2009, p. 589). With this imagery, the entire network becomes a constellation of bodies, of interdependent communities, not with homogenous needs but with a sense of accountability to one another: accomplices in the realization of such needs. For if we believe this world to be one shared organism "then we must believe in the reverberating effects of a conscious disentanglement, a conscious awareness of privilege and oppression, and the outflowing change the ownership of that awareness can bring to wider contexts than ours" (Gallagher, 2009, p. 589). Transformation on a grand scale must follow the collective, 'conscious disentanglement' through molecular movements, through sharing – the dispersion of living knowledges and techniques for building resilience, both within and extending beyond one's web.

Whereas the label of paganism has been misused as rationale for whitewashing and other colonial violences, there are elements of such earth-based systems of belief and ritual that hold vast emancipatory potential. In reimagining the white settler relationship to the more-than-human, it is necessary to explore a reconnection with Euro-descendent ways of relating. Through unearthing the stories of witches and other European pagans, disentanglement from whiteness becomes possible.



## Looking Around

### *More-than-Human Teachers*

The logic of whiteness sits as a fogged-up windowpane, obscuring its own origins and that of our bodies – our beginnings as organic beings that rot, and that ultimately, along with everyone else, become dirt. Somewhere amid the cycles of history, whiteness successfully convinced us that humans – not all *homo sapiens*, of course, but the whitest of them; those possessing an innate personhood in their genealogical supremacy – are both distinct and superior to the rest of the seed dispersers; the grazers; the heterotrophs that were once our kin. In unraveling the human exceptionalism of whiteness, we must also become, anew, “ecologically literate” (Capra, 2014, p. 362). A healthy ecosystem has feedback loops that maintain self-regulation and balance; it is conscious of its limits. With an economic system submerged in neoliberal values, the concept of restrictions – on consumption, on extraction, on the power of the free market and of multinational corporations – is implausible. Capitalism not only desertifies the land and poisons the water, but also threatens the very futurity of earthly life. As anthropologist Anna Tsing writes, “the idea of human nature has been given over to social conservatives and sociobiologists, who use assumptions of human constancy and autonomy to endorse the most autocratic and militaristic ideologies” (2012, p. 144). But “human nature is an interspecies relationship”: a fluctuating field



of relation; a living collective (Tsing, 2012, p. 144). What if we saw the interface of self and non-self, of human and more-than, as the most valuable site of learning? We are literally more nonhuman than we are human in the flesh: “we are walking assemblages with our own microbiotic communities” (Fishel, 2017, p. 6). Our ability to exist, to thrive, in our ecologies is second only to our nonhumanness. Under whiteness we have lost the field of relation; lost sight of what keeps us alive, where our value lies. In looking to the landscape out one’s door, even in looking to the houseplant resting on the windowsill, these expressions of interdependence and reciprocity become points of influence in our worlding project; in reconsidering this inherited human/nature rift that so well explains the void in white settler socio-ecological understandings.

### *Lessons from Mycelium*

All constructions reflect a maker’s consciousness. Our structures are architectural renditions of the relationships we have with each other, and the values we hold. In this way, design has the power to both reflect and institutionalize the dominant logic: the accepted way of being in the world. Thus, the common city looks like a series of boxes into which we organize and segregate, boxes teeming with items we extract to consume, always growing. Trapped in this architectural way we strive always for some form of progress that falls on the backs of the other, hidden in plain sight. But there exist other design-ways, other ways of constructing that sustain rather than commodify life. Some of these ways are distant, others right nearby – some are just below our feet, beneath the forest floor. The western scientific tradition of reductionism “creates an unnatural separation effect in the mind in which objects and topics that are inextricable from one another in the real world can be intellectually split apart” (McCoy, 2016, p. XVIII). But in recognizing fungi and the mycelial networks they create, reductionist thinking is negated immediately. Termed by radical mycologist Peter McCoy as “the natural world’s grand connectors, mycelial networks exemplify this universal principle of mutual aid” – the ultimate model of community interconnectivity (2016, p. XVIII).

If this logic can be reimagined through sharing living knowledges, and deepening our reciprocal relationships within and across communities, then the mycelial network is a clear site of imaginative stimulus. As McCoy explains in his book, *Radical Mycology*:

Knowledge is the substrate of life experience that every hypha and human integrates into its being. As information stores increase, they design the mycelial network of life experience, forming new connections as the web becomes increasingly dense. New events recall and connect to those of the past, exposing metaphors between disparate experiences. And when new ideas are encountered, the web’s capacity to appreciate novelty increases, offering new means to combat barriers to self-reliance and increasing one’s ability to adapt. (2017, p. 382)

In the mycelial network, there is no singular locus or linearity: each hypha (branching filament, which collectively make up mycelium) of each web is as significant as the next, which translates into a radical resilience. For hyphae, information is always lived, not ‘discovered’ through disembodied observation. The act of sharing information and resources informs all future branching of the implicated webs, augmenting the possibility for further knowledge production and relationship building. In these acutely connected communities, all ‘voices’ occupy the same amount of space and hold the same potential value, since their distribution is so well facilitated. There is no ostracism: “knowledge can be shared between elders and the young with ease, while

information from the individuals and hyphal branches on society's periphery can be heard, influencing the growth of the entire network” (McCoy, 2016, p. 381). But what would this structure look like in human communities? If all knowledge held equal value, and every lived experience impacted the growth of the extended community, accountability would be fundamental, and boundless. McCoy presents Radical Mycology as working to further “the three major pillars of social change: education and awareness building around important issues; resisting, slowing, and stopping ineffective or disastrous social systems; and designing functional and appropriate alternative systems that increase quality of life” (2016, p. XIX). He calls for a new schema in the western psyche “a way that is affirming, intelligently self-guided, and resilient against unforeseen and inevitable change” (2016, p. XIX). Attuning to these mycelial networks of lived experience, transmitting information and developing reciprocal relationships with beings across species lines, brings about a definitively revolutionary design. Pulsating beneath the soil, mycelial networks are powerful sites of influence in unlearning western reductionism and in building livable worlds.

### *Lessons from Microbial Relationality*

The human/nature split undergirds core narratives of the West, deeming humans the pinnacle of evolution, the ultimate formation. Human/nature grants a sense of ownership to humans – contingent, of course, on certain corporeal criteria – embedding into the western psyche a supreme impartiality; detached from the irrational beast. But perhaps the starkest disproof of human/nature is the reminder that the body is predominantly nonhuman: it is composed primarily of water, and hosts “trillions of microorganisms – outnumbering human cells by 10 to 1” (MacDougall, 2015). These single-celled microflora coexist within us, performing essential functions in processes such as digestion and immunity; sustaining our lives as we host them. So what am ‘I’ if my body is itself an ecology; shared. I am born of the land and the land is born of me. Despite attempts to sanitize humanity of such microscopic fungi and bacteria, “there is no escaping them. They are ubiquitous agents of transformation, feasting upon decaying matter, constantly shifting dynamic life forces from one miraculous and horrible creation to the next” (Katz, 2016, p. 2).

Whereas the art of home fermentation is age-old, the onslaught of the West’s industrialized foodways has swept this practice to the margins. In his book *Wild Fermentation*, queer fermenter and food activist Sandor Katz makes the case for microbial coexistence and “incorporating the wild”, arguing that, through the practice of home fermentation, “you become more interconnected with the life forces of the world around you. Your environment becomes you, as you invite the microbial populations you share the Earth with to enter ... your intestinal ecology” (2016, p. 12). Resilient systems are fractal – if biodiversity is the key to a resilient ecosystem, the microcosmic body will, too, thrive in multiplicity.

In looking outward still, we see that fermentation is a queer, political process of transforming unlivable worlds, with microbes as its agents of change. Katz presents social change as a fermentive praxis defined by its gentle, slow, yet steady transformative mode, which “recycles life, renews hope, and goes on and on” (2016, p. 166). This is a practice of decomposing all that no longer serves, of transforming the old not just to taste better but to heal the body. To ferment is to commemorate the dead: to value the life they lived, to carry those lessons, as they transition into new forms. Within the sourdough starters and home-brewed vinegars, microbes teach of relationality through action, familiarizing the fermenter with the quiet vibrations of the world; weaving kinship networks across taxonomical divides. Social change embedded in a logic of purity, which resides within that of whiteness, “creates bifurcation of the world into good/bad,

clean/dirty, and self/other”, and locates the individual human as the sole agent of change (Maroney, 2018). The way of fermentation, in theory and in material, disputes the politics of purity as a white fantasy, seeking to bleach out, to swallow up. Fermentation showcases a symbiotic adaptability – resistance in diversity and non-hierarchy. Inspired by the resilience of shape-shifting microorganisms, Katz’ projects of home fermentation – decidedly impure in their bacterial bubbling and unknowable ends – act to queer the dominant logic, where queering signifies an interrogation into and deconstructing of hegemonic formation. Further, despite the past three centuries of western scientific operations of naturalizing heteromonogamy – where queerness is thus an unnatural activity – existing throughout more-than-human worlds are, in fact, the most destabilizingly queer of livelihoods. There exist a “vast range of same-sex acts, same-sex childrearing pairs, intersex animals, multiple “genders,” “transvestism,” and transsexuality”” (Alaimo, p. 52). Naming queer bodies to be ecological formations is powerful as a mechanism of subverting and healing from the institutions of queer- and trans-antagonism, which, of course, work within whiteness operations. Thus, Katz’ fermentive praxis is “[an act] of resistance against commodification and cultural homogenization”, as well as scientific doctrines of heteronormativity (Maroney, 2018). The foundations of such purity projects will decompose amidst the microbial process: the operations of our trillions of corporeal co-inhabitants. Perhaps through such subversive, household practices, we can craft the power to decompose our institutions and cultural narratives, all of which serve the project of whiteness. Let them transform and be reinterpreted to make space for all, a futurity for all communities and life forms. Fermentive praxis forwards settler unlearning in repositioning all bodies as deeply and necessarily within the webs and cycles of the more-than-human. Simultaneously, it provides a queered model for political remapping, which elevates resilience in diversity, and care without bounds.

### *Lessons from Crops: The Fourth Sister*

When agriculture was industrialized, the farm was transformed from an abundant site of entangled, multispecies networks into monoculture: a sterilized, mechanical grid. Biodiversity came to be considered a nuisance; pests and weeds were to be chemically eradicated, financed by the often already-indebted farmers. But plants know all too well the dangers of seclusion; they form alliances with each other, with animals and fungi, with bacteria that allow them access to nutrients – to survive, to reproduce. Whether in a tropical forest or a flourishing garden, plants embody this knowledge: abundance is crafted through embracing interdependence.

Permaculture is a system of ecological design that is rooted in three core ethics – earth care, people care, and fair share – and 14 principles, such as ‘observe and interact’, ‘use and value diversity’, and ‘use edges and value the marginal’ (Meyer, 2017). It aims to foster relationships of reciprocity within ecosystems, as well as between people and their communities. Though the movement is accredited to white Australian biologist Bill Mollison, the (widely stolen) knowledge undergirding permaculture originated as ancestral and living Indigenous practices of biodynamic agroecology (See Maxwell, 2019). A plant association commonly taught in permaculture books is The Three Sisters/la milpa, an association of three plants that has sustained Indigenous communities throughout the Americas for millennia. Composed of corn, beans, and squash, the Three Sisters are a vegetal expression of sisterly love: a network of nourishment.

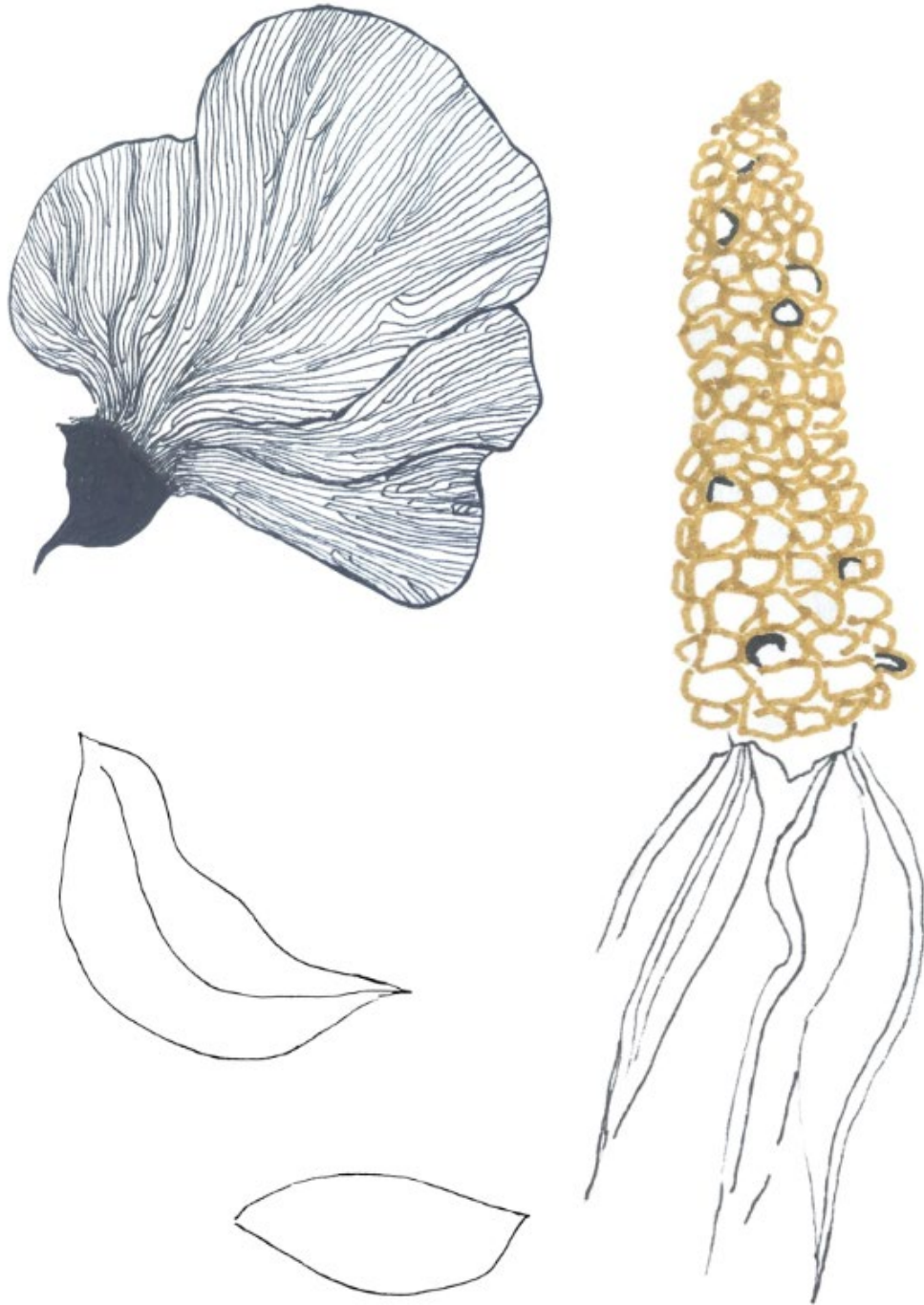
The corn is the first to emerge, fueled by the moisture in the late-spring soil, growing straight up to form a pillar for the bean vine, which emerges second. As the bean plant continues to grow, “tough receptors along the vine guide it to wrap itself around the corn in a graceful upward spiral” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 130). The squash surfaces last, with broad leaves that function to cover

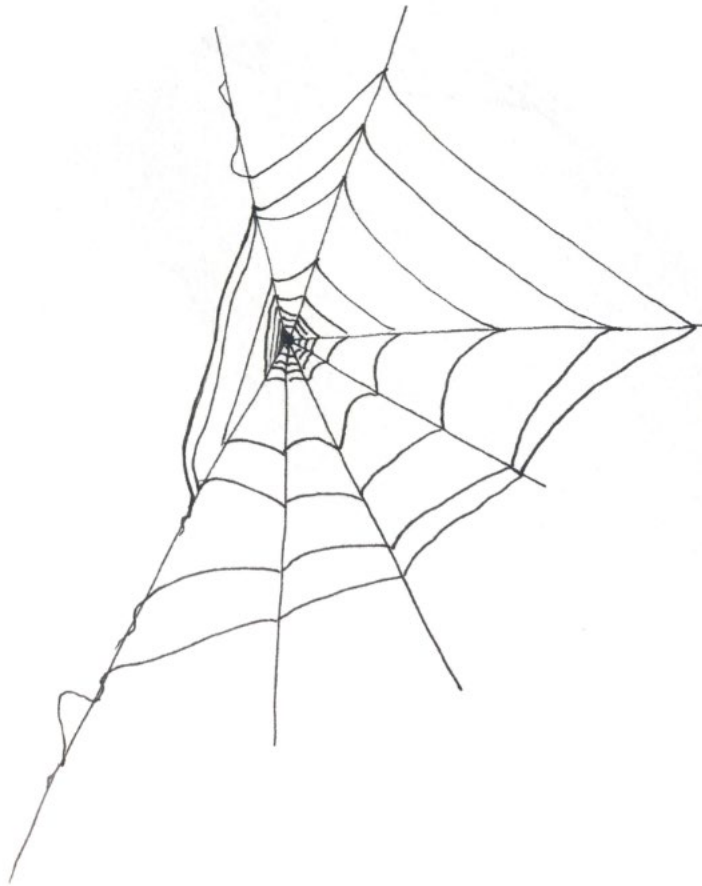
the soil, keeping other plants out and retaining moisture. Water is easily accessible for each sister, because the corn plant has thin, superficial, roots, the bean has deep taproots, and the squash stem is able to send out roots to collect water from further away. Another factor for plant survival is the access to mineral nitrogen in the soil: nitrogen that has been taken from the atmosphere and converted by nitrogen fixing bacteria. These bacteria, known as *Rhizobium*, contain “catalytic enzymes [that] will not work in the presence of oxygen” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 133). Thus, in the spirit of cross-kingdom synergy, members of the legume family “will grow an oxygen-free nodule to house the bacterium and, in return, the bacterium shares its nitrogen with the plant” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 133). Powered by a strong ethic of reciprocity, the soil housing the Three Sister system is rich in nitrogen, which in turn nurtures a fruitful association. However, as Kimmerer suggests, the Three Sister crops, now fully domesticated, also rely on a fourth sister:

Perhaps we should consider this a Four Sisters garden, for the planter is also an essential partner. It is she who turns up the soil, she who scares away the crows, and she who pushes seeds into the soil. We are the planters, the ones who clear the land, pull the weeds, and pick the bugs; we save the seeds over winter and plant them again next spring... We too are part of the reciprocity. They can't meet their responsibilities unless we meet ours. (2013, p. 140)

As are all life forms, the human being is essential to its ecosystem: not superior, but important. Not only do the Three Sisters teach us to craft abundance through building networks but, further, they make clear the human's place within a system – our duty. They embody the rewards of love and nourishment that we receive when we situate ourselves inside of our ecology. What if care was currency, if our economy reflected the Sisters': a tender exchange of life-sustaining elements, of intimacy, of support?

By engaging in the intimate act of noticing, listening carefully to the quiet workings of more-than-human worlds, sensibilities of livable worlds emerge as guides. The lessons required to preface such imaginative undertakings begin with taking a stroll through the forest, with baking a loaf of bread, with observing ant colonies, geese, and blades of grass doing the work of the world. Guided by such intelligent ecologies, this transformation into new ways of being, of being-with, towards an impure kinship, begins to germinate.





## Conclusion

Where the logic-project of whiteness is operational, white bodies benefit. Privilege is felt differently in each body; three-dimensional beings with intersecting identities land uniquely into the ever-morphing taxonomy. Yet, a system with winners and losers is produced and policed by every dominant institution of western civilization – the cops, the prison, the court, the university, the hospital. All were constructed by and for the project of amassing and enriching whiteness. But the imagined subject, the active agent, in the project of whiteness is not just white-skinned but masculine and neurotypical, able enough to produce, straight enough to procreate. Whiteness extends past the flesh and formulates an illogic, which operates through a sense of existential paranoia, which forgets where it came from, which responds in the only way it knows to the threat of the other: with violent and unmet force (with teargas, with rubber bullets, with guns). Amid the West’s long-standing systems of punitive ‘correcting’, it is difficult even amidst revolutionary thinkers to imagine a new way of creating change in this society. Yet, punitive modes of control – which incarcerate, isolate, and execute unmanageable bodies – tear communities apart; “[keep] us small and fragile” (brown, 2015). In looking deeper, toward transformation, we hold space for error, for moving through worlds of trauma and healing: we “yield deeper trust, resilience, and interdependence” (brown, 2015). Further, we imagine. We understand that our consciousness is reflected in the patterns we see around us – the structures we build, the stories we choose to tell. Stories create culture, and ours is one composed of stories that celebrate false imaginations of economy and ecology. Under whiteness, we have become

disoriented from that which crafts and sustains life: relationship. In our failure to see and hear one another, and especially those most disenfranchised, we forget the process of being – of being-with. And in forgetting this, we embody the system: one incapable of sociality, deprived of accountability.

In her chapter “In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to Place”, Kimmerer reminds herself that “the grief is the settlers’ as well. They too will never walk in a tallgrass prairie where sunflowers dance with goldfinches. Their children have also lost the chance to sing at the Maple Dance. They can’t drink the water either” (2013, p. 212). In a civilization rooted in subjugation, nobody flourishes ... but we know there are better ways to live. However, as white settlers we first have an urgent responsibility to confront our violence, and to call it ours. We must subvert these enflashed and epistemic privileges and act on the demands of communities on the frontlines of racial-capitalist and colonial violences – to be in a practice of solidarity with these communities and reciprocity with the land. This work must be done at many levels –we must show up, use our bodies as buffers from state violence, we must be educating our white friends, and be redistributing our resources. When it comes to reimagining relationship, the needed patterns already exist – not in the form of a city grid system or a prime minister’s campaign platform, but in the words shared in circles of healers and survivors, on the margins, and beneath the soil. To reimagine is to carry histories in the body as it moves slow, noticing, and dreaming up questions: to prophesize the future as a network that sustains us all.

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