

# Permaculture Design

Regenerating Life Together

## Decolonizing Permaculture



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Winter  
2015  
No. 98  
Suppl.



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*Permaculture Design* is an independent journal serving the permaculture movement in North America. We aim to provide information useful to people actively working to establish permaculture systems "on the ground."

For subscriptions, advertisements, editorial submissions, and all correspondence write: Post Office Box 60669, Sunnyvale, CA 94088 USA. Please see page 64 for complete subscription information.

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**Permaculture Design**  
Post Office Box 60669  
Sunnyvale, CA 94088 USA

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**Upcoming Issues, Themes & Deadlines**

#99	Ecological Restoration	December 1
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#101	Permaculture at Work	June 1



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# The View from the Garden

John Wages

I HAVE TO CONFESS that I was skeptical at first about the “Decolonizing Permaculture” theme. Why can’t we stay focused on growing food and the other material and technical aspects of sustainable culture? Why can’t we fix all the world’s problems in the garden?

It’s a fun, worthwhile project to plant a garden, build soil, put in some perennials, and experiment with guilds. There’s nothing I love more than planting a garden and watching it grow. Once I grew a field of sunflowers—a whole quarter acre or so of them, can you imagine? Quite a sight.

But, we shouldn’t pretend that building a sustainable 25-acre farm is necessarily permanent. In today’s world, the State could take the land in a heartbeat through eminent domain. In northeast Mississippi, the regional development authority was so determined to entice Toyota to build an automobile plant that it convinced the state to use eminent domain to take the land of multiple homeowners on the future industrial site. Some of them fought it in the courts, but all of them lost. Sure, they were paid, but what about the land? What if I developed a food forest on my property? Perhaps the railroad would be re-routed out of downtown and through the country, through my land. In fact, the new highway by-pass came close enough that it took a sliver of land on the far side of the property. We were lucky to escape with only a tiny loss of land and an increase in traffic noise. There would be a zero percent chance of saving my food forest because society does not value such things the way they value automobile factories and highways.

Hence the importance of invisible structures and “politics.”

And then, after reading the articles, it seemed unquestionable that people had encountered divisive, unconstructive, even racist and sexist behavior in permaculture courses and gatherings. People aren’t making up these stories. Still, as some of our readers have pointed out, the rhetoric in some cases became perhaps too strident, and painted the whole of permaculture with too broad a brush. We have several excellent letters that we published in #99, and thoughtful readers continue to send

feedback on Decolonizing Permaculture. Expect a bit more in #100.

Sometimes, we need to be disturbed. We need someone to point out things in our lives and our relationships with others, which we ourselves have trouble seeing—things that we cannot observe directly. Decolonizing society is of unquestionable importance. We should start with ourselves, with permaculture.

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The theme of this issue enticed more writers, and more heartfelt writing, than any issue with which I’ve been involved. That speaks volumes about its importance. I don’t see myself as an expert in anything preceded by the word “social,” so I’ll leave it at that.

We received so many articles that we felt it appropriate to put together a Supplement. In addition to the articles we were unable to publish, due to hard page limits on the print edition, we have included a few others.

For those of our readers who are primarily interested in gardening, food forestry, and the like, let me say that the *Activist* has always run about one issue per year dealing with social permaculture or invisible structures. We are not changing this practice. *Permaculture Design* intends to continue this tradition, seasoning the mix with some tangible “Skills & Practices” in every issue. Note that we have begun this section with #98. If you’d like to contribute an article for this section, please drop us a line. Articles that describe waterworks, pond building, chicken tractoring, specific plants and their needs, seedsaving, or anything else fundamental to the traditional permaculture experience, are welcome.

If you’re reading this issue for the first time, please download our sample issue (the Seeds issue from Feb. 2014) as a pdf. If what you read appeals to you, and if you think permaculture has serious potential to change the world, we hope you’ll consider subscribing. Δ

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## SPECIAL THANKS

to RHONDA BAIRD for ironing out the issues with our first downloadable edition (#99) while continuing to do an exemplary job with the layout of our print editions, through many last-minute revisions;

to KEITH JOHNSON for managing the website through the last year’s transition,

and to our growing number of SUBSCRIBERS, who have suffered through this Publisher’s long learning curve.



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# Requests from the People of Color Caucus at the North America Permaculture Convergence

**D**URING THE FIRST North American Permaculture Convergence (NAPC) in August 2014, self-organized people of color (POC) and white allies (Allies) identified a need to address issues of race and racism within the permaculture movement. After meeting separately as POC and Allies caucuses, the groups came together and endorsed the following points as powerful requests of all leaders and practitioners within the permaculture movement of North America.

We gathered in a circle, surrounded by the wider group on the morning of the last day as three members of the POC caucus, Uma Lo (NYC), Anandi Premalall (NYC) and Louis “Babalu” Alemayehu (Minneapolis/St.Paul), took the mic and shared our requests and a poem.

POC and Allies gather inside the Sunday morning circle to make heartfelt requests of our community.

The following requests and associated suggestions represent a place to start the long journey toward inclusive community, rather than a conclusive and comprehensive list of appropriate actions. They are practical ways to counteract interlocking social, cultural, and economic systems that perpetuate domination and structural disparity. They are concrete ways to demonstrate that affirming the human dignity of all matters to you.

DRAFTED AUGUST 30, 2014

1. Include/provide anti-oppression training as content for all permaculture gatherings such as the NAPC, PDCs, or other



2014 Morning gathering at NAPC. Photo by Rhonda Baird.

regional gatherings.

- Treat this training/content as an integrated focal point of the gathering, and schedule it in such a way that it is easily accessible and highly visible.
- In particular, we challenge/encourage permaculture teachers and leaders to seek out anti-oppression training, and to identify concrete ways to incorporate it into their work and their lives. (There is a big difference between “knowing about” systems of oppression and acting as if it matters.)
- We encourage anyone who finds these recommendations or anti-oppression training confusing to seek support from others, especially white allies, to understand why and how it is important, useful, and relevant.

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**We request that inclusive language be affirmed in every aspect of permaculture work....**

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2. We request that as we reconnect with the land through the practice of permaculture, the permaculture community actively seeks out and publicly acknowledges both the history and current reality of the land as it relates to struggles against colonization, conquest, and oppression.

- This means actively seek out the history of the land and the First Nations that lived there.
- This means actively finding out about the modern status of First Nations communities that are still there, and other groups like migrant workers who may be struggling for livelihoods on land near you, urban farmers seeking access to land, and communities being forced off of land due to gentrification.

3. We request that the permaculture movement acknowledge the historical rights of Indigenous peoples to the land on which we gather. We ask event organizers to make a sincere request to use the land, as well as issue an invitation to the appropriate indigenous peoples to open events and/or bless the space before we gather.

- Acknowledge and affirm the ways in which ‘permaculture



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design' is drawn directly from the wisdom of indigenous cultures; (Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, the "inventors" of permaculture, codified knowledge drawn largely from observing and learning directly from Aboriginal and indigenous peoples.)

4. We request that gatherings be staffed with both American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters and language interpreters, as needed.

5. We request that inclusive language be affirmed in every aspect of permaculture work—invitations to events, courses, workshops, texts, etc.

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## **...when doing outreach to communities of color, organizers and leaders in permaculture develop full, rich, symbiotic relationships....**

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- Find ways of expressing permaculture concepts that are culturally appropriate for the communities you are working with; focus on the essence of the learning rather than normative jargon/labels.
- Invite participation of local communities.

6. We request that permaculture gatherings make space for appreciating multiple generations that may be present.

7. We request that when doing outreach to communities of color, organizers and leaders in permaculture develop full, rich, symbiotic relationships with communities of color, rather than developing tokenistic relationships or 'recruitment' strategies.

- We request that permaculture organizers consider their events opportunities for proactive and fun intercultural exchange and learning; and that they consider seriously how scheduling, food, and music make an event more or less accessible to different groups of people.

8. We request that permaculture event designers engage with people of color and other marginalized groups about designing reserved safe spaces at events, or designing for support.

- These are spaces that are available to people to gather where they are more likely to be able to experience relief/rest from prevailing expressions of white domination, privilege, and supremacy—for example, Queer / Trans / POC space.
- When doing outreach for a program or vetting re: scholarships or assistance, design to have more than one person of an under-represented group. The experience of being isolated/alone can reproduce or generate new traumas re: oppression and alienation.

9. We request that the permaculture community work together, as friends (rather than as saviors or exotifiers), to do the healing work necessary for ourselves, our communities, and our earth.

- We acknowledge that the phrase 'ally' positions us in a battle, and pits some of 'us' against others of 'us.' Instead, consider the invitation to be a 'friend'—to take opportunities to show care and consideration and to recognize and treat as fully human everyone in 'our community.' Δ

### ***Agroforestry and Forest Garden Network***

The network, based in the UK, invites more participants from North America to participate in sharing their forest garden with others. It is up to members to choose and arrange any visits from the list that they are interested in – please follow instructions given with each invite.

For more information, contact:

Agroforestry & Forest Garden Network  
A.R.T., 46 Hunters Moon, Dartington, Totnes, Devon,  
TQ9 6JT, UK  
Email: [mail@agroforestry.co.uk](mailto:mail@agroforestry.co.uk)  
<https://www.agroforestry.co.uk>



# A Black Woman Practicing Permaculture

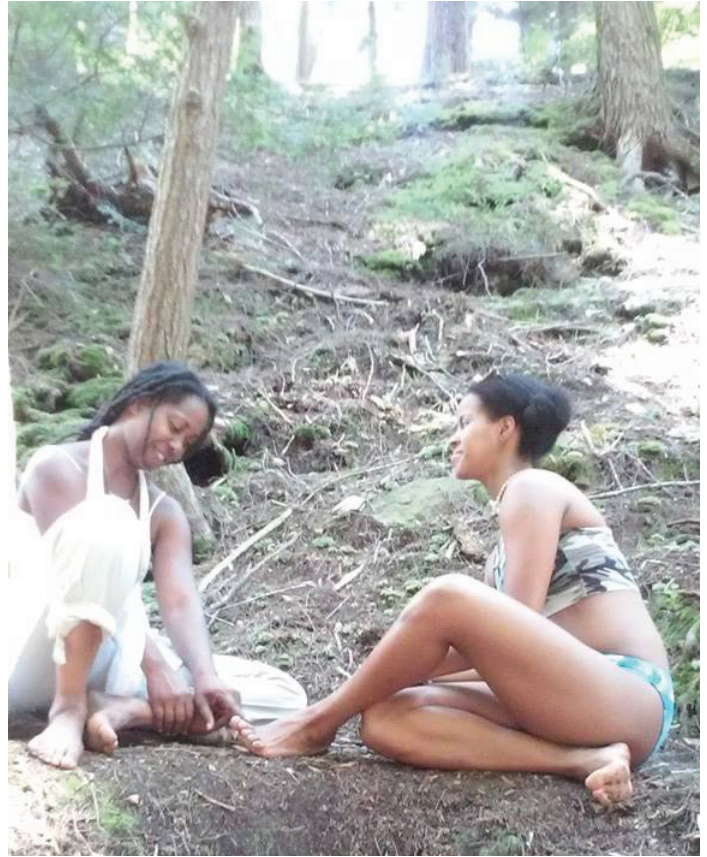
Kirtrina Baxter

**I**T WAS AROUND THE YEAR 2006 when I first learned of permaculture. It seemed a natural addition to my Earth-centered lifestyle. I was living in Upstate NY at the time, and a group of us went over to Davenport to hear a man speak about these practices. It would be a few years later before I would learn he was considered one of the “superstars” of the permaculture movement.

At the time, it was not uncommon for me and my child to be the only people of color in a setting. So as such, I was not surprised this event was just the same. Two years later, I met Monica Ibacache, who was the first person of color I met who had ever heard of permaculture at the time. It was refreshing. We talked about various natural living practices as we sat in our friend’s geodesic home and dreamed of a future that would include many such structures and thoughtful living among diverse people.

During this time, I had dreams of multi-cultural communities of people settling on land and living in harmony with nature. Indeed, I had moved Upstate from Philadelphia to do just that, as my eclectic friend group had the idea that we would migrate up and live off-grid on the land. Though some of us moved up at separate times, we each moved to different counties, most of us not at all, then we barely saw each other again. However, the original goal was to one day live together on this piece of land owned by one of our friends, where we camped yearly.

I began taking a PDC in 2010 with the Finger Lakes Permaculture Institute (FLPCI) in Ithaca. I agreed to host it at the center where I worked because they wanted to offer the community access to this knowledge. I was program manager at a historically black community center, and discounted tuition was offered to



*Kirtrina Baxter and her daughter, Enlylh, who is going to Spelman College this fall to major in Environmental Engineering. Photo by The Baxter Family.*

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**How is it that these permaculture principles speak to me, yet the movement does not?**

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any residents of color. One came, in addition to me. In a town with few people of color—and even fewer into sustainable living—permaculture did not speak to my community. Although I couldn’t complete the course because of work responsibilities,

the land design aspect was of interest to me. I still had hopes of someday “living with the land.”

At the time, I was farming with young people and gardening with community members, and constantly learning new information, so this opportunity was welcome. I was friends with the teachers at FLPCI, and I knew we were all sharing and learning much of the same information.

During my nine years of living in Upstate NY, I came together with various groups of people looking to form intentional communities. We did a lot of research, made a lot of plans, and shared a lot of dreams. One problem was that my daughter and I were usually the only people of color. For the group, that was a boon on the multicultural side—for me, not so much. Later, I would realize that there were elements of how I express myself as a black woman that could never be fully experienced in these circles. There was no one who could truly understand and share in these moments of self-expression, which in part, is what





*Soil Generation, the garden coalition that Kirtrina organizes in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*

makes us who we are: the ability to express our culture. Be it kneeling in prayer at sunrise, evening seder, or a Sunday dinner, how we express ourselves among like people is very particular. Anyone with whom I shared my customs, would always be a participant-observer, and never be able to fully understand. To dedicate myself to a life-long environment where it seemed unlikely for me to have those shared experiences, was a lonely thought.

### **Cross-cultural kinship**

At this point, I was questioning my purpose. Because my life path has led me to be one of Gaia's servants, was I destined to be a scarce resource in the landscape of natural living? Indeed not. For She always provides for her children, and over the last few years, I have been blessed to connect with many other people of color who are dedicated to work and care for the land. I share customs with some of them; with others, I willingly exchange in the stories of our cultures because we share a common bond of oppression that has led us to have shared experiences in life. The times when we are together are rich and filled with laughter and stories of family and growth, yet are always rimmed with the sorrow of our struggles.

I once met a Lakota woman and as we came together through stories of injustice and violence to our people, we bonded with the similarities of our experiences. However, the evening ended with her telling me a story of a ritual recently performed for the first time in a long time on her reservation. She spoke of the awe-inspired faces and the pride in the stance of the young boys and children as they watched the warriors of their tribe riding in, massed on their large, beautiful, horses. Children called out the names of those warriors with whom they felt a kinship in that moment, straightening up the backs of those men on horseback,

bringing tears to the elders who watched on with remembrance and hope. She spoke of how the young people cheered the warriors on, as they circled the group and then rode back up the mountain.

The watering of my eyes as we said our goodbyes, knowing we had shared an intimate moment of historic cultural preservation, solidified our kinship. We both saw our young ones embrace their heritage with honor and pride, knowing that historic cultural knowledge holds the seeds of our lineage. This knowledge, be it rooted in the core of their being, will produce a trunk or shield of courage against the injustice they will inevitably suffer in this life, then branch out to bestow the arms of our heritage, which is essential for the fruit to flourish on the tree that is our people. The tree must stand strong to survive in this hostile environment and to produce more seeds. To know at once, in that last glance between us, that this was our shared reality was priceless to me.

These moments—this understanding among us—requires that we question our associations. And so as I have been blessed

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## **Whether or not people of color choose to embrace permaculture will depend on the movement's ability to acknowledge those cultures whose existence paved the way for this knowledge.**

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also to meet more people of color in permaculture over the last three years, we are asking ourselves and each other: how is it that these permaculture principles speak to me, yet the movement does not? In trying to answer this for myself, I'm stricken with the reminder of how I felt living in Upstate NY and seeking to build community with those who did not share my experiences. However, I'm also empowered through my knowledge and understanding that these practices are a part of who I am, as a descendant of an agrarian people, as a follower of the God-dess and that they have been transferred down to me through my lineage, in my DNA.

On indigenous ways of knowing, sharing this truth with other people of indigenous descent in permaculture who may or may not have already known this fact, is always revealing to me in certain responses: first, of a sense of pride in being validated for an innate feeling of rightness in these principles and practices, and second, the moment of awareness when the familiar sense of injustice in the way in which this knowledge is being



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transferred sinks in. To deny or devalue the depth of importance that preservation of historic cultural knowledge and expression is to a people, is unjust.

### ***On creating a diverse community***

The reality of a shared community of diverse cultural peoples is possible when there is a space for each of these groups to express their culture among themselves as well as with others, freely. A desire to be among people with similar or shared experiences should not be viewed in opposition of diversity. On the contrary, it is with combined groups of cultural representation that allow for a strength in diversity, not with select individuals. Cultural continuity relies heavily on the unified beliefs, acts, and practices of a people. Without this, culture is weakened, and it cannot sustain itself alongside other cultural groupings. It will eventually wither away or become something more akin to a larger cultural group. This lessens the sentiment of diversity, which is the desired goal.

Interestingly enough, what I realized after being in Upstate NY for nine years, searching for this multi-cultural experience with nature, is that I was a lot closer to that in Philadelphia, an urban setting. The city hosts peoples from all over the world, and though we may not all live in the same neighborhood or be surrounded by woods, we each still have a portion of the city that feels like home. Because of this, our cultural ways can be passed down and our traditions honored among ourselves, even if not to others. So, I love it when I visit my friend from Vietnam in South Philly, and I can breathe in the aroma of the spices of her culture coming from the kitchens of families on the block preparing for an evening meal. Or when I'm driving through 5th & Aramingo, and I hear the bomba of Puerto Rico blaring from the speaker on the corner store. These things let me know that although we may not have equal access to institutional benefits, we will continue to be! We have access to each other, and that allows us to remain strong in who we are, which in turn will enrich our struggle for equality.

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## **...there must be an establishment of culture-specific spaces at convergences and meetings....**

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As for permaculture, my feeling is that it draws from these living and ancestral sources of indigenous knowledge and hordes it as its own—the cultural expression of it, changed; the ancient nature of it, re-claimed; the practices boxed up and sold off as an invention of white male privilege or practicality,

depending on your experience. Yet, as the movement naturally progresses onward, the question is asked, how do we decolonize permaculture? The white practitioners cannot seem to grasp the fundamental importance nor the profound difference of proclaiming these cultural truths outwardly. What would that mean for the practitioners who are descendants of indigenous people, indeed what would that give toward a just transition of society?

It was not until last summer when I was invited out to the North American Permaculture Convergence, and I was able to meet and talk with more people of color in permaculture, that as a food activist, I felt my presence within the movement may be able to serve a larger purpose. So I am in the design phase of my PDC now.

### ***How do we diversify permaculture?***

It is said that permaculture embraces all. Yet when its body is examined, there is a lack of cultural representation, and the question persists, how do we diversify permaculture? What I see today is a strong following of land stewards of color who practice ways of working in harmony with the natural environment, be that trees, rivers, plants, or people, in the city or in the country, on the farm or the reservation, or in the 'hood or a brownstone. All have found their way to an understanding of natural ways of living. The path that led them there may have come through an elder, a practice (such as permaculture, Ifa, or Wicca), or a divined personal journey. Will permaculture be the movement to embrace this body of land stewards? I don't know.

What I do know is whether or not people of color choose en masse to embrace permaculture, will depend on the movement's ability to acknowledge and honor those cultures, living and ancestral, whose existence paved the way for this knowledge to be synthesized, shared, and practiced. As well, there must be an establishment of culture-specific spaces at convergences and meetings when we come together, with the understanding that this is for strength and not division.

And what I know most is this: those of us descendants of indigenous people, who are living this natural way of being, will continue to grow and strengthen as we draw others, too, to put their hands in the soil, re-connect with the Mother, and accept the healing that She offers—and we goin' be alright. △

*Kirtrina M. Baxter, MA, is a dedicated food justice activist and community organizer. As an Agro-Africanist, she has a passion for nutrition, growing culturally-relevant food, seed-keeping, and awareness around the disparities in our food system that negatively affect communities of color. Kirtrina is currently the community organizer for the Garden Justice Legal Initiative—a program of the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia. She works with gardeners around the city, assisting them with access to land and other resources. In this capacity, she organizes Soil Generation, a diverse body of urban ag & food justice advocates who help inform policy and provide community education and support to gardeners in the city. Kirtrina also manages the green spaces at the Overbrook Environmental Education Center which includes a permaculture orchard, pollinator gardens, and a raised hoophouse.*

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# “Decolonizing Permaculture” Not a Metaphor

Kelda Lorax

WHILE IT'S TRUE that the analogy of decolonization within the permaculture movement is extremely useful in working on true care of people, I also want to remind readers and friends that decolonization is also not a metaphor (see Notes).

In an effort to be brief with difficult topics, pardon my bluntness in advance! To acknowledge my positionality before starting, I am a privileged white woman who grew up middle class. I have the time to write articles, and my parents own a second home in Hawaii (this will be interesting in a couple paragraphs).

De-colonizing literally means giving land back to indigenous peoples. We permaculturists work on solutions of stewardship and land access, thus the practice of a colonizer class giving lands back to indigenous people is one we should be learning about and promoting. Yes, this can be fraught with difficulty, but we are designers and we can do this.

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## Our feeling of Rightfulness is what white supremacy looks like....

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De-colonizing also means giving credit and resources where credit is due and resources have been taken away. Though we often say that permaculture is ‘the cutting edge of a 10,000 year old technology,’ exactly whose technologies was it based upon? Mollison admits that his autobiography on this topic is a pack of lies, but we desperately need to catalog this history in order to begin to make it right. Every time we practice food forests, polycultures, plant varieties, or anything the permaculture colonizer class literally takes for granted, we should know whose ancestors’ sweat and hard work went into creating those techniques, who carries that knowledge now, what sovereignty issues they may be struggling with, and how we can advocate for them or even give them money. For example, biochar originated in the Xingu region of the Amazon watershed, where today the descendants of that heritage are battling the construction of the world’s 3rd largest hydroelectric dam that threatens 500 square miles of rainforest, as well as traditional way of life. We need to talk about their ancestors’ hard work (biochar) and also give a context for them as a contemporary culture that would probably welcome the Permaculture movement’s resources and assistance in order to continue to simply survive as a culture. Our planet is not just facing species extinction, but culture extinction as well. We need to know history up to the modern day; this is especially

true for those of us who make a living (ie, get paid resources) teaching (appropriating) what indigenous ancestors took thousands of years to cultivate.

Colonization is still happening through the Trojan horse of permaculture. White European descendants buying up land in the two-thirds world—even if they intend to create a permaculture haven—IS, quite literally, colonization. It invites more white people, raises land prices, and leaves less land available to the comparatively poor locals to themselves steward through traditional means. I’ll go ahead and say that I don’t think white people should be living in Hawaii (so you can imagine how I feel about white landowners in Latin America), and I think prejudice towards *hoalies* there is well-deserved. It is noble to want to make a place better, but truly that can also be done by giving resources and time (including permaculture design courses on the inhabitant’s own terms) to the people of that place making it better themselves. Teaching a man to fish is not the same as occupying a man’s place to fish and never leaving. Plus, plenty of international permaculture students would be interested in giving money directly to locals who teach permaculture (and thus subsidizing education to locals), rather than to the white intermediaries who currently stand at the front of the classroom.

Nobody said decolonization would be easy, or that white people would be able to participate without giving up things they feel entitled to. If my words above raise some defenses, or if there’s a feeling of “but I’m a better kind of white person, and my reasons are so right,” know that I definitely relate to racist wet-blanket moments myself. If you’re white and if you’re privileged, remember that even the ability to self-determine choices like vocation and location, that many of us are accustomed to, is not granted to the rest of the world. Our feeling of Rightfulness is what white supremacy looks like; it’s what we’ve been taught to do, and we can work to question our rightfulness and undo this. To quote Reinhold Neihbur: “Be willing to sacrifice who you are to what you are willing to become.” Δ

*Kelda Lorax began studying permaculture in the 90s, interned at the Bullock’s Permaculture Homestead, and helped restore the Seattle Permaculture Guild. She co-taught and led several PDC’s, and is currently on the board of the Northwest Permaculture Convergence. Visit her website: [divinearthgp.com](http://divinearthgp.com). She credits Dean Jackson ([hilltopurbangardens.org](http://hilltopurbangardens.org)), whose conversation guided this article and much else.*

### Notes

Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1: 1-40 (2012). [decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/view/18630/15554](http://decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/view/18630/15554)

Balasubramanian, Janani, “What do we mean when we say ‘colonized’?” *blackgirldangerous.org* (2013).



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# Restorative Justice and Permaculture

## Peas in a Pod

Jonathon McRay

**P**EACEBUILDING AND SUSTAINABILITY often treat one another with suspicion. Both fields obscure the unbreakable lifeline between them with oversimplified arguments like “social justice versus the environment” or “jobs versus nature preserves.” Artificial distinctions between people and planet are dangerously misleading because our lives and all their conflict and health come from soil and sunlight. Economic inequity and political oppression are inseparable from the ruin of soil, forests, and water. All arise from structures and daily practices of exploitation, waste, supremacy, and violence. Sustainability will sustain nothing without challenging and transforming power and privilege. Peacebuilding cannot build peace unless it includes redistributing land use and renewing energy sources. We need much more than superficial mediation and fossil fuel efficiency.

### ***A Liberation Ecology***

We cannot divorce the social and the ecological because the former is sustained by and immersed in the latter. This is my central point: social justice and land care are intimately interrelated. To speak of one is necessarily to speak of the other.

***Nature shapes culture.*** Human cultures are always sustained by the land community (soil, water, air, plants, and animals). We have to eat. This rule has no exceptions.

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## The US now has more prisoners than farmers.

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Everywhere is different: The land community is endlessly diverse and unique across soils and seasons. No place is exactly the same because each one has distinctive capabilities and limitations.

Attention is required: Observant care is necessary to tend to diverse contexts and conditions. There is no global policy for justice or sustainability.

***Culture shapes nature.*** These contexts and conditions include human histories of nurture and exploitation that shape how the land is used, who cares for it and owns it, how decisions are made, and how the wealth is shared or not.

Histories of exploitation are histories of transferred trauma, from displacement to deforestation. “Hurt people” hurt people



*Nature and culture shape each other.*

and the land in a spiral of violence, forcefully represented by the industrial agricultural and prison systems.

The promise of 40 acres and a mule would have redistributed 400,000 acres of land to black families after the Civil War. Instead, the state compensated slave owners for losing their captives, a perverse reparation in reverse. New vagrancy laws enabled police to arrest homeless and unemployed black men, a common occurrence after Emancipation. Prisons then rented out convict labor to farms, factories, and mines. In Tennessee, my home state, the black population of Nashville’s main prison nearly doubled between 1865 and 1869. Convict leasing filled the South’s prisons with predominantly black men through a reiteration of slavery because, according to the 13th Amendment, prisoners are property. Rather than an inefficient vestige of agrarian societies, slave labor jumpstarted America’s Industrial Revolution and turned it into a capitalist empire. The US now has more prisoners, almost 40% of whom are black, than farmers, less than 1% of whom are black. The industrial food and prison systems beget rural communities with more prisons and fewer farms and urban communities with more criminalized people of color and less healthy affordable food. The history of industrial agriculture is the history of the prison system (1).

Monoculture and mass incarceration are defined by extraction of soil, water, and people; disconnection of cycles of nutrients and healing; waste of energy, money, and opportunities; enslavement of seeds and, constitutionally, of prisoners; extermination of plants, bugs, and people that are labeled pests; and uniform solutions to complex and contextual relationships. The mindsets and systems that disproportionately imprison people of color are the same ones that deplete the Earth and displace communities from their homelands. All the supposed benefits we receive (more food, less crime, efficient technology, improved quality of life) have murky externalities that we export to be

suffered faraway by inmates, overseas factory laborers, migrant workers, landfills, eroded fields, and dead zones. Rehabilitation—empowering good health and good skills—is impossible without reinhabitation: understanding ourselves as living within actual places on the Earth and developing the skills to live there well.

Restorative justice and permaculture are some of these skills, helpfully serving as particular expressions of general themes like peacebuilding, conflict transformation, land care, and sustainability. They need to unite because their cause is common. Our problems are too overlapping for fragmented and specialized interests to compete against one another. Instead of cookie-cutter solutions, a liberation ecology of social justice and Earth stewardship grows from polycultures of diversity and collaboration.

### ***Restorative justice: asking fair questions***

In criminal legal systems, crimes are violations of laws and offenses against the state, not against those harmed. The legal system often atomizes and alienates those who were harmed and those who harmed: stories of context and trauma are rarely heard except to prosecute people called “offenders,” who are sent to jails and prisons where they are further entrenched in destructive cycles and environments.

## **We can grow all the food we want, but without just and transformative responses to conflict, we will all be well-fed enemies.**

Justice, according to restorative justice, is not an eye for an eye or the antecedent to the American way. Instead, restorative justice is constituted by a set of questions, which are always more transformative than definitive answers:

1. Who has been hurt, and what are their needs?
2. Whose obligation is it to meet those needs (and what are their needs?)
3. Who else has been affected by this event?
4. What is a participatory process that engages all those impacted to decide what needs to be done?

These questions can aid communities in strengthening themselves by giving decisions to those involved instead of passing power to groups uninvested in and unaffected by the outcomes. Against the monoculture of mass incarceration, restorative justice is a flexible process that adapts to specific contexts and

depends on participation.

As a broad spectrum, restorative justice claims an ancient history in which traditional customs emphasized restitutions before centralized states monopolized the use of force and favored retributive responses. The guiding questions take many forms in courtrooms and communities because crime is understood as the cause and effect of broken relationships. The modern social movement includes a diversity of tactics from mediated encounters between victims and offenders to truth and reconciliation commissions in postwar transitions, from family group conferences to protecting survivors of domestic abuse, from school discipline to prison abolition. Two examples help illustrate these various methods.



*Restorative Justice workshop at Civics Summer. Photo by Daniel X. O’Neil. CC, accessed through flickr.*

In Chicago, Restorative Justice (RJ) Hubs are a community-led approach to transforming youth crime and conflict instead of depending on expensive imprisonment. RJ Hubs are hospitable community spaces where youth and families are mentored in building healthy relationships through addressing trauma and learning necessary skills. In doing so, communities share responsibility for neighborhood safety by reinvesting juvenile justice resources into places where youth violence is most concentrated. RJ Hubs intend to immediately reduce school suspensions and expulsions, but their long-term goal is to make juvenile detention facilities obsolete (2).

In Rio de Janeiro, one-fifth of the population lives in crowded *favela* shantytowns where drug gangs are the largest youth employer. In the mid-90s, Dominic Barter partnered with *favela* residents, including gang members, to create restorative circles, community processes for supporting those in conflict by convening the three parties most affected—those who have acted, those directly impacted, and the wider community—with-in a structured dialogue facilitated by a community member. The process attempts to identify the key factors in the conflict, reach agreements on next steps, and evaluate the results. Restorative circles prioritize listening and responding to what local people want rather than arriving with prepackaged answers (3).

Restorative justice’s name assumes more than its defini-



tion because we cannot restore justice to dead people or eroded soil. But restorative justice is more about tending to the present by giving room for conflict and preventing harms from further destroying lives than about reinstating an unattainable past. Its questions maintain a dual focus on specific harms and the personal and socioeconomic conditions that incite violence. Permaculture suggests that these same questions can and should be asked about abused landscapes and degraded watersheds.

## ***Everything is related***

Permaculture is a design strategy and land ethic for creating human communities that thrive on the wellbeing of their local ecosystems and those downstream. Permaculture is the design of functional relationships: learning how the gifts and needs of each element work with and benefit others. Everything is related.

For example, a tree does not multitask, that stressful attempt to simultaneously complete unrelated jobs, but it also never does only one thing. Simply by being itself, a tree holds and builds soil, stores and cleans water, sequesters carbon and produces oxygen, serves as habitat and windbreak, provides shade and moderates rainfall, shares nutrients and water through the gift economy of roots and microorganisms, and produces food, wood, medicine, and mulch. A tree is multifunctional, and the desire of permaculture is to design regenerative agricultures and sustainable cultures that imitate these patterns.

Our landscapes and watersheds are hurting, and we are obliged to listen to them and meet their needs, which is the only reliable way to meet our needs. Permaculture recognizes that all our food, fuel, and fiber come from nutrient and water cycles, energy flows, and the miraculous plant-and-soil conversion of sunlight and carbon dioxide into carbohydrates and oxygen.

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## **Sustainability will sustain nothing without challenging and transforming power and privilege.**

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Dinner and democratic movements cannot happen without photosynthesis.

### ***Polyculture partners***

Restorative justice needs permaculture because localizing crime control is inadequate when our material existence depends on a privatizing global economy that unevenly distributes re-



*Oil and gas pipeline through damaged land. We have much to repair. Forest Guardians; [www.fguardians.org](http://www.fguardians.org). Photo taken in New Mexico.*

sources and manipulates what is legally considered crime. Without understanding our ecological lives, restorative justice cannot answer some of its most important questions: What are the root causes of the violating behavior in the offender, the community, and society? What are the social structures and relationships we desire (4)? We can grow all the food we want, but without just and transformative responses to conflict, cooperative ways of making decisions, and collective responsibility for structural change, we will all be well-fed enemies. Reinhabiting land will not by itself resolve economic disparity and exploitation, racial oppression and forced assimilation, or denied self-determination and decision-making exclusion.

Restorative justice helps permaculture understand dynamics of conflict and provides examples of inclusive decision-making in response to harm; permaculture gives restorative justice a way out of remaining a temporary safe space that never challenges the economic and energetic foundations of society. We cannot have sustainable cultures without regenerative agricultures, but we will not have regenerative agricultures without sustainable cultures: the stories, traditions, and livelihoods that help us live together for a long time.

Restorative justice and permaculture have both been accused of appropriating indigenous worldviews by lumping local customs and ancestral wisdom under one rubric without any accountability to these traditions. Both have been criticized for individualistic theories of social change that ignore systemic discrimination and historic abuse. And, like almost anything

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produced by colonizing societies, both have tended toward white rhetoric and practices that wash out diverse perspectives. White permaculturists and restorative justice practitioners are often like many other white people: scared by or ignorant of the past and angered by the accusation of their complicity to the point of denial. We are too often colorblind to our own power and privilege. If these visions are to be what we need them to be, restorative justice should take seriously the contexts and histories of harm; permaculture should be judged by its redistribution of surplus beyond putting food scraps in a compost pile. Otherwise, they are elitist veneers on current affairs, like boutique foodie restaurants or an option on the legal menu.

## Permaculture designers and restorative justice practitioners are facilitators of health.

Even so, restorative justice and permaculture may be inevitable outgrowths of a fragmented people attempting to remember who they were before they became white. If that is the case, restorative justice and permaculture might be necessary for some of us to unsettle our colonized minds to settle, perhaps for the first time, as landraces—cultures comfortable at home.

Restorative justice and permaculture together express a radical social and ecological justice that exposes the roots of the spiral of violence, reimagines the roots of our relationships as practices of care, and roots ourselves in places to cultivate these practices and return decisions and participation to communities. Permaculture designers and restorative justice practitioners are facilitators of health. Neither engineers solutions but instead guides delicate and intimate conversations about pain and possibilities.

Restorative justice can offer vision and practices for transforming conflict, inclusive and participatory decision-making, recognizing and healing cycles of trauma, and accountability for the consequences of harm to others. Permaculture can offer ethics and design for transforming ourselves from parasites to

members of the land community, participation in food sovereignty, recognizing and healing cycles of waste into fertility, and accountability for the consequences of using our only world. At the heart of both are questions of right relationship and practices of caretaking. Both combat the industrial fabrication of waste: the idea that things and people are disposable. At their most liberating, permaculture and restorative justice are allies for building community and designing ecological and social systems that empower all voices and share the land's abundance.

Monoculture and mass incarceration are two peas in a pod. Permaculture and restorative justice might be, too. Δ

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### Notes

1. <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/make-it-right/infographic-40-acres-and-a-mule-would-be-at-least-64-trillion-today>
2. <http://rjhubs.org/>
3. <http://www.iirp.edu/pdf/brazil.pdf>
4. David Dyck, "Toward a Structurally Responsive Restorative Justice," in *Handbook of Restorative Justice: A Global Perspective*, edited by Dennis Sullivan and Larry Tift (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 535.

### Restorative Justice Continuum: Characteristics

	Can Become Restorative	Partially Restorative	Fully Restorative
Engagement	The involvement of those directly affected is not a primary concern. Decisions are made by a party not directly impacted but with authority. No option for dialogue among those directly impacted.	Key stakeholders are informed or included to a limited degree. Some stakeholders have some input but final decisions are made or approved by a formal system. There are limited opportunities for input or stakeholder dialogue.	All parties - those harmed, those who harmed, and the community - are provided opportunities to participate, shape the process, and make decisions. There are clear opportunities for dialogue. Decisions are made by consensus by those directly affected. All are respected.
Accountability	The focus is on the rule or law violated and the consequence. (passive accountability)	Attention is paid to the harms and needs but the primary concern is the rule or law violated and the consequence.	Focus is on identifying, acknowledging, understanding, and addressing the harms, needs, and causes that have arisen. This creates opportunities for <b>active</b> accountability.
Restoration	Minimal to no attention is paid to restoring the harm or losses experienced. Passive accountability and or rehabilitation of the offender is typically the focus.	Some effort is made toward restoring, mostly very tangible, losses. Often the harm and efforts to restore are defined by someone other than those directly affected.	Focus is on acknowledging and restoring the physical, emotional, and social harm and related needs of all those affected to the degree possible. Attention is paid to followthrough and satisfaction with the outcome.

WORK IN PROGRESS (12/13/11) Developed by Jon Kidde, Green Omega, L3C Please send suggestions to [jonkidde@greenomega3c.org](mailto:jonkidde@greenomega3c.org)





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# Bridging the Gap Between Privilege and Oppression

## Navigating an Uneven Terrain

Heather Jo Flores

**F**IRST OF ALL I want to say that I do not represent anyone but myself, and though I have vetted this article with several peers and mentors, I do not presume to know the needs and desires of anyone else. However, it seems to me that there are ripples of injustice coursing through the permaculture community, manifesting as a pattern of landowners and/or self-proclaimed leaders doing things that hurt, offend, oppress, and devalue others. These behaviors discredit the permaculture movement at large, and unless we can overcome them, our ultimate goal of sharing a true and authentic sustainability will remain far out of reach.

We can whisper the names of the beasts: racism, sexism, ageism, xenophobia, misogyny, hate, fear, anger... we all experience these things from time to time, and we see the resulting backlash and judgmental attitudes. Perhaps it is the willingness to play the superior that is the root of the problem? Self-righteousness is certainly not a principle of permaculture, and yet we divide ourselves so easily, bickering over the details and competing for resources.

I recognize that these issues need to be studied and dealt with through an intersectional lens. Nothing is separate from the other. But for me, the central problem that divides the permaculture community is class. It seems to me that the unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity, while often connected to the other -isms, is at the core of many of the bad (poorly designed) dynamics in our community. Not to say that racism, sexism, ageism and other -isms don't cause problems, but ultimately it is the control and ownership of money and property that allows people to abuse their other privileges.

My own history is of extreme poverty, marginalization, and struggle. I grew up with my sister and our single mom. My mom, of Cree/French heritage, who was beaten as a child and



*Private property for public benefit. Photo by AB Brand.*

alcoholism that dominated his life at that point. By the time I dropped out in 10<sup>th</sup> grade at the age of 15, I had attended 19 different schools and lived in at least 30 different houses. I have been on my own since then, and have been generally self-reliant, unless you count student loans, which I accepted in order to access an education that was unavailable without them. That was my “choice” and I don’t regret it, but the burden of those loans is crippling.

However, because I grew up with such an unusual set of resources, I learned to be extraordinarily resourceful, and that is precisely what makes me such a good designer, teacher, and community organizer. I’m not tooting my own horn here, only illuminating my own body of work as an example of how effective a person can be, even if they didn’t start out with much. Now imagine what I could have done had I been connected to the right opportunities at a younger age. And imagine what I could do now if I had a piece of my own land instead of 80 grand in student debt.

All of these years—organizing Food Not Lawns, writing the book, growing and sharing seeds, traveling and collecting species and stories—all of that has been funded by me doing a lot of crazy shit for money. You name it: housecleaning, selling jewelry, sex work, and, of course, growing and trimming marijuana. Judge me if you must, but I did what I had to do to survive. Why didn’t I just market my seeds, produce, and skills as a professional, and make ends meet that way? Because (and this is especially true when dealing with the permaculture community) I have consistently locked horns with the beasts enumerated above. People of privilege have blown me off, forgotten to pay me, plagiarized my work, used my name to sell a PDC without hiring me to teach it, and even, as in the case with RealFarmacy and their smarmy “Grow Food, Not Lawns” Facebook page, tried to steal my trademark through the US

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**And we don’t want you  
to feel bad about it.  
We just want you to do  
something to change it.**

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had me when she was 19, worked full-time-plus, at minimum wage, in a wide range of jobs. But we never had enough money for rent. As such, I spent much of my childhood either homeless, living in a van, or being dropped off at a relative’s house for a few months, to lighten the burden on my mom. My dad, a working-class electrician whose parents emigrated from Mexico before he was born, wasn’t around until I was a teenager, and wasn’t able to help much through the haze of violence and

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Patent & Trademark Office. If I hadn't been able to hustle up several thousand dollars trimming weed in California last winter (to hire an attorney) I would have lost the Food Not Lawns trademark forever.

I don't tell you all of this to make you feel bad or to pity me. I tell you to make the point that not everybody has access to the jobs, schools, homes, families, land, and respect that is a given in many of your lives. And we don't want you to feel bad about it. We just want you to do something to change it.

I do believe that most people wake up in the morning wanting to be good people and to do good work in the world, regardless of their race, class, gender, age, or what they eat for breakfast. And when I see nasty, divisive behaviors like interrupting, shaming, slandering, disregarding, plagiarizing, avoiding, condescending, taking advantage of, jacking up the rent and calling oneself King, Duke or Benevolent Dictator, they are coupled with rationalizations about how doing "the work" is more important than how others feel about the way that work gets done.

"I don't have time to deal with people criticizing me. The Earth is dying. I have work to do," wrote one permaculture teacher who is known to be especially abusive. My response to that? This is the work. The Earth is not actually dying. Yes, Earth Care is important, and many species are going extinct, but we will climb right to the top of that list if we don't get the People Care and Fair Share ethics worked out. Maybe human extinction is what's best for the Earth, maybe not. I'd like to think we can err on the side of survival, however temporary it may be in the big picture.

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## **We don't need a Hero. We need small, steady change built upon strong, healthy connections.**

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### ***Decolonization and sovereignty***

I most often hear the term "decolonization" used in discussions about race, class, and privilege. Recently, a friend and colleague pointed out that "decolonization is not a metaphor." That stunned me. I googled it and found a powerful, provocative body of work centered around a 2012 essay by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. They identify any person who owns land in a place they are not Native to as a "settler" (a.k.a. colonizer). By this definition, just about every landowner in the permaculture community is a settler/colonizer. Tuck and Yang: "The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym."

I have had a handful of discussions about decolonization in terms of giving land back to Indigenous populations. I am Cree

Indian on my mother's side, Chihuahua on my father's. And so when somebody with money, land, and privilege seems eager to "help" the oppressed, I will bring it up. The conversation usually goes something like this:

Settler/landowner: "What can I do to help the poor?"

Me: "Gift me a piece of land, and I will turn it into a seed sanctuary, food forest, and permaculture paradise that will feed and benefit the community for generations."

Settler/landowner: "Not gonna happen."

Me: "Ok."

Alas, it doesn't seem as if people who own land will start signing deeds over to sovereign nations anytime soon, and in my most candid moments, I would probably say that there's not much point in continuing a discussion about equality until people are willing to do way more than just talk about it. The only way to truly balance the scales is by actually, physically redistributing wealth. Call me a socialist, but isn't socialism at its heart just a community coming together? Fair Shares, anyone?

Decolonization is also about sovereignty. People with more privilege have more control over their own lives and, as such, have better opportunities to manifest what they see as their true purpose, without the burdens (and time consumption) associated with struggling to survive on a daily basis. Sovereignty means being free to pursue your dreams, to follow your chosen path, to share, speak and teach your truths without fear of poverty and persecution. Nobody should feel like a slave. Unfortunately, it is all too common for landowners in the permaculture world to treat their tenants, interns, and volunteers like peasant-slaves, and again, to justify it with excuses about how "the work" is so important for the world.

I wrote about sovereignty in my essay, "The Heroine's Journey, Toward a Feminist Storycraft" ([www.academia.edu/10057495/The\\_Heroines\\_Journey\\_Toward\\_a\\_Feminist\\_Storycraft](http://www.academia.edu/10057495/The_Heroines_Journey_Toward_a_Feminist_Storycraft)), in relation to the age-old question, "what do women want?" I discussed the possibility that a woman's heroic journey might have less to do with slaying the proverbial beast, and more to do with understanding, befriending, and co-existing with it. And this is a metaphor for what we, the permaculture community, are attempting to do with nature. We seek to learn from it, adapt with it, and collaborate, rather than to control,



*Milkweed with butterfly. June 2015.*



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manipulate, and abuse it. But we still need to learn how to adopt those ideals in our human relationships.

Is it this archetypal need to be the Hero that drives oppressive, patriarchal behaviors? To me, it boils down to two things: a view of oneself as somehow superior in knowledge and ability to others, and a lack of the sincere trust that one needs in order to build authentic relationships. And again, if somebody has enough money, they can play the buffoon and get away with it. And so the Hero comes blasting into a project, sure that others will fail without his almighty guidance, and proceeds to insult, alienate and/or disregard the people who are doing most of the work. We don't need a Hero. We need small, steady change built upon strong, healthy connections.

So what can we do?

## Friendships

Friendships are the building blocks of community. Think about what it means to be a true friend to somebody. Friendships ask for justice, equality, non-violence, respect, and communication. Friends are loyal, honest, and sincere. Friendships require vulnerability, compassion, patience, and most of all, effort. A friendship asks you to go out of your way to see someone, to help them, and to support their work and their emotions. And a true friend gives all of this back to you, and so much more.

Aren't these all of the same qualities we want for our permaculture community at large? Is it possible that we can subvert patterns of abuse and oppression by forming honest, lifelong friendships across the divides? The list below offers tangible suggestions for how to cultivate real friendships and alliances.

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## It's not enough to just value somebody's ideas. You have to give credit for them too.

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The problem with this type of list is that it asks of the privileged reader to discover a sense of empathy based on altruistic inclination: I am asking you to forego the privilege that seems to benefit you, and to give up some of your power and position, in order to build a more just society for everyone else. Perhaps this article already has you feeling triggered, frustrated, defensive? And I am asking you to check that luggage at the door, to open your heart and mind to the possibility that these actions will benefit not just you as an individual, but also the global community, in ways that avoiding change and hoarding your privilege won't.

It's a tall order, but I hope that you will embrace the challenge. Think about the friends you currently cherish. Wouldn't you do just about anything for them? Imagine that there are so many new and true connections out there, just waiting for you to step forward.



*The author leading a hands-on workshop in lawn conversion. Picture taken in Fort Wayne Indiana at our Food Not Lawns Lawn Liberation event summer 2015. Photo by AB Brand.*

## What You Can Do

**Socialize.** Invite people with less privilege to your parties and attend ours. Dance with us, eat with us, live with us, and date us. In short, socialize with us the same way you do with your friends.

**Listen.** Stop talking. Don't argue. Just listen. If somebody says something that triggers you, be with the discomfort and just keep listening. Sometimes friends need to rant and vent with each other. You'll get your turn.

**Value.** Value and use creative input. My experience of the world could be vastly different than yours, and these differing perspectives could be a powerful addition to your project.

**Support.** Offer to help with food, rides, housing, childcare, and logistical support. Don't just waltz in and be the Leader while everyone else does the menial stuff. But don't just do these things because you've got something to prove—do them because that's the kind of stuff that friends do for each other.

**Make time.** Make time for conversations about difficult topics. Don't act as if they're not important, just because they may not be visible to you. Respond, rather than react, to critique. Let those conversations be a safe, sacred space for you to learn together with somebody about how to build true peace in the world.

**Don't flake.** Show up when you say you will. Don't try to talk people down, undercut their rates, or flake on contractual agreements. Don't make idle promises. Be real.

**Educate yourself.** Educate yourself about race, class, gender, and intersectionality, rather than expecting others to educate you. Read books, search the web, go to workshops. But then, once you learn some stuff, keep learning. Don't decide that you are now an authority on privilege and oppression, just because you read some stuff about it.

**Be a student.** Enroll in courses and workshops taught by people outside of your own demographic. Be a student as often as you ask people to be yours. You think you already know about permaculture? Come to my class, and I guarantee you will learn things you never even thought about.

**Acknowledge.** Give credit where credit is due. This connects back to the part about accepting creative input. It's not enough to just value somebody's ideas. You have to give credit for them too. Consistently. This takes time and effort. Thank you.

**Promote.** Write about and promote the work of others. Scroll through your Facebook feed and look through your bookshelf. How many of those links you shared and books you read were created by women, people of color, queer people, or poor people? Realize that, unless you go out of your way to find and promote that work, it might not come across your feed. Find it. And share.

**Hire.** Hire women, people of color, etc. to do work on your site and to teach in your courses. Offer meaningful work at a wage comparable to your own. If you haven't heard about one teacher as much as another, ask yourself why. Could it be because of privilege? Don't assume that a more famous teacher is more qualified to teach. Often, it's just the opposite. And then, remember to give them credit for the work you hired them to do.

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## Organize events that create opportunities for others. This task in particular falls all too often to the women in the community.

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**Network.** Use your connections to build capacity for others. You probably already do this for your friends and colleagues. Scan your memory for the connections you've helped to create and ask yourself if your network includes a good balance of people across races, genders, and classes. Adjust the ratio accordingly.

**Organize.** Organize events that create opportunities for others. This task in particular falls all too often to the women in a community. I have seen it a million times: the women organize, promote, and hold space for a workshop, and then the men come and teach, orate, and leave a mess at the end. Switch it up!

**Donate. Decolonize.** Give money and property to people who did not start out with the resources you started out with. I know, you worked hard to get where you are. But consider that somebody else probably worked even harder, and were rewarded with less, just because of the circumstances they happened to have been born into. So give up some money. Give up some land. Just do it. Give away a car, a tractor, some tools, and some seeds. But again, don't give because you feel guilty or because you want to be a hero. Do it because you know that sharing resources truly and effectively contributes to lasting, sustainable community.

**Trust.** This is the fundamental building block of any friendship, relationship, or community. Trust each other. Trust yourself. Don't get defensive. If you do feel defensive, take a walk, write a poem, or go yell at a tree for a few minutes. Then come back and try again. Remember the permaculture

principles: Respond to feedback; Designer limits the yield; Problems are solutions; Mistakes are tools for learning. Don't use the ethics and principles for excuses to avoid difficult conversations—use them as tools for navigation.

Good luck! I welcome your feedback and look forward to the conversations that will come of this article and others in this pivotal issue. Δ

*Heather Jo Flores is a Chicana activist, author, educator, and interdisciplinary artist focused on the connection between physicality and creativity, with emphasis on healing self and Earth through creative expression and community interaction. She wrote Food Not Lawns, How to Turn Your Yard into a Garden and Your Neighborhood into a Community (Chelsea Green, 2006) and co-founded the original Food Not Lawns group in Eugene, OR, in 1999. She holds a BA in Permaculture Education and an MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts. This summer, she took the Edible Nations tour across the Northern US, and this winter, the tour continues, with an exploration of avocado-based permaculture sites around the world. Find her at [www.heatherjoflores.com](http://www.heatherjoflores.com) and [www.foodnotlawns.com](http://www.foodnotlawns.com).*



*Coneflower and bee in the home system. We can apply our principles from nature to how we support more just, equitable and diverse permaculture community. Photo by Rhonda Baird.*

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# Confronting Patriarchy in Permaculture and Alternative Food Movements

## Permaculture or Spermaculture?

Trina Moyles

FOR HALENA SEIFERLING, a Master's of Policy Studies student at Simon Fraser University, it's a question generated not from facts or statistics, but from one of the most essential principles of permaculture: observation.

"I started to wonder about some of the voices, typically male, that were leading the conversation about challenging local food systems," Seiferling says. "They seemed to favour liberalism over facing and actually addressing social injustice."

Seiferling began her permaculture education four years ago in Cuba, the island nation that's been internationally recognized for surviving a crash in oil imports (following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989) in part by undoing and diversifying conventional agriculture, and also by institutionalizing permaculture, a holistic and sustainable food systems design for achieving "permanent culture."

In May 2011, Seiferling was among ten Canadian women selected to participate in a permaculture design course (PDC) at the Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation for Nature and Humanity (FANJ) in Sancti Spiritus. Together, the Canadian women collaborated with Cuban permaculturalists to design and transform a peri-urban farm into a permaculture system, integrating ethics of transforming waste into wealth and maximizing biodiversity.

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**...and where women are most actively involved right now around community involvement... they are not getting paid for it.**

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"The Cubans were surprised that our group was made up of women only," recalls Seiferling.

But the program's Canadian coordinator, Ron Berezan, a permaculture designer and instructor with The Urban Farmer in Powell River, British Columbia, was not at all surprised by the gender imbalance in Seiferling's program.

"In most [permaculture design] courses I've taught and organized, there have been more female students than male students. It's actually disconcerting to me that we can't get more men to



*Canadian women in Cuba!*

take the courses," says Berezan, who's been teaching permaculture in western Canada and Cuba for almost 10 years.

"But why is it that when men get into the stream of this movement they absorb a lot of the leadership? Of course, I have to count myself among them," he adds.

It's a question that's beginning to surface more frequently in the minds and actions of female and male permaculturists and food producers alike in North America: are alternative food systems and movements shaped and dominated by the leadership of men?

Bonita Ford is a permaculture design instructor and co-founder of the Permaculture Institute of Eastern Ontario. Ford is a woman of color and says that she has not personally felt held back from any experience in her permaculture career because of her identity.

"I look through the lens of gender, ethnicity, and culture in different areas of my life," says Ford, "And it recently came up again through the permaculture community."

In 2013, Ford attended a workshop for women in permaculture organized by the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York.

She recalled an activity that made her "open [her] eyes," whereby facilitators asked women to answer a series of questions about women's involvement in and contribution to permaculture in their communities by voting with their feet and taking a step forward. Though she had "sensed it" before, Ford was surprised by the visible results of the activity.

"It was interesting to see that mini-collection of data," says Ford.

"That spread of, yes, women do show up as teachers, women do show up as authors, but less than men, and where women are most actively involved right now around community involvement... they are not getting paid for it."

"It's a reflection of what we see historically in society," Ford

comments. “Women take on roles that are important, yet not compensated or recognized [by society].”

Ford and other permaculturists claim women’s contributions to the permaculture and local food system movements are immense, yet they are under-represented in forms of dissemination and recognition, including at conferences and in courses, textbooks, and online.

“The higher superstar permaculture teachers are almost always men,” agrees Berezan, who casts a look back at the original founders of the permaculture movement who, he says, could be described as the “permaculture patriarchs.”

In 1978, Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, two white Australian men, synthesized various facets of existing sustainable agriculture principles into what they termed “permaculture.”

Although described as a decentralized movement, it would be easy, even for an outsider, to argue that white male leadership continues to shape Western permaculture. A simple Google image search of “permaculture instructors” brings up over 50% more white males than female, indigenous, or visible minority instructors.

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## Some women who are working in alternative food systems have chosen to temporarily step away from the permaculture movement....

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The more contemporary superstars of permaculture could include Geoff Lawton, the Greening the Desert food forestry guru, along with Joel Salatin, an American family farmer and outspoken advocate for locally raised food.

Lawton recently launched an online permaculture course, challenging the traditional 14-day Permaculture Design Certificate course. According to Berezan, the initial online offering attracted well over 1,000 students. Both Lawton and Salatin have published books, taught courses, and are highly sought-after speakers at conferences all over the world. They’ve planted themselves firmly into the North American food movement, and as some would argue, dominated the movement’s conversation.

“Spermaculture is a term coined by women and queer folks to name the ways that permaculture projects are often dominated by white, middle-class men who [can be] outspoken and overbearing,” says Nick Montgomery, a PhD student in the cultural studies program at Queen’s University.

Montgomery’s research explores the ways that people are cultivating alternatives to the dominant order of hetero-patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism, with a focus on permaculture and local food movements.

“I think many of the gendered divisions in food movements



*About half of the world’s farmers are women producing more than half of the food in the world. Yet, there are major concerns about property and ownership of the means of production.*

today reflect broader systems of oppression,” says Montgomery.

“White, cis-gendered, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied men are some of the most visible and vocal leaders in the food movement because we’re socialized to be competitive, individualistic, assertive, and authoritative. We tend to talk first, loudest, and longest, and we’re often rewarded and encouraged when we do.”

Some women who are working in alternative food systems have chosen to temporarily step away from the permaculture movement in North America. Angela Moran was one of the first urban farmers in Victoria, BC, and has over ten years experience applying permaculture principles to growing food in the city. She admits that most of the “big players” in permaculture are men, and many have never come to see her urban farm.

“I’ve not been invited much to teach in areas that are being headed up by men,” Moran says. “Maybe it’s just that I’m busy, maybe they think, ‘she’s got a kid, she’s got a farm’—I don’t know what it is, but it’s made me understand the permaculture movement from a different perspective and what it’s really doing.”

Berezan describes permaculture as a “young movement” that lacks self-awareness and criticism in many ways. While Bill Mollison founded and introduced permaculture as a scientific movement, today’s generation of permaculturists are continually pushing for the inclusion of social dynamics, including gender dynamics, in discussions.

“If it’s care of the earth, care of people, and sharing the surplus, human dynamics have to be a part of that, and the social analysis needs to be a part of that,” says Berezan.

In eastern Ontario, Ford credits the recent work of Karryn Olson-Ramanujan, a permaculture teacher, designer, and co-founder of the Finger Lakes Permaculture Institute. Olson-Ramanujan published an article in *Permaculture Activist* (August 2013) called “A ‘Pattern Language’ for Women in Permaculture.” The article explores the patterns of issues that women face in permaculture communities and offers practical solutions for making permaculture more accessible to women [editor’s note: Olson-Ramanujan’s follow-up to that article appears in the print version of *Issue 98: Decolonizing Permaculture*].

“Karryn’s article focuses a lot [on] alliances, and things men



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can do to try and make more space for women in their courses and communities,” says Ford.

“The article proposes simple ways to make the classroom more welcoming—to prep the teachers and the class to be aware of their communication, especially the teachers. If there’s a woman in the group, to not interrupt her; to give her the floor.”

“In a large class, being able to see the front of the room is important,” Ford explains. “If people are standing, men tend to be taller, and just having the courtesy and awareness to share the space makes a difference.”

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## **...male permaculture instructors in her community...are gradually becoming more aware of power and privilege....**

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Moran agrees that challenging gender roles and striving for sensitivity in communication plays a key role in making permaculture more accessible to women and diverse groups.

She acknowledges the efforts of male permaculture instructors in her community who are gradually becoming more aware of power and privilege, and building alliances with women and other diverse groups for increased social inclusion in the movement.

“Permaculture has all of the solutions,” Moran stresses. “We just have to make sure that it gets into all the right minds of the sons and the daughters of the colonialists who created our current food system.”

△

Story originally published in *Briarpatch Magazine*, May/June 2015.



*Women often work in the food movement in support roles.*



*Women care for the Earth, for people, and distribute surplus.*

*Trina Moyles is a Canadian writer and freelance journalist. Her writing focuses on social and environmental issues in rural communities in East Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Over the past three years she's been working on a book called Women Who Dig, about the lives of women farmers from eight countries in the Americas, East Africa, and Asia. Visit [www.trinamoyles.com](http://www.trinamoyles.com) to read more of her writing.*

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## Settlers in the Land

# Three Pillars and Decolonizing Permaculture

Dave Pritchett

“I AM A SETTLER in this land, too,” Randy says.

We are sitting in a talking circle on the back porch of the farmhouse of Edith and Randy Woodley. This is the beginning of a day-long workshop on forest gardening at the Woodley’s four-acre homestead. Before I taught about forest garden theory and practice, Randy insisted that we first talk about how we as people relate to the land. I’m glad he did.

Randy is a legal descendent of the Keetoowah Cherokee, while Edith, his wife, is a member of the Eastern Shoshone tribe. They both take their heritage seriously, and with equal gravity they recognize that the land on which they live and make a living belongs to the Kalapuya. When they purchased the homestead in disrepair, the first thing they did was visit the elders of the Grande Ronde, a reservation that is now the living place of many tribes of the Pacific Northwest dispossessed of their homelands. They asked how they could honor the Kalapuya people: “plant huckleberries,” the elder said. And they did. Since then, Edith and Randy have worked hard to restore the farm, using permaculture principles and techniques as they learned, as well as growing vegetables and medicinal herbs with

the methods of their own people.

In the early 1800s, the Cherokee were displaced from their native homeland in what is now the Southeast, an area that included parts of Georgia, Tennessee, and North and South Carolina. This displacement was part of an overall plan by Andrew Jackson to remove the native people of the region for further expansion by white settlers who were eager for more land.

Land acquisition like what the Cherokees experienced is part and parcel of colonization. As Mark Lakeman, permaculturist and co-founder of City Repair, reminds his students, Europeans have a long history of colonizing other peoples’ lands. A major tool in this exploitative enterprise is the urban grid form.

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## ...Powell suggested creating “watershed commonwealths” ....

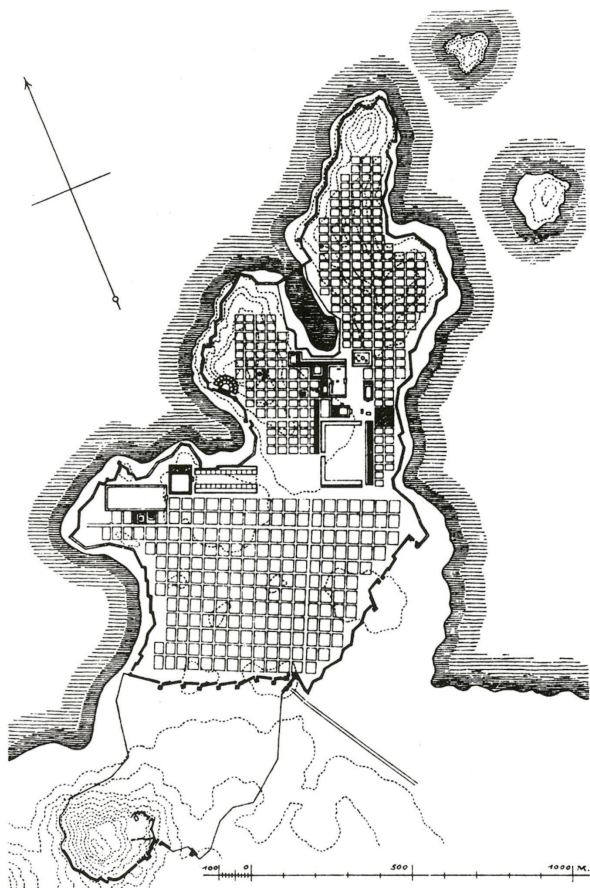
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### *The urban grid vs. the watershed*

The grid can be seen the world over, from ancient China to the pre-Columbian city of Tenochtitlan (1). As a political mechanism, the urban grid operates under the “conviction that the anonymous masses were not entitled to a free environmental choice but were to be molded by a module that was determined by an intelligence higher than their own” (2). This geometric configuration allowed for city planning for control of the movement of goods in and out of the city, as well as managing the population. Straight streets allow military or police personnel a long line of site and effective movement from one location to another. As James C. Scott notes, “the elective affinity between a strong state and a uniformly laid out city is obvious” (3). City historian and sociologist Lewis Mumford elaborates how the grid functioned for imperial designs:

The very weakness of the [grid] plan—its indifference to the contours of the land, to springs, rivers, shore lines, clumps of trees—only made it that much more admirable in providing a minimum basis of order on a site that colonists would not, for long, have the means to fully exploit. Within the shortest possible time, everything was brought under control (4).

The grid plan was used throughout the centuries as a means of managing people and nature, but its ultimate iteration as a colonization tool came about when it was expanded by the newly formed US in 1785. The Land Ordinance of 1785 stipulates





that the land of Ohio and westward be divided into a grid which could be subdivided from the level of county down to individual lots. City planning historian Sibyl Moholy-Nagy calls this act the full circle “rebirth of Roman colonialism, which converted land from a life-giving source to a speculative commodity” (2).

As Euro-Americans pushed west, the grid followed, allowing settlers to stake out homestead claims. However, in the arid lands west of the 100th meridian—approximately halfway through Kansas—homesteading became increasingly difficult. Annual evaporation approached or surpassed annual rainfall, making traditional agriculture unfeasible without irrigation. Geographer John Wesley Powell predicted this problem with the traditional homesteading pattern of settlement, and proposed an alternative to the grid. Instead of partitioning Western lands according to the Land Ordinance of 1785, Powell suggested creating “watershed commonwealths,” organized by a nested pattern of watersheds (5). These watershed commonwealths would ensure that residents have decisive control over their own scarce water, allowing them to mitigate their own water conflicts. Further, because the settlers of these commonwealths would have to fund and manage their own water resources, population of the Western lands would remain low enough to be supported by the limited water supply. Powell’s vision was unpopular. Congress wanted to retain rights to the timber and mining resources; developers feared the commonwealth idea would slow expansion in the West; homesteaders did not want to wait for the land to be properly surveyed and organized into watershed districts (6). The grid won out over the watershed.

## The core ethics of permaculture represent alternatives to these pillars....

Ultimately, three quarters of the US came under the gridiron plan (7). Thus, the geometric layout—irrespective of the contours of land, the aspects of weather, or, especially the flow of water in the watershed—was overlaid across an entire continent.

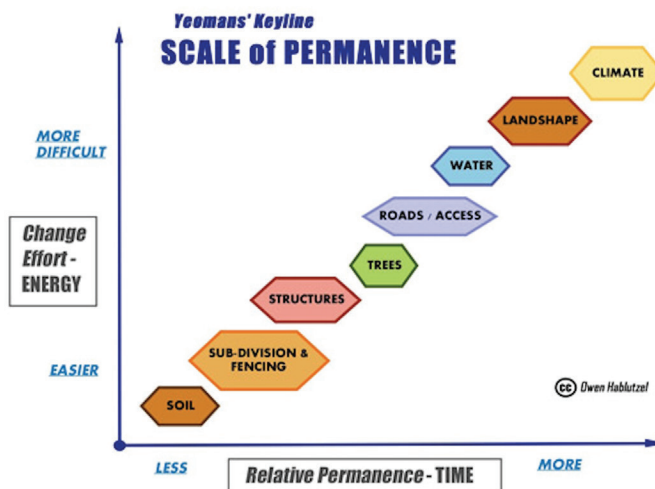
Instead of such attention to detail and nuance as Powell envisioned, Mumford complains that in the gridiron plan, any person with a “triangle and a T square” could plan an entire metropolis without any training in sociology or architecture (4). The gridiron paid no heed to the social needs of urban inhabitants, lacking planned space for public parks, and cost hilly cities like San Francisco untold amounts in the energy used to transport goods directly up hills rather than contoured road systems (4).

Under the Dawes Act of 1887, the gridiron plan was extended even into the territory of the reservations given to American Indian tribes. This act called for the plotting and partition of most tribally held lands into a grid plan similar to that estab-

lished by the Land Ordinance of 1785. Bringing tribal land under the gridiron plan commoditized Indian land into individual holdings, dividing communal land tenure and effectively breaking tribal government. The Dawes Act included stipulations that any Indian who wanted to be granted a parcel must register as an American Indian on the Dawes Rolls, a registration undertaken in order to render individuals trackable by the nation-state (3). The grid thus arose from an imperial practice utilized in specific colonies in Western civilization to a hegemonic tool of empire employed by the United States in the subdual of land and the genocide of people.

The gridiron was capitalism writ large onto the landscape: “on strictly commercial principles, the gridiron plan answered, as no other plans did, the shifting values, the accelerated expansion, the multiplying population, required by the capitalist regime” (4). Thus, along with colonization came a commoditization of land as a resource. This is in contrast to the indigenous way of relating to the earth. As Sium, Desai, and Ritskes note (8),

*Indigenous peoples recognized, from the beginning, how Western thought and presence displaced and endangered Indigenous ways of knowing and relationships to the earth, as well as the earth itself. We have a responsibility to honor the Indigenous ‘laws of the land’ and to restore right relationships. Often the call for sustainability and ecological responsibility is framed from a settler vantage point, in belief that “this land is your land, this land is my land” so we must take care of it. For those of us who are not Indigenous to Turtle Island, we must recognize our particular responsibility to this land and its stewards. All of this is interwoven into this work and our beginning point.*



The displacement by white settlers fostered by the grid continues today. The gridiron, through its iterations in the Land Ordinance of 1785 and later in the Dawes Act of 1887 has organized power relations in such a way as to prevent indigenous sovereignty. An example of this is with the Karuk tribe in Northern California, whose subsistence practices of hunting and fishing are continually jeopardized by lack of access to land, while industrial logging and damming of rivers deplete the salmon

on which the Karuk have historically depended (9). This forced assimilation via food insecurity continues to happen because the gridiron plan has fractionalized the land on which the Karuk live in relationship, commoditizing it for sale and private ownership. Further, by failing to see the Klamath River as a unity in which the health of its forest and various tributaries affects its own health, the river has become polluted with toxins and sediment, diminishing the population of salmon and other wildlife.

As permaculturists, of course, we attempt to see the uniqueness of place and works with its features rather than regardless of them. One tool we use to accomplish this is the Keyline Scale of Permanence, a concept used by Australian engineer P. A. Yeomans, which helps integrate humans into the particulars of place. The Scale of Permanence acknowledges that any place has unique features like climate, landscape, flora and fauna, and soil. Yeomans recognized that these features—along with human constructs like roads, fences, and buildings—have different levels of permanence or stability. By ordering the features of place with respect to their permanence, Yeomans created a nested scale of permanence which aids the human designer in heeding the givens of place.

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## “Care for people” is the permaculture ethic that represents an antidote to the xenophobia exemplified in the logic of perpetual war.

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### Three pillars of white supremacy

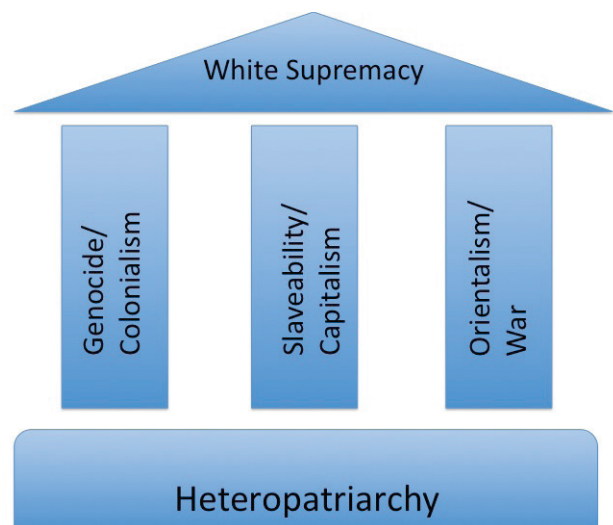
Understanding the complex ties between European colonization of non-European lands and the continued wealth and privilege associated with those of European descent requires investigation of what in permaculture are called the “invisible structures” that organize the social and natural landscapes. Indigenous scholar Andrea Smith has a helpful analysis in this regard which she calls the “three pillars” that continue to shape white privilege today (10). In order to “read” the social landscape, we must learn the tools to help us understand the contours and forms that invisible structures take. The three pillars that Smith describes uphold continued white supremacy that exists in the form of privilege and wealth, and are based upon a cultural foundation of heterosexism and patriarchy. The core ethics of permaculture represent alternatives to these pillars.

The first pillar is *the logic of slaveability/capitalism*. The logic of slavery anchors capitalism—and at its worst, renders black bodies as nothing more than property to be used in the

cotton fields, or, after the 13th amendment, to be put to work via Jim Crow laws. Despite eventual abolishment of Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration of black persons today continue the logic of slavery by corporate prisons and prison work for low wages. The permaculture alternative to the logic of capitalism is the ethic of limits to consumption and sharing of surplus. Where the pillar of slaveability objectifies people for production, permaculture acknowledges that all forms of energy are limited. Sharing resources, rather than accumulating them, reflects the cooperative strategy seen by most organisms in nature.

The second pillar of white supremacy, according to Smith, is *the logic of genocide/colonialism*. This logic holds that native people must constantly be disappearing. The myth of the Americas as open landscape for the taking necessitated the genocide of indigenous peoples who had lived in relationship to the land for thousands of years. Religious rhetoric fomented this genocide, calling the “New World” a “new Israel,” which of course meant that the colonizers had the right to murder the indigenous inhabitants of the land. The logic of genocide perpetuated the forced displacement of native nations onto reservations, and continues today in the myth of the disappeared Indians. Native Americans are spoken of as the original inhabitants who are now vanished. This allows settlers to appropriate indigenous culture—a phenomenon all too common among permaculture practitioners. In reality, indigenous peoples could be honored most by working to restore their sovereignty over lands that belong to them rather than by assimilating their culture or religion. Physical and cultural genocide are used to extract resources through colonialism, whereas permaculture teaches an ethic of care for the earth. The colonial grid framework divides land into parcels to be sold, unconcerned with appropriate use; permaculture pays close attention to context, from bioregion to watershed to microclimate, and tends the land accordingly.

The third pillar of white supremacy is *the logic of orientalism/war*. This logic sees foreign people as perpetual threats to the superior civilizations of the West. While these exotic foreigners are not disappeared or owned, they loom on the horizon as a source of fear, and thus represent the reason for the creation of the military complex that takes over the national budget and perpetuates the control of the globe by Western nations. The





“War on Terror” that allows everything from drone strikes to water-boarding and indefinite detention of brown bodies continues due to this logic of Orientals as the foreign threat which justifies perpetual war. “Care for people” is the permaculture ethic that represents an antidote to the xenophobia exemplified in the logic of perpetual war. With crises like climate change threatening the existence of humans, a movement away from the logic of war toward peaceable cooperation in caring for all people is timely.

Finally, it is important to note that these pillars—slaveability/capitalism, genocide/colonialism, and orientalism/war—are connected. Any movement to dismantle white supremacy must acknowledge the interconnectedness of racist ideologies, and address each of them. Their interrelatedness can be seen by looking at the history of one particular region, the historic land of the Creek Nation. The Creek lived in an area in what is now the Southeastern US in eastern Alabama and western Georgia, but due to land pressure on white settlers, President Jackson forcibly displaced the Creek in 1832 to Oklahoma. Having “disappeared” the indigenous population, settlers could now move in to the area and establish plantations, made wealthy by the slave work

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## That harmony must include a righting of both historic and contemporary injustices....

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of black bodies. Even after slavery was abolished, Jim Crow laws continued to enslave black residents of the area. Now, the area is infamous for Fort Benning, where the fear of foreign threat perpetuates the School of the Americas. The School of the Americas, now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, has trained many South American military leaders who have committed egregious human rights abuses.

### *Decolonizing permaculture and ourselves*

For white non-indigenous people who live in North America like myself, it is important to recognize, just like the Woodleys have in Kalapuya territory, that we are settlers. One of the strengths of permaculture design is its attention to context, but too often the historical context within which designers work is forgotten. This historical context (11) includes a legacy of colonialism to which we must pay attention if we are to truly design towards the three core ethics of care for people, care for the Earth, and distributing surplus resources.

So how can permaculturists design their own practices to support indigenous and people of color led movements that fight the legacy of white supremacy fomented by the three pillars? I

want to offer some practical suggestions.

- **Share resources.** Donate a percent of your income from teaching and permaculture design to indigenous or people of color led movements.
- **Care for the Earth.** The design process already helps permaculturists see beyond the grid-locked boundaries of the properties they plan, but this is just a beginning. Like the Woodleys,



*There is much that we can do to support the next generations in healing.*

permaculturists might also seek the wisdom of those who have a long history of caring for the lands on which we live how we might both tend the land as well as honor the people who have tended it for millennia.

- **Care for people.** Show up for racial justice. There are many movements for social change that address current iterations of white supremacy, and people of color need support from those of us who have white privilege.
- Finally, we must always remember that while the grid is a legacy of colonialism, **ultimately we all live within that fundamental ecological unit of nature, the watershed.** It is within the watershed that we work, play, and in which we are connected to all other living creatures within it through the flow of water. If the grid parcels land, flattens flora, and divides creatures, the watershed catches us all in its web of life.

At the Woodley farm they have named Eloheh, a Cherokee word that means something like “harmony with all things,” there is a mixture of indigenous techniques and permaculture principles that inform how they interact with the land. Though they, too, have seen some of the worst of white supremacy—the Woodleys lost a 50-acre permaculture farm in Kentucky due to violent pressure from White supremacists in 2008—the name Eloheh testifies to their belief that harmony is possible. That harmony must include a righting of both historic and contemporary injustices: as the Woodleys know from experience, displacement is not just a thing of the past. In the meantime, the huckleberries they’ve planted in their new home are becoming established, and a food forest is producing fruit. Δ

*David Pritchett grew up in the mountains of Kenya. Now as an*

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assistant medical director of a detox center and a permaculture designer in Portland, Oregon, he works toward the health and recovery of people and landscapes.

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# An Open Letter to the Permaculture Community, Family, and Friends

Joel Glanzberg

FIRST OF ALL, I WANT TO THANK YOU, not only for your good efforts, time, and energy, but also for your caring—your caring not only for this living Earth, but for the people, and the beauty of life. Thank you.

Many of you may know of my work from the example of Flowering Tree in Toby Hemenway's excellent book *Gaia's Garden* and the video *30 Years of Greening the Desert*—others from my regenerative community development work with Regenesi. In any case, I know that you share my concerns for the degrading condition of the ecological and human communities of our biosphere, and I am writing to you to ask for your help.

We are at a crisis point, a crossroads. If we are to turn the corner, we need to use everything at our disposal to its greatest effect. My concern is that we are not using the very powerful perspective of permaculture to its greatest potential, and that we need to up our game. We know that the living world is calling for this from us.

I often feel that permaculture design is like a fine Japanese chisel that is mostly used like a garden trowel, for transplanting seedlings. It can of course be used for this purpose, but is certainly not its highest use.

Permaculture design has often been compared to a martial art such as Aikido because at its heart, it is about observing the forces at play to find the "least change for the greatest effect,"

a small move that changes entire systems. This is how nature works, and is precisely the sort of shortcut we desperately need.

The lowest level of any martial art is to learn to take a hit well. Yet, this is where so much of our energy seems to be directed: setting ourselves and our communities up to be resilient in the face of the impacts of climate change and the breakdown of current food, water, energy, and financial systems.

The next level is to avoid the blow, either through dodging, blocking, or redirecting it. Much of the carbon farming and other efforts directed toward pulling carbon out of the atmosphere and developing non-carbon sources of energy fall into this category.

At the highest level, practitioners track patterns to their source, shifting them before they take form, redirecting them in regenerative directions. This strategy lies behind principles like "obtain a yield" or "the problem is the solution," and is the reason for protracted and thoughtful observation. We learn to read energies and to find the acupuncture-like inoculation or disturbance that changes the manifestation by altering the underlying pattern. Problems turn into solutions and provide us with yields if we can stop trying to stop or block them. This is the pattern of regeneration.

Every permaculture technique is a small disturbance that shifts the underlying pattern and hence the system. Water-har-



vesting structures, rotational grazing, chicken tractors, mulching, spreading seed-balls, setting cool ground fires in rank meadows or forests, transforming spoiling milk into creamy cheese, revolving loan funds, libraries, and even the design course itself all follow this pattern. We disturb brittle, senescent systems to allow the emergence of the next level of evolution—even when the system is our own preconceptions and habits of thought. This sort of strategic disturbance lies at the heart of self-organizing systems, and is the key to effective change efforts.

In a changing world, it does no good to teach a man to fish. What happens when currents, climate, or communities change? It is essential to teach how to think about fishing—whatever can be fished for, with whatever is at hand. This difference explains why the process is called permaculture DESIGN.

In its highest form, permaculture is not about designing individual, isolated physical elements. Rather, it is a pattern-based approach to designing systemic change efforts. This is the point of the PDC, as well as all that time spent in the forest or garden. It is to learn how living systems work so that we can shift the living systems most in need of shifting: human systems including how we think about the world.

Changing paradigms tops systems thinker Donella Meadow's list of the most effective places to intervene in systems. To effectively change the systems that are causing global degeneration, we need to change the human paradigm, beginning perhaps by shifting our paradigm of what permaculture really is. If we do not shift these larger human systems, our lovely gardens and beautiful hand-built homes don't have a chance.

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## At their highest expression, practitioners track patterns to their source, shifting them before they take form.

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Although the PDC contains many techniques, it is primarily about changing how we think about the world. It is meant to crack our certainties about everything from agriculture to economics and how the world works. This is why so many of the principles are like a whack on the side of the head. "What do you mean the problem is the solution? Or that yield is limited only by my mind?"

The PDC shifts our paradigm, then it shows us the pattern of shifting other people's paradigms. To catalyze paradigm shift is the greatest use of our skills—not to create gardens or to train gardeners, but to shift the thinking of folks who understand business and economics, laws and governance, so that these systems can be re-thought and re-worked to follow the patterns of living systems.



*Change-makers at a Midwestern conference to explore how to shift our paradigms and increase community resilience.. Permaculture design was well-received by attendees as a critical path forward. Photo by Janice Pyle.*

We have been warned that "the map is not the territory," and then have mistaken the map of permaculture as the territory of permaculture. Living in a materialistic and mechanistic culture, we have grabbed onto the "stuff" and mechanisms of permaculture, rather than the essential patterns. Just because we learn about living systems through gardens, forests, and fields, does not mean that that is where our art is most fruitfully applied.

So what am I asking of you? Please just think about this. Let it burn out the choked underbrush of your certainty. Watch how it effects how you think, teach, design, and work. Let it open room to let something new emerge in the sunlit space. While cracks in structures do indeed need to be fixed, from splitting seed coats, hatching chicks, or birthing babies or ideas, nature uses cracks as doorways to new life.

Please forward this around your networks. Debate it. Trash it. Try it on and try it out. If you would like to know more or let me know your thoughts please go to my website at [patternmind.org](http://patternmind.org).

Many thanks for your open hearts and minds.

△

*Joel Glanzberg is a long-time permaculturist (see Gaia's Garden). The integration of permaculture, tracking, and Living Systems Thinking, as three doors into the world of patterns, has consumed him for over a decade. A partner in Regenesi (www.regenesisgroup.com) and a mentor with the Tracking Project (www.thetrackingproject.org), he tries to be a good husband and father. For more information, visit [www.patternmind.org](http://www.patternmind.org).*





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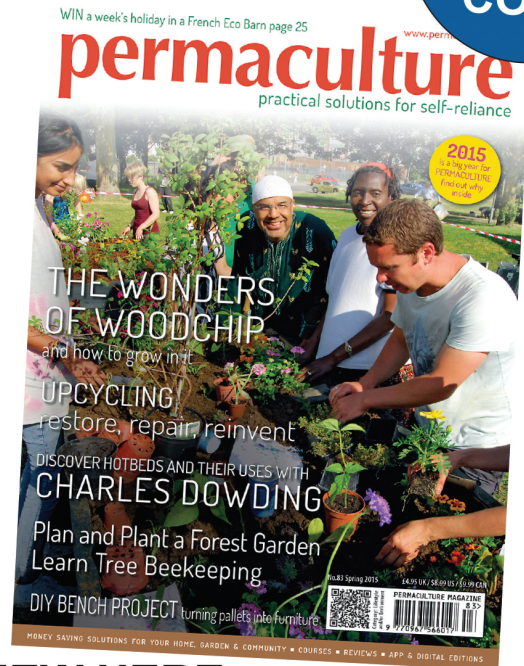
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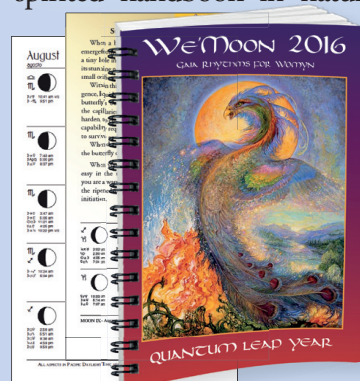
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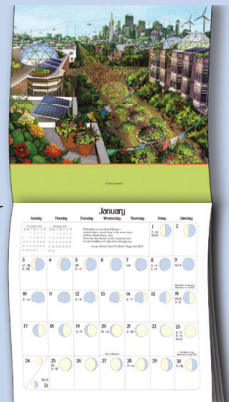
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*Throughout history, the really  
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