

Farming

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The correlation of the feminine to nature, repressive for so long, can be a source of power



▲ Women see the connections between earth and food and human health. Living those connections feels like the most conscious, everyday kind of witchcraft. Photograph: moodboard/Getty Images/Cultura RF

In the past few months I have started putting down roots. It's a cliché but it's literally what I'm doing. I spend my weekends transforming the tired old lawn into garden beds, layering woodchips, straw and horse shit I've shovelled from the paddocks next door into rich soil to grow my lettuces and kale. I have always loved gardening but now, more than ever, working with the earth has taken on an element of the spiritual.

As a teenager, like many suburban white girls, I got way into Wicca, that gentle, nature-centred neo-pagan religion beloved by would-be witches everywhere. Much later, in my early 20s, I revisited witchcraft, finding an unstructured feminine spirituality that helped me make sense of the world.

Like many other young women I loved the playfulness of astrology and the tarot, but what always appealed to me most was the sense of communion with the natural world. Now, at a point of genuine global climate crisis, I am beginning to see how valuable fostering that connection can be.

Women have long been associated with nature, usually to our detriment. An enduring, exasperating thorn in the side of feminism has been the persistent belief that women are inherently closer to the physical world, and to our animal bodies, than men, disqualifying us from our right to intellectual or cultural pursuits beyond the home.

Simone de Beauvoir wrote about it when she described woman as being "more enslaved to the species than the male" thanks to the embodied reality of human reproduction; the anthropologist Sherry B Ortner wrote in 1974 that associating women with nature handily allows us to subjugate half of the world's population, while asserting confidently that it is simply the natural way of things.

It's all rubbish, of course; as Ortner put it, all humans have a physical body and a sense of nonphysical mind. And, certainly, we can't be bound to either by something as ephemeral as gender.

But I think this correlation of women to nature, which has been oppressive and restrictive for so long, can now be a source of power and unity for women who are concerned - as we all should be - about the future of our natural environment.

My favourite way to think of the witch is as a woman drawing strength from what ought to subdue her. When you think of it this way, a whole coven of earth witches emerges among the women of Australian agriculture. Much of what we associate with the figure of the witch concerns women's knowledge of the natural world: plants for eating and healing, solstices for planting and harvesting, cycles of the world by which to set the cycles of the home.

When I part the mulch to plant seedlings, or when I forage blackberries and wild brassica while I'm walking the dog, I feel a sense of connection to all the planting, farming and foraging women who've come before me.

And though many of the farmers I've spoken to would probably balk at the idea of identifying as a witch, the term taps into a long lineage of women's knowledge about the earth. Women in agriculture seem the most logical inheritors.

Regenerative agriculture is a radical new approach that privileges soil health and holistic farming. In Australia many more women are involved in regenerative agricultural practices than are in traditional agriculture, which remains male-dominated.

It can be tempting to attribute this unquestioningly to the notion that women are somehow inherently more in tune with nature but that's neither accurate nor useful. The reality is that many farming women inordinately take on the role of childcare and food preparation - and this is what makes them experts in their field. They see the connections between earth and food and human health. Living those connections feels like the most conscious, everyday kind of witchcraft.

It's easy to dismiss this kind of thinking as kumbaya nonsense but that's partly because the impulse is so ingrained in us to devalue anything associated with the feminine - in this case, something as objectively neutral and undeniably necessary as the Earth on which we stand.

For a long time, just as we have associated women with nature, we have coded nature as feminine and, as we do with all other things coded feminine, we have degraded, exploited and subjugated it.

But taking up the position of the witch - someone who values the feminine, and defiantly claims the knowledge and power of the bodily and natural - shows how to completely reimagine our relationship with the Earth and, hopefully, to change the future of all who live on it for the better.

● Sam George-Allen is the author of Witches: What Women Do Together

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Arcane knowledge and those possessing it have always been targets for the ignorant and self interested, particularly patriarchal institutions and religions. These types are not interested in anything except their own power and privilege, and persecution of those with other viewpoints has long been the preferred modus operandi.

Farming practices aligned with natural cycles and systems are not limited by gender attributes, but as an archetype I se...

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Guardian Pick

I garden, the women in my family gardened, particularly my grandmother who taught me a lot. But we all did it because we liked gardening and also the thrift of growing your own food. I'm not against it if you want to get all earth mother power of women about it, knock yourself out, but plenty of women simply do it because they like gardening. Like I do

It's a bit like the rise of the AFL women's game. I played the sport and really enjoyed it, so I...

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