

The (Mal) Creation of Food the Monsanto Way: A Call to Return a Mythic Sensitivity to Food Production

By Clara Oropeza

Standing amidst the bucolic scenes of a traditional farm, rows of green vegetables reaching for the sun, and the landscape dotted with animals, pecking and grazing about in clean, fragrant air, it becomes easy to see the appeal of the agrarian countryside. However, humankind's lost sense of reciprocity and relationship with nature has become evidenced in the developing relationship between the industrialization of food and patenting of parts of nature. The popular phrase "we are what we eat" evokes a culture rooted in a creation mythology that links human nourishment to the foods produced by Mother Earth, all the while honoring all phases of agriculture, including the rhythms of nature's cycles and natural yield. However, the piercing question is what will unfold when food production trends towards the hands not of agriculture farmers, but a multi-national chemical company? Monsanto's genetic modification of food reveals a de-mythologizing of food creation, and as a result, a detachment to our animistic connection to nourishment. A myth that considers the divine nature of our food source needs to be re-written into our discourse. It is also imperative that our personal myths embody a sensual connection to Mother Earth such that our spiritual appetite to nourish our physical bodies may be solidified.

A close consideration of the myth of modernity, i.e., the Christian creation myth, illuminates, from a mythological perspective, the rise of the corporate manipulation of the agricultural order, thus, the question concerning the origin of the dominant paradigm of consciousness with respect to the natural world. In Genesis God tells man: "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth. I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on

the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food” (*Holy Bible, New King James Vers.*, Genesis, 1.28). This passage underscores that man is “above” and has power over nature, for nature exists separate from man. In her compelling essay “Nature Writing: Jung’s Eco-Logic in the Conjunction of Comedy and Tragedy,” Susan Rowland cogently argues that “the ecological disaster that is western modernity results from the over-valuing of sky-father transcendence as the privileging of rationality, discrimination, and separation over connection and relating” (286). This “over-valuing” of sky-father transcendence as the dominant attitude in the world, Rowland argues, leads to the modern consideration of man as superior, and thus in the position to control his creation. As a result, Rowland points out, “the ‘logos,’ the abstract knowledge of the natural world, ceased to be identified primarily with the mind of God and became the dominant (and privileged) mode of knowledge as science” (287).

This emphasis on scientific logos, in the guise of modern technology, can be seen in the genetic modification of our foods today, specifically with regard to what is being performed by one of the world’s leading chemical companies, Monsanto, formerly known as Aroclor, famed manufacturer of the carcinogenic fluid polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) (Robin 3). In her revealing book *The World According to Monsanto*, Marie-Monique Robin traces the company’s history, noting that Monsanto “began by manufacturing saccharin, the first artificial sweetener,” and in “1918 Monsanto made its first acquisition, buying an Illinois company that made sulfuric acid” (Robin 11). Monsanto’s history reveals a penchant for artificial creation:

In the 1940s it became one of the world’s major producers of rubber, followed by plastics and synthetic fibers such as polystyrene, as well as phosphates... At the same time, it reinforced its monopoly in the international market of PCB market, guaranteed by a patent that enabled it to sell licenses almost everywhere in the world. (Robin 11)

Moreover, the genesis of genetic modifications of foods, according to Robin, began in 1953 when the biochemist James Watson and the Briton Francis Crick “discovered the double helix structure of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), the molecule that contains the genetic code for every living organism” (132). In 1972 Monsanto began working on developing seeds that would be resistant to their leading pesticide, Roundup. Today Monsanto has the patent on 11,000 specific seeds, including many of the world’s staple crops, corn, soy, and canola among them. Monsanto also holds a patent on a variety of wheat used for making traditional Indian foods such as *chapattis* (Robin 293). “Monsanto holds a monopoly on the growing, crossbreeding, and processing of this variety, which originated in northern India” (Robin 312). Monsanto epitomizes the modern paradigm dominated by patriarchy and Judeo-Christian ethos, resulting in a gross devaluing of nature’s logic including the instinctive yield that was once produced by nature alone. The biotechnology Monsanto uses to produce food is blatantly devoid of a mythic sensitivity towards food formation. The patenting of living things, particularly of seeds, is now a lucrative part of the world’s food market (Robin 206). Monsanto’s systematic process of genetically modifying seeds, patenting them, and then supplanting the traditional agrarian seed bank across the globe seeks to feed only the shareholder bottom line. Monsanto posted earnings of \$4.8 million in the second quarter of 2012 alone, an increase of 15% from second quarter of 2011 (Zack’s Investment Research).

As living systems we can no longer stray from a mythological connection to the sacred creation of food. One place to turn to is the Seneca creation myth. This myth aligns Native Americans as an embodied people with the divine body and a reverence for the food that nourishes humanity. In the myth “How the World Began,” Sky-Woman is responsible for carrying seeds from the upper world to the lower world. She is responsible for the

germination of the seeds. In this newly created lower world, Sky-Woman finds herself amidst flourishing life, as stated in the creation myth: “The root of the tree which she had grasped she sunk into the soil where she had fallen and this too began to grow until it formed a tree with all manner of fruits and flowers and bore a luminous orb at its top by which the new world became illuminated” (Parker 62). This is how Sky-Woman makes her way into this world, as first woman. The seeds Sky-Woman transmits from one world to another contain not only vital nourishment in the form of food for the next generation, but the seeds are also a rich source of family stock, of ancestry.

In contrast, the genetically modified seeds produced by industrial agriculture such as those generated by Monsanto, are the product of genetic tinkering by replacing genes from one organism into another (Robins 113). Genetic modification of food echoes the rationale that man must “fill the earth and master it.” The manipulation of the genetic information of crops at the molecular level reveals Monsanto’s engaging a “God fantasy,” one in which it plays the creator and manipulator of nature. C. G. Jung cautioned against the inflation with a God image. He argues:

Far from being a negation, God is actually the strongest and most effective ‘position’ the psyche can reach, in exactly the same sense in which Paul speaks of people ‘whose God is their belly.’ The strongest and therefore the decisive factor in any individual psyche compel the same belief or fear, submission or devotion, which a God would demand from man. Anything despotic and inescapable is in this sense “God,” and it becomes absolute unless, by an ethical decision freely chosen, one succeeds in building up against this natural phenomenon a position that is equally strong and invincible. (245)

This God-like-fantasy, as described by Jung, forbids the ego the ability to reflect on what is being created, thus causing a shadow. Today our food production is in the hands of scientists, not farmers. This shift in food production is causing an immeasurable humanistic

disconnection from our ecological system, which in turn leads to a disconnection of our inner ecologies.

Again, an essential metaphor missing from the Christian creation myth, yet by contrast is prominent in Iroquois mythology, is the power attributed to women of birthing life, and Mother Earth as a womb that gives birth to the abundance of life. In the Seneca creation myth, for example, Sky-Woman's daughter dies during the child birthing of twins, and her son Good Mind watches as crops sprout from his mother's life-transforming body:

Good Mind watched at the grave of his mother and watered the earth above it until the grass grew. He continued to watch until he saw strange buds coming out of the ground. Where the feet were the earth sprouted with a plant that became the stringed-potato, where her fingers lay sprang the beans, where her abdomen lay sprang the squash, where her breasts lay sprang the corn plant, and from the spot above her forehead sprang the tobacco plant. (Parker 64)

This creation myth places women at the core of all that pertains to flourishing in the earth, and the "three sisters" (corn, beans and squash) become the revered and main life support that feeds society. For the Iroquois, connecting women to Mother Earth is not a mere romantic metaphor, but rather it links women to their creative powers, unrecognized in Sky-Father world. It is also in the Iroquois community that women are known to be the farmers, passing down ancestral knowledge about the specific biodiversity and agricultural methods.

The working of farmland, the tilling of the earth, in the processes of food production is another natural ingredient that is excluded when using genetically modified seeds. In her brilliant book *Soil Not Oil*, Vandana Shiva argues, "as the fossil fuel economy has grown, it has substituted energy for humans. On the one hand, this has rendered humans redundant to the economic enterprise of production" (138). Shiva takes us back to the notion that "human energy, combined with the energy of the sun, the plants and animals, the wind, the air, the sea

and water, the soil and the earth, is both the basis of work and livelihoods and the source of sustainable and renewable energy (139).

It is through joining a mythic sensitivity, as in the Seneca creation myth, as well as uniting the polyphony of critical voices, like David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* or Vandana Shiva in *Soil Not Oil*, that we can re-write a mythic sensitivity to our food creation. David Abram argues that “our task is that of taking up the written word, with all of its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land” (273). In a similar way, Shiva reminds us of the force that words carry. For example, in our current mechanistic worldview, the word “energy” has lost its other meaning. To Shiva, energy is not measured in British thermal units, but rather experienced as Shakti: “the generative force of the universe, to the sun that powers our lives, to the water that comes to us as bountiful rain or a flood or a tsunami, to the air and the wind that move the clouds and create the climate. Energy is not just oil and gas. Energy is an all-pervasive element of life” (134-135). For those of us who believe our body is connected to Mother Earth, we must feel that natural energy of Shakti inherent in our food while reflecting on what the phrase “we are what we eat” resonates with in our soul.

A Garden of My Own

As a way to bring nature into my own personalized landscape, I have undertaken the cultivation of a flower and vegetable garden in my backyard. I have come to rely on my garden as a place that inspires and nourishes all of my senses. In her book *A Natural History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman points out what it means to describe ourselves as “sentient” beings: “sentient beings (from Latin *sentire*, ‘to feel,’ from Indo-European *sent-*, ‘to head for,’ ‘go’; hence to go mentally) we mean that we are conscious. The more literal and

encompassing meaning is that we have sense perception” (xvii). Our sense perception runs through our entire body. David Abram reminds us, “we can experience things—can touch, hear, and taste things—only because as bodies, we are ourselves included in the sensible field, and have our own textures, sounds, and tastes. We can perceive things at all only because we ourselves are entirely a part of the sensible world that we perceive” (668). Abram’s invites us to see ourselves as organs of the sensory world that is animated with life. The reciprocal nature of perception then inspires us in turn to act respectfully to the rest of non-human nature.

My garden is home to a host of plants such as variant native sages, fragrant tall stems of lavender, elegant agaves, desert primrose (that throughout the day turn their sprightly heads towards the sun), and blooming fuchsia bougainvilleas. In the steadily sun-bathed corner of my garden, the soil is filled with citrus trees, tall stalks of leafy dinosaur kale, celery, green chard, red leaf lettuce, spinach, pickling cucumbers, mint, fennel, and basil. The flowers and vegetables all sprout upward like a horizontal line towards the moon. It is in this space where I feel vital Shakti pulsate. Here I connect to Mother Nature’s nourishing gifts and cycles of creation.

In my garden, I am often drawn to Persephone’s energy and envelop myself in the landscape that evokes healing. Here I meditate on the fluttering silence, and the creative flow exuded by the body of the cosmos. I witness and relish the array of sanguine butterflies dancing with freedom and fluttering aliveness that frequent my garden. In my inner garden, I connect the flutter of the *mariposas* to my own pulse and I am reminded that I too have wings, and that I too transform. Taking in nature’s rich dance in my personal garden grounds me in

her truest pattern—that is, life, death and rebirth. Nature reminds me that in each moment something must give for another to be birthed.

The process of personalizing my garden has aligned me on a path that reflects a union between my inner sentiments and my outer landscape. Cultivating a garden gives nature a permanent home in my own personal myth. In nature is where my quotidian rebirthing happens. As I become acquainted with non-human nature and the vibrant vegetables that thrive in my immediate region, the mythic sensitivity exuded in my garden reminds me of the bases of traditional farming. We cannot allow ourselves to be carried away from natural food production. Rather than allowing intimate agrarian knowledge to vanish from our culture and allow companies like Monsanto to take over agriculture, we can participate in the sensuous presence of plants and earth, and participate in the local farmers markets and co-operatives sprouting up in our communities. In this way, our appetite for a mythic and sensual connection to Mother Earth and to nourishing foods can be harmonized.

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