

in the Land of the Living

a journal of anarcho-primitivism and christianity



we are wretched and civilized



may we be holy and wild

in the of the Land Living

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In the Land of the Living is a collaborative publication drawing out themes of wildness and resistance in the Hebrew-Christian faith. We seek to reclaim the origins of this faith which are firmly rooted in resistance to civilization, with an emphasis on pursuing wildness and anarchy. We are interested in Christianity as resistance, not religion.

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Interview with Layla AbdelRahim

by Andy Lewis

Layla AbdelRahim grew up in different languages and cultures and in a variety of social and natural environments that spanned five continents. Her experience and occupations are just as multi-varied: journalism of war and international so-called development in North East Africa, anthropologist in Europe, wanderer, researcher and university lecturer, writer, and most important, an unschooling mother. In the last decade, she has been synthesizing these experiences and perspectives in critical essays on the domestication of parenthood and childhood as well as working on a doctoral dissertation on knowledge in children's books from an anti-authoritarian perspective while keeping a travelogue and a blog on learning matters.

Layla's presentation at the Anarchism and Christianity Conference held in Memphis this past August was one of the most inspiring and insightful talks I've ever attended. Her trenchant analysis focuses on topics such as childhood development, domestication, literature, civilization and language. Whether you're on board with anarcho-primitivist ideas or not, Layla's emotionally moving approach offers a depth of analysis which none but the most hopelessly civilized can deny. It's in hopes of inspiring vibrant discussion and action that we offer this interview with Layla AbdelRahim.

A- Your play, *Red Delicious* begins in the "Garden of Eternity" and addresses the causes and effects of The Fall into civilization. Could you talk a bit about some of the topics that come up in the play?

L- In writing that play it was almost as if I wasn't writing it. It was like the characters came and simply spoke, it was almost a mystical experience. Every play that I've written came by itself. So in a way I'm almost afraid to interpret it myself. The play touches on the topics I raise connected to childhood, the story of The Fall into civilization, and how the perversion of knowledge enters in with taking the forbidden apple from the tree. It addresses the disobedience and impatience of living outside of natural time. I actually wrote this play before I came across John Zerzan's powerful piece on time (*Time and its Discontents*). I'm glad, because I think after reading his critique of time and language that play would not have happened. I just kind of lived the play as I was writing it.

Time and impatience go together. It seems as if all these dualities enter in with the civilized mode because the meaning has been perverted, knowledge has been turned upside down. If we alienate ourselves, if we cut ourselves off from the world, we call it knowledge. But it's ignorance. By wanting to conquer time we enter the mode of impatience and of time as a construct. When you're impatient, that's when time ticks, otherwise you're out in the world like gatherer hunters as Marshall Sahlins shows. Out in the world seasons happen, cycles happen, and so much more. We can't say definitively what really happens in the world; we

can only tune in and feel. We can know things that way.

So, all our suffering seems to be symbolized by The Fall, picking the apple. Oppressive sexuality comes in with The Fall. Nudity becomes part of knowledge because that knowledge becomes the gaze of the other for purposes of power. The one who gazes defines the one who is gazed upon. The gazer suppresses the other by constructing this perversion of knowledge, civilized knowledge. As a result he becomes deaf to the other, blind to who the other truly is. Clothing becomes part of the separation. The more clothed a person is, the more veiled, the more nude, the more wanted, the more consumed he becomes.

It's funny how it seems like civilization just turned everything upside down. The scenes that take place in complete darkness in the play connect this critique with childhood and learning: children and all creatures learn that which makes sense easily. When the things that make sense in the wild are perverted and inverted by civilized knowledge, then learning becomes difficult. Learning becomes a painful and arduous process because the things children are made to learn make no sense.

Some people who read the play saw the ending as pessimistic, but I'm not sure why. I see it as optimistic, for, in the end a woman and her child walk around picking fruit and singing. What else could you want?

A- Children are born wild and even as they come into contact with the deadening process of domestication they generally retain a much greater attunement of their senses than adults. To what extent do you think children can be guides for parents?

L- Even though children are born into this perverted context they have not had their true knowledge perverted yet. That's why the pre-lingual stage is really important. This stage is the time for visual attunement, seeing the world for what it is. It's the linguistic pedagogy that imposes itself and really drums into children that what they're seeing is not valid, that it's the language to define what their seeing that is important. So, as children adapt to being linguistically apt beings they become alienated from what they see. They start seeing through language.

Language is schizophrenia. There's a famous experiment in psycho-linguistics where people from different linguistic groups were flashed various shades of the same color to see if there was a difference in cognition between those groups who had only one word for a color versus those groups with different words for different shades. In Russian, for example, there is a different word for light blue and blue. Whereas in English there is only one word, blue, you modify it with light or dark. So the experiment found that those who spoke languages like English, which have only primary color terms, saw different shades of the same color as the same (i.e. they identified light blue and dark blue as simply blue). Whereas those with different words for the different shades always identified them as separate colors.

What does this tell us? It tells us that cognition is shaped by language. How does it affect children? Well, it domesticates them by imposing words as experience. It tells us that maybe if we tune into their questions without ready made answers we could be amazed.

Don't be ready with the answer, question it, question it together with the child. In domestication the child will always resent the parents because the child is forced to renounce her own, wild purpose and meaning. But this is not a natural state; it's civilized. In a state of wildness, the parent-child relationship is so much more pleasant, so much more fulfilling, so much more relaxed.

Psychologists, anthropologists, and other "observers" of human and animal nature view this conflict in civilized parent-child relations as something natural and ineluctable, but still, no one can really explain it and what remains obvious is that under civilized conditions childhood, parenthood, adulthood – that is, life in general is arduous, while in the wild, even if it offers a much wider range of experience, there is an underlying permanence of leisure and warmth.

A- Could you talk a bit about the importance of addressing issues such as domestication, civilization, language, symbolic culture, topics that are generally marginalized and looked at as abstract philosophical constructs with no application in daily life?

L- The whole premise of domestication is based on resources, which means consumption. The more you want to consume the more you have to invent. So you have to invent time to feed impatience. If you take away food people will be hungry. If you want food you better do something for it. So the lives of hungry people are consumed along with their dreams and purpose. What is the purpose of a domesticated human? -- To consume and be consumed. In the wild we don't know what the purpose is for human and non-human animals. For those who believe in God, God created the purpose. For those who believe in spirits, it's the spirits who create the purpose. For those who don't believe in anything, it's an accident, but there it is. Only in domestication will you have a situation where you say "everything is here for me to do as I please." And what comes out of that is an incredible tragedy, because freedom and purpose are imprisoned and killed.

Domestication turns everything you want in life into a commodity. How often have you heard a parent say "I've invested so much in my children"? What does that mean? It can mean only one thing and it only occurs with domestication: that children are your commodity, an investment. In the wild children are not yours so you cannot invest in them to bring you dividends; you can only give them the tools to live in this world.

To educate children in the system of domestication makes them handicapped, sterile. They are not given the tools to live, they are given the tools to become someone's food! Education crushes the child and inflicts brutal suffering. We are so alienated from our own suffering from our own meaning with the help of language and the various aspects of domestication. For example, how often do you hear doctors, friends, family tell mothers that they are doing their child a service by abandoning them in the crib at night, alone? They tell mothers they are giving their child the skills to be independent. No! You're alienating the child from your protection, from your love. You're alienating yourself from your instinct to respond to the crying of that child and giving it comfort and protection. And this happens only under domestication because in any other context the mother, the community would respond. Even within the realm of domestication you can sometimes see this natural response. We have a cat that never had kittens but will nurse kittens that are not hers. The cat doesn't justify a lack of empathy by saying to the kitten, "I'm giving you the

skills to be self-sufficient.” It’s the topsy-turvy meaning. You aren’t getting the kid independent and ready to be self-sufficient; you’re getting her alienated from her pain and when the child becomes an adult, she will know nothing else. And how will that adult respond to someone else’s crying if her first lesson in life has been that no one comes when you cry alone in the dark?

A- If anarcho-primitivism provides a critique of the oppressive elements we’re traumatized by, what role does empathy play in undoing that trauma, in healing?

L- Like anything in a civilized context, empathy too is subject to that inverted knowledge. It can be subverted into the opposite of what we think we’re trying to achieve, which is healing, atonement with the world. If you sincerely care about someone else, then what are you going to do about it? Are you ready to give up what you want if it is going to hurt someone? Or the only motivator of change is the concern for your own sustainability?

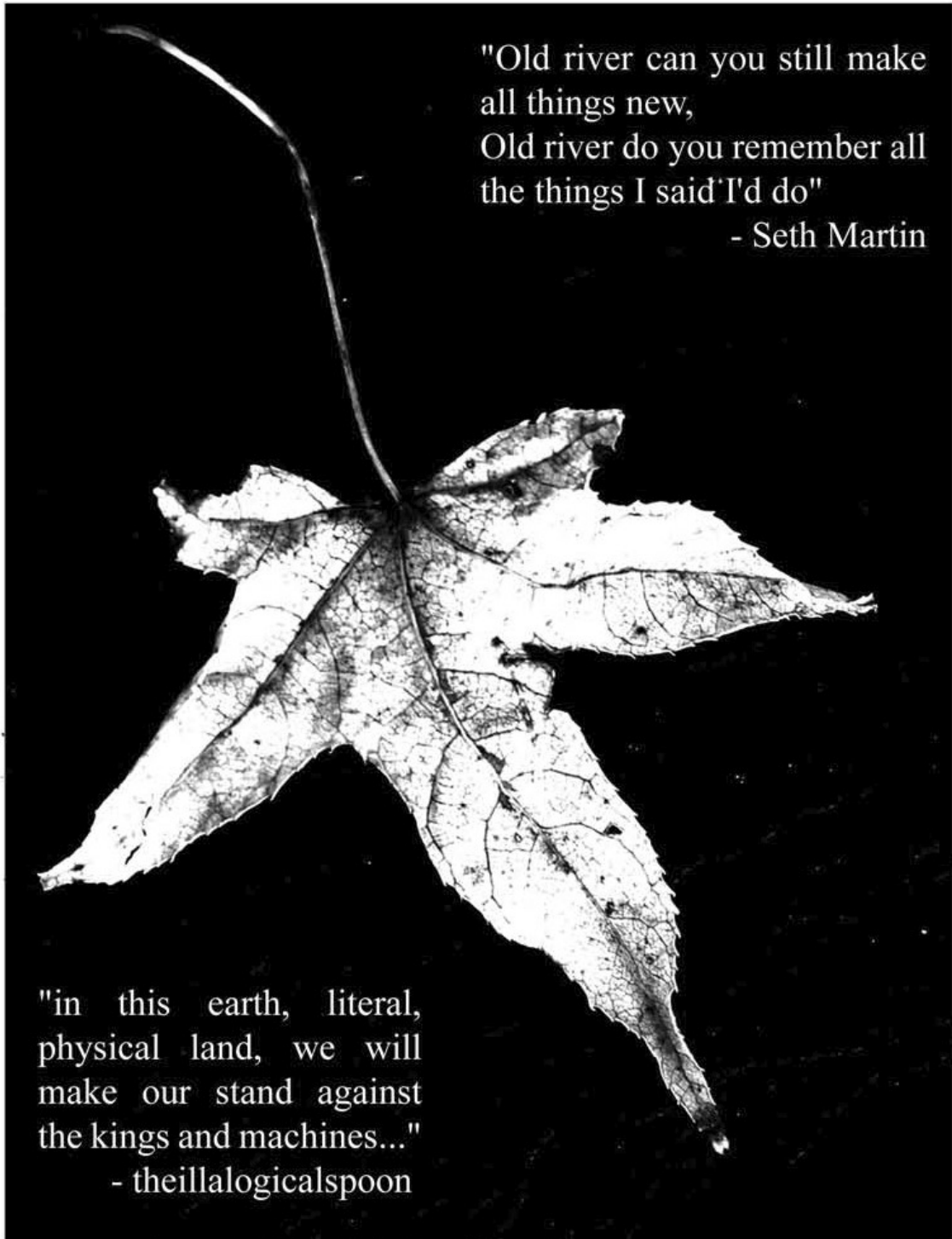
Everything is “sustainable” nowadays. But, is the only measure of sustainability our measure? It’s this civilized meaning, this greed that tells us that the only reason for a change is because it’s dangerous for “us.” So if it’s dangerous for 100,000 species it’s ok but if it’s not sustainable for us, then it isn’t.

If you feel what the other feels, though, you become aware of the other's pain. So, empathy has to be a part of healing. When I talk about empathy though, I do not mean the relief that one feels after having verbally lamented with someone, even wept perhaps, but then continues to act as if nothing happened. I’ve seen wealthy people that love to commiserate. They don’t miss an African film festival. They’re the first in line for films about AIDS in Africa or dying children, and oh how they cry! During the film they really feel. You should see the tear soaked napkins that fill the garbage afterwards! But then they go out and discuss what they’ve seen over a fancy dinner, “Oh how we feel for these children!” And they feel really good about it and about themselves. They feel elevated spiritually. As a result of this, maybe, they’ll give a \$20 bill to a homeless person on the way to their fancy car. But they would never give up the car or the lifestyle that allows them to practice this voyeurism into other people's pain and without doing anything to eradicate it from the root; because real expiation entails giving up your privileges that, in the first place, could have only been acquired at the expense of others. So, the privilege to see a film about dying children in Africa can come only at the expense of those children’s lives that get consumed by the voyeur.

Empathy brings responsibility. How much are you willing to do and to suffer in order to alleviate the suffering of others? If 100,000 species are going to be destroyed by your desire, is your desire worth it? If one person is going to suffer from your desire shouldn’t you question it? Maybe it’s sustainable to kill all your neighbors, it will make more space. So are you going to do it because it’s sustainable or will you not do it because it will hurt them? And the term neighbor should extend beyond humans. My neighbors are skunks, my neighbors are raccoons, my neighbors are mice, the birds and the cats. How are you going to live with these neighbors and so many more we don’t see? What will I do to not hurt these neighbors?

Ultimately the anarcho-primitivist critique comes in because it's the only honest critique that really goes all the way to the end of the logic. Where does the logic of the machine go? Alienation, subversion of knowledge, domestication – what have these done? Obviously for anarcho-primitivists there cannot be only one answer to the question “what is to be done?” But we can begin by asking how do we truly empathize with our neighbors, the worms, the birds, the sky.

The works of Layla AbdelRahim can be read at www.miltsov.org



"Old river can you still make
all things new,
Old river do you remember all
the things I said I'd do"
- Seth Martin

"in this earth, literal,
physical land, we will
make our stand against
the kings and machines..."
- theillalogicalspoon

REFLECTIONS ON JOHN ZERZAN AND LAYLA ABDELRAHIM AT THE ANARCHISM AND CHRISTIANITY CONFERENCE

by Andy Lewis

This year's conference was very well attended with a decisively primitivist feel to the weekend. Having John Zerzan and Layla AbdelRahim there certainly added to the interest and dialogue throughout the event. While some may have been hesitant about the possibility of a connection between anarcho-primitivism and Christianity, Zerzan made it clear that he is very open to ongoing collaboration and discussion. If anyone hasn't heard John's glowing report of the conference (and this publication) on his radio show, check it out at archive.org, type in "anarchy radio" in the search window and it's the 8-18-09 show.

Layla AbdelRahim's talk on Saturday afternoon was amazing. In the preface to the interview with her in this issue, I said her session was one of the most inspiring and insightful presentations I've ever attended. Speaking with people afterwards confirmed my impression that this was much more than a typical session. Layla's measured tempo and well defined terms maximized the effect of her shattering analysis concerning children, parents and domestication. These are topics that effect all of us deeply in one way or another and she made some very moving connections that were at once heartbreaking and hopeful. It was heartbreaking to realize the depth of alienation that plagues children as they are plunged into the horrors of domestication and civilization. But it was even more hopeful to realize the potential for healthy children and parents if we simply open ourselves to "the other", the undomesticated self. Layla made it clear that children fight the domestication process with all they have and adults can and should do the same.

John Zerzan's keynote presentation on Friday evening was very thorough and laid the groundwork for intelligent conversation throughout the weekend. John made it clear that he's not a computer technician at the start of his talk as he struggled with the audio-visual setup for his presentation. Although it was clear that not everyone agreed with John's critique or fully understood it (a couple of comments relating to citizenship may have been better received at a Derrick Jensen talk) for the most part those in attendance were familiar with the basic ideas of an anarcho-primitivist perspective. Zerzan's honest openness to Christian engagement with these ideas was a big highlight for those of us who have been delving into these connections. This isn't to say that an honest look at differences isn't just as crucial, but for this event connections were the point of emphasis. Everyone I talked to came away with the highest regard for John as someone who is authentically approachable, engaged and interested in listening as much or more than talking.

I don't think I'm overstating it when I say that John and Layla's open and honest engagement throughout the weekend won over a lot of people who had their doubts about anarcho-primitivists coming into this conference. Reading Zerzan or AbdelRahim's works is enhanced in many ways after you meet them. It's impossible to meet these two and not be impressed by their heartfelt motivations. They certainly aren't writing and speaking about this stuff to get rich. There's a real commitment and desire to bring these ideas into

the open, to initiate healing. They provide a wonderful example for those of us who seek to undertake projects rooted in love.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The full effect of this conference will undoubtedly play out over the next few years. Some of the results we're hoping for include;

1. Serious engagement with these ideas from The New Monasticism Movement, Emergent Church, Catholic Workers, biblical scholars, theologians, Ecclesia Project etc..
2. A break from the Leftist framework that has defined radical Christian critique and action for far too long.
3. Thoroughly bring to light the connections between domestication, civilization, racism, sexism and homophobia. Increased engagement with those whose voices are often marginalized and oppressed due to race, gender and sexual orientation.
4. A hermeneutic rooted in civilization critique.
5. More publications, conferences, primitive skills gatherings, discussions, songs, bands etc... in short we want to see more going on.
6. Increased familiarity with anarcho-primitivist/ anti-civ/ green anarchist writers, publications and projects.

This summer seems to have been a breakthrough for these ideas and there's no reason to think this momentum will do anything but grow. More and more radical Christians are awakening to the fact that the basic underpinnings of a biblical critique of power go far beyond empire to the very roots of civilization. There are a lot of people joining the conversation but after a while the same basic question always seems to come up.... "What are we going to do?" It's my sincere hope that we don't leap to address this question at the expense of a thorough understanding of the problems and a deep sense of origins. Likewise, we should be wary of any answer that is monolithic in its approach. We should be attempting to sort these things out together. There are undoubtedly answers which will be communal and others which will be personal. It's tempting to say rewilding is what we should do, but that only serves to reify the whole thing. Primitive skills, conferences, writing, speaking, listening, bonfires, wild people, wild places, non human animals, music, play, adventure, faith, hope, love, all play a part in finding the answers. But we should always be ready to question any and all answers. Perhaps one path to discerning the appropriate response(s) to the question at hand is to be patient, focused, steadfast and prayerful in our commitment to have ears to hear and eyes to see. If we can trust that which is wild, the very source of wildness, if we open ourselves to living faith, the path ahead may twist and turn in a way we never imagined. - Andy