

Stopping Cop City and Reconnecting with Abundance

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Abundia Alvarado is a community organizer and a co-founder of Mariposas Rebeldes, a member of the movement to protect Weelaunee Forest and Stop Cop City, and a founder of FaunAcción, and El Molcajete. A Nahuatl and Apache trans femme migrant, she is currently based between Atlanta and Tennessee. In Atlanta, she helped launch an annual money-free gift-economy festival called the Dandelion Fest and is working on projects around the idea of the universe as a “Sacred Web of Abundance.” We spoke about Abundia’s life’s philosophy, its roots, and how it has shaped the trajectory of her organizing.

Since the interview was conducted last month, there have been some developments in Atlanta’s grassroots campaign to stop construction of a highly militarized police training facility, nicknamed “Cop City,” on 85 acres of the Weelaunee forest. On December 13 and 14, SWAT teams and police arrested twelve land defenders and six of them were given bogus “domestic terrorism” charges. All six have been bonded out of jail, but readers can contribute to their legal expenses through the Atlanta Solidarity Fund, follow the movement at *Scenes from the Atlanta Forest*, and organize solidarity events. -DF

You’ve described your childhood surroundings near Monterrey, Mexico, as a “web of abundance”. Could you elaborate on some of the values you picked up in this environment - including from your Nahuatl and Apache family and from the local community as well as the broader ecosystem - which continue to inform your organizing?

I grew up in a neighborhood called Canteras in the outskirts of Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico, the third largest city and center of the Mexican business and economy, located in the desert land, surrounded by a beautiful web of abundance that saved me from the daily horrible reality of extreme poverty. Canteras was full of different cacti—many of them edible like the *nopales* which have *tunas* (prickly pears)—that I collected almost all year round. There were different varieties of chiles, my favorites being the tiny yet potent *piquin*. For my sweet tooth, there were blackberries, mulberries, and many other desert foods and flowers. So even though we were food insecure at my household, I still ate so well and plentifully. Canteras's web of abundance (or WoA, for short) was everything to me. I played in it all day, befriended animals and plants, and imagined other worlds outside the neighborhood and its physical and mental constraints. I relentlessly explored every inch of that land and learned something new every day from all the plants, animals, insects, fungi, etc, that were part of that particular WoA. There were a lot of waterways, little waterfalls, and pools to bathe in. It was heaven for a curious and very active little girl (although I didn't yet identify as a girl outwardly).

This particular land where I was born and grew up was owned by a very rich landowner, but my mother helped organize 120 families to occupy it and settle there. The occupation was successful and the Canteras neighborhood was born. These 120 families were mostly Indigenous people from different parts of Mexico but mainly Nahuatl people like my father's family. I learned about their cultures and traditions by paying attention to the staples they grew (such as corn, tomatoes, chilis (especially *chile piquin*), blackberries, mangoes, oranges, peanuts, bananas, and avocados), the way they cooked them and the dishes they made. My neighbors helped each other to grow food and shared the harvests. One value that was instilled in me during these early years was respect for all the plants, ecosystems, and animals, and always being aware of other species' jurisdictions or territories. Canteras was also the home of many kinds of snakes like the rattlesnakes, copperhead, coralillo and the mysterious (mythical) *Alicante* snakes. My family was so lucky we never got bitten by a snake even though I encountered them every day in the mountains. I knew where they lived and hung out and was careful not to intrude then. That respect and awareness is something that I carry on with me and that informs my activism around animal rights. Regarding human jurisdictions, I was never good and always transgressed their boundaries.

From the community, one of the values I carry is showing up for each other, being in solidarity. People would bring food when someone lost a job, brought medicine when someone got sick, visited people who were in jail. If someone needed a place to stay because their home burned down, people opened up their doors, same with people traveling. When people had to install a cement roof, there would be a party where everyone would show up and help build that roof.

When you formed Atlanta's queer, Latine anti-capitalist collective Mariposas Rebeldes in February 2021, why did the group choose this name (which means Rebel Butterflies)? Do you see it as fitting some of their various projects such as gardening, producing tempeh, and running gift-economy festivals?

When co-founder Israel Tordoya and I dreamed and moved forward to carve a space for Latines that did not require paying or consuming, we were thinking that "Mariposas" (a name given to gay, trans and gender nonconforming folks in Mexico) was very fitting, we added "Rebeldes" as a statement that we were also into troublemaking. Once we started the backyard veggie garden, our conversations started to switch from just space for Latines to learn and become actively involved in reclaiming our heritage by growing, processing and cooking staple foods and dishes from the countries where we and our relatives came from. We also realized that a lot of our festivities come from those staple foods as well as our mythologies and precolonial religions. That is why we choose Itzpapalotl, an old Mexica- Aztec goddesses as our patron, to reclaim our mythology and our precolonial queer rich history. Our patron, Izpapalotl, protects women and children and rules over the kingdom of creativity and art. Izpapalotl transformed herself, she could be a fierce butterfly

warrior with claws, or she could become a beautiful woman. When men abuse or commit violence against any women (cis or trans), she kills these perpetrators. Itzpapalotl is a goddess that not just transformed herself at times but also protected women's boundaries. When we, the Mariposas, thought about being a collective, being in the diaspora, far from our lands and being in the second or third generations growing up here, we wanted to reconnect with our mythology, our ceremonies, our rituals, and add new meanings, new words, making a different way to relate to our culture and be close to our land and ancestors.



Image of Itzpapalotl by Mariposas Rebeldes member Edric Figueroa.

One of our members did a beautiful drawing of Itzpapalotl. We started to tell stories, and we created a little video that tells the story of the Mariposas migrating to Atlanta. It's fictional but it takes elements of Latine people's histories migrating to the United States. And all the butterflies are so beautiful and they do their job collectively. They are gorgeous scavengers that show incredible strength in migrating from Canada to Mexico and back. When some die, other butterflies continue their migration and mission. So we were inspired to build the Mariposas for queer, transgender, and nonbinary people around the U.S. and beyond. And that's why I find our name fitting.

Which of the Mariposas Rebeldes' projects would you say have been most effective and rewarding so far?

Mariposas Rebeldes started as a backyard garden project where we grew certain foods. We started growing corn, beans, and squash with the Three Sisters methodology, and we grew *nopales*, chilis, and tomatoes. We were kicked out, displaced from the land because it was a rental home. And we moved online during the pandemic and hosted several interesting skill shares about corn, corn processing, and the making of different things with corn. We keep doing a lot of skill shares and dreaming about one day having our land.

I felt that we, the Mariposas, could have a festival going along with the work of building our own traditions and mythology. We could build things for the community, and so I thought of the Dandelion Festival where people would bring recipes and process different things with dandelions.

We thought our festival wasn't going to be very well attended, because the pandemic was raging.

But contrary to our expectations, tons of people showed up. A lot of people were hungry for relationship and human contact, especially among queer people and especially among migrant queer people. And so there was a huge success.

At the Dandelion Fest, people showed up all the things that you can imagine that involve dandelions, from pasta, to jellies, to medicine, to teas, and other concoctions. But not just that. They brought beer, wine, and all kinds of medicines. They brought food, and other things that they made. People showed up with their skills and knowledge to offer others, whether it be mythology, massage, therapy, singing, performance, cooking, painting, you name it. There were so many things, all of a sudden it was like a gigantic farmer's market with amazing things. Minus the money factor. Nothing was for sale, nothing was to be bought. Everything was exchanged, given, shared. It was a huge success. People stayed for a long time.

We opened up at the center of the festival a place for our ancestors where we did a ritual and had pictures of people who had passed from COVID or from violence against queer and trans people. And we opened up a place at the center of this festival so people could visit with their ancestors, those that had passed to the next world. We had performances, spoken word, dance, multimedia, art, food, drinks, and so many services. The neighbors came to offer such as massages, tarot reading, painting, canning, all for free.

I was just blown away by having such a high-quality festival, with people bringing such amazing things and no one spending a dime. So that was a successful and popular thing the Mariposas has done for the community so far. People loved it and want to normalize such spaces and have already asked about opening up spaces where different collectives can organize clothes swaps and skill shares under the umbrella of the Dandelion Festival with different experiments of gift economies without money. So, yeah, I think that has been the most successful project and it's been very rewarding to see the community so excited and interrogating themselves and their relationship to wealth, money, and the capitalist system.

We did a second Dandelion Fest, and it was just as successful or more so. Even though it was in a gentrified area, about 60 percent of the people who came were Black and brown. That was nice to see because Atlanta is so segregated and different communities don't mingle much. Around 400 people participated throughout the festival that started at 3:00 pm and ended at midnight.



Scene from the Dandelion Fest (Source: <https://mariposasrebeldes.tumblr.com/>)

Could you speak to how large is the group, how is it run, how do members support themselves financially, and what does day-to-day life look like in general?

So the Mariposas group is composed of 5 members. Edric Figueroa (he/ they) was born in Peru, and came to the States as a kid. He is gay and has been involved in organizing for the LGBTQ community for a while. Israel (they/ them), is a co-founder. They are also from Peru. Israel studied pharmacology and is really into sustainable agriculture and currently doing a ton of work on our collective land, Bosque Itz'papatl, to build permanence. Jesse Pratt Lopez (she/her) is a trans young woman from Colombia raised in the U.S. She is a journalist and a very talented photographer and a plant worship enthusiast. She also created the Trans Housing Coalition (THC) in Atlanta that does live saving work for houseless Black trans women. She started this project as a teenager. Jesse and I work a lot on carving spaces for alternative economies and are both very involved in protecting Weelaunee forest. She is also involved with the Weelaunee coalition among many other projects and initiatives for our queer fam in Atlanta. PJ (they/them) is the youngest of all of us and they are Chiricahua Apache, Tejano and white. They're an actor and performance artist, very interested in communicating Mariposas values and sharing with people the different meanings of art, multimedia, performance, writing and other media. They are one of our land stewards and have a passion for building community through food and art.

Jesse had a job for a long time and she's transitioning. Israel has had various agricultural gigs in Atlanta for the past two years; now they're doing part time work teaching kids agriculture. PJ works in a coffee shop. Edric works in nonprofits, has been working there for about six years, on HIV education and prevention. I had a job advising projects in Mexico about food sovereignty and food reclamation for Indigenous. I quit my job in April last year, and I've been just focused on helping Mariposas and I've got gigs interpreting and translating between English and Spanish. It's been hard for me to do these jobs because Mariposas' projects are piling up. I do a lot of relationship building here in the South, between all the different queer community projects.

Mariposas Rebeldes seem very conscious of their location on land of the Muscogee (Creek). I'm interested in how you see your organizing as relating to Indigenous peoples' Land Back (#LandBack) movement.

Yes, we are very conscious and aware that we are living on Muscogee land and we are in relationship with Muscogee people and honoring their land as best as we can and as we learn more about radical stewardship. My husband is a Muscogee scholar, and we have strong ties to Muscogee people and culture, particularly ceremonial life. I am part of the ceremonial grounds and participate in the religious life of the Muscogee together with my husband. We are not just doing land acknowledgements but also trying to support Muscogee people. The Mariposas are very interested in learning from Muscogee people about agriculture and radical stewardship. We've been thinking about different projects related to medicinal plants for the benefit of Muscogee people and the larger Atlanta community. We are careful with what we plant in our communal property. We plant native as well as non-native or migrant plants that are beneficial to the land, that enhance the land.

We plugged in on the conversations about Land Back in November, 2021 and we are trying to focus on stewardship as a way of advancing Land Back. Also, I've been thinking about how Indigenous migrants from the Global South, especially Central and South America, fit into the Land Back movement. We want to have these conversations with Muscogee and with other Indigenous people in so-called North America. And now that we have a relationship with people protecting Weelaunee forest, these conversations are very much present. For example, I started a Signal chat study group on the rich history of Muscogee resistance and land defense and are in conversations to call for a big gathering focusing on stewardship and Land Back, for this spring in middle Tennessee. We are open for partnership on this by the way. We hope to keep building a relationship with Muscogee people and any other Indigenous people and keep learning and engaging with them. All the Mariposas are part Indigenous or, like myself, identify as Indigenous. I first identify as Nahuatl and Apache then Mexican.

Some of the Mariposas are currently visiting a Muscogee ecovillage, called Ekvn-Yefolecv, in Alabama. It's an amazing place run by Muscogee people and we could learn so much from them about radical stewardship.



Atlanta forest defenders repurpose an old truck. (Source: <https://crimethinc.com/2022/04/11/the-city-in-the-forest-reinventing-resistance-for-an-age-of-ecological-collapse-and-police-militarization>)

Could you speak more on your experience with the Save Weelaunee/Stop Cop City campaign which organizes against the construction of a high-tech police training center on currently forested land? I've been inspired by how it brings together anti-racist and eco-defense folks, and I loved their banner saying 'Stop the Metaverse, Save the Real World.' I'm hoping you can speak to some of this campaign's accomplishments and mistakes on the ground.



Banner in Atlanta displays “Stop the Metaverse, Save the Real World.” (Source: <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/horizons/493130/stop-the-metaverse-save-the-real-world/>)

I’ve been involved for the duration of this struggle—which is now 1 year and 9 months—with Save Weelaunee/Stop Cop City, and we have been successful at stalling the project that was supposed to begin construction eight months ago. We threw them off the schedule, which is a big accomplishment for an autonomous decentralized movement with very little cash against a billionaire project and wealthy interests. I think there have been many small accomplishments with people going to Weelaunee and preventing destructive forces (aka police) from entering the forest. We’ve also been successful in spreading the word about Cop City and forest destruction plans.

I see some of it from afar, since this decentralized movement is relatively large and I’m not always aware of what other people do. Also there have been very beautiful projects at Weelaunee like the “Weelaunee People’s Park”, the food runs, the cooking/potluck community nights every Wednesday at Weelaunee, and the building of a *sukkah* during the last week of action. There is a strong Jewish presence in protecting the forest.

As far as negatives, the movement started off a little bit on the wrong track, because the people who organized Defend the Atlanta Forest at first were mostly white anarchists. I remember when they called for the first meeting. Around sixty people showed up, four of them were BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), and the rest were all white.

And I said we had to call for another meeting where we made sure we had Black people, because the Black communities around this forest were going to be the most impacted if the forest gets destroyed and if the police facility gets built. The ones getting incarcerated as a result will be disproportionately Black, Indigenous and brown people. I did not see too many efforts from the beginning from the white anarchist communities to remediate that. I was in the middle of moving to Tennessee, and I distanced myself from the movement.

Then last September, we decided to reach out to Muscogee people. I told the decolonization working group that I could reach out to Muscogee people, share what’s happening at Weelaunee,

and invite people to check it out if they wanted, too. That's what I did. I went to Oklahoma and reached out to a *Mekko* (leader) of one of the ceremonial grounds. I informed the Mekko of what was happening and opened an invitation for him and his grounds members to come. They agreed to visit Weelaunee and to perform a stomp dance exhibit there, so we quickly started to raise funds and hosted them during National Day of Mourning last year for an historic Stomp Dance. That dance was very well attended, the most well attended event of the Save Weelaunee movement to date. It was a beautiful night with clear and crisp skies, the Mekko gave a very powerful speech about Muscogee stewardship of the homelands and a blessing for the people fighting for the forest.



Muscogee stomp dance at Weelaunee

(Source:

<https://crimethinc.com/2022/04/11/the-city-in-the-forest-reinventing-resistance-for-an-age-of-ecological-collapse-and-police-militarization>)

That opened up the question about us as a movement centering Black and Indigenous people. Because of all the momentum from that Stomp Dance, and the attention we got, we decided to push for a coalition. In January of 2022, the resulting Weelaunee Coalition was started by an alliance of amazing Black educators, at pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and elementary schools, together with me and white allies. Together, the Weelaunee Coalition met and found our identity and call. We organized a summit in April of Muscogee scholars. That was a very successful event.

We now have a strong Weelaunee Coalition with many different groups involved, and we have a set vision and goals. We meet once a month, and we decided we want more physical presence in the forest, so that the cops don't mess with the forest defenders. We organized different things like bike rides, picnics, and celebrations each weekend, either from the Weelaunee Coalition, anarchists in Defend the Forest, or Stop Copy City.

There are also groups and nonprofits organizing things. People are staying in the forest, camping there. People have been living in houses in trees for almost a year so far. White people have been learning not to take too much space, and to lift up Black and Indigenous voices. They've learned to tone down their "savior complex". We're creating a safe space for Muscogee people to participate in this movement in any capacity they have, including from afar. And we've been discussing what Land Back and rematriation mean to them.



In Montreuil, France, a banner displays “From Lützerath to Atlanta, Defend the Forest.” Lützerath is the site of Zone to Defend (ZAD) in Germany.

(Source:

twitter.com/CHIforests/status/1614356435575668736/photo/1)

I understand that, since founding the Mexican anti-speciesist organization FaunAcción, you’ve remained involved with them and their offshoot “El Molcajete”, and you’ve also been in touch with folks in San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas. What lessons do you think U.S.-based organizers can learn from some of the communities you’re engaged with in Mexico?

That’s correct. I founded FaunAcción in 2015, and El Molcajete was born in December of 2016. I am more in contact with El Molcajete, as an advisor and helper. We are also learning and supporting El Cambalache, a group from San Cristóbal de las Casas that works on gift economies. They have a global class on emergent/ alternative economies with folks from all over the world and a store where people go to exchange and/or get things for free.

FaunAccion and El Molcajete are open to working with people who aren’t vegan or anti-speciesist. They work in alliances and partnerships in order to advance their causes. The people in Mexico are willing to open up in partnership and not just keep with one black-and-white message or one single strategy. They are looking to do more intersectional work.

So for example, FaunAcción worked with the Secretary of Education to print a book that was going to be used to teach third graders. The Secretary of Education was not anti-speciesist, but we were willing to spend time on this because we thought putting ideas of animal rights and plant-based and Nahautl diets into the curriculum was important. They printed the book, and we had more plans to continue but then the pandemic hit.

In the United States, it would be very nice if people looked at how Indigenous people stewarded the land and the animals, and we could help them recover traditional staples that happen to be plant-

based. There are animal-rights groups and vegan groups that only work with like-minded groups. To me, that purity doesn't achieve anything and damages the movement.

Why do you see your queer and trans identities as being integral to your organizing, and what is the relation between your personal and political journeys in this sense?

I've come to understand our organizing, our showing up for each other, and our fights, as very integral to our identities and living as we're under threat as queer/ trans/ gender-nonconforming people in the United States and in a capitalist society. Despite capitalist attempts to co-opt movements, we are still in the margins.

We are all about community healing and transformation, and creating safe spaces for the LGBTQ community. We're not just concerned about single issues like pronouns or bathrooms, but about transforming our entire daily life and creating safety for all of us as well as concrete ways of showing up for each other in our daily lives.

For me, it's about fighting for things that I need to have a good, safe living standard. I'm not interested in "helping others" *per se*. It's a dangerous road when you "help others." Very privileged people can do that, but the community I'm organizing is not just queer, trans, and nonconforming but is also migrants, Indigenous, Black, and people of color. People have so many needs, including economic, legal, emotional, health, community, and spiritual needs.

We wanted to learn from the WoA to mimic or model our systems based on the WoA. We know that we're always evolving and healing constantly from life trauma, for example. My identity is very tied to what I do for me and for the community I'm part of.

As you've transitioned and claimed your grandmother's name, Abundia, there's an obvious resonance with your personification of the universe as a "Sacred Web of Abundance." This is also the name of your latest project, an online organizing tool. What are your hopes for this endeavor?

Part of my journey and part of what I'm doing is informed by my grandma Abundia's life. She was a powerful Chiricahua Apache healer, an amazing person, an enemy of the state, who survived in very, very harsh times for cis indigenous women and single mothers in Monterrey, Mexico. I admire her so much and wanted to honor her and learn her ways. She lived a life of abundance even though she was not rich. She was able to sustain herself by running a *cantina*, a bar, which was hard for women at that time. She was able to sustain my mom. She did a lot of good for the community but also lived her life in abundance, meaning she did not live in fear of scarcity. According to the stories I hear from my mother, my grandma enjoyed everything around her including the plants and animals. Whatever she had, she shared with others: her knowledge, her food, her time, her skills, her life experience, her joy. Her house was always open to the community, particularly for marginalized groups such as women ostracized for having babies outside of marriage, women who worked as sex workers, and probably even trans women.

I am so inspired and also feel a spiritual relationship and connection. I hope I can help more and more people to experience their life in Abundance. When we experience Abundance, we have less need for monetary transactions and accumulation, unnecessary accumulating many hours of work every day and obsession of saving money as the only way for safety for the self and our families and loved ones. I hope we start many projects that put Abundance in the spotlight in 2023. I hope that many people can take the reflections and ideas about Abundance as a tools to affect their daily lives and praxis. I hope I can pull out a team, especially of Indigenous, Black, queer and trans people, who will talk about Abundance in their art/ organizing/ activism in 2023.

I need to figure out how I'm going to sustain myself. I've been thinking about a paycheck, grants, fundraising etc, since I need money for gas, travel, and food. I've started conversations with people. I hope that in 2023 we can put out a call and set everything in motion so that we can grow from there with this project in a very solid way and that Mariposas and Weelaunee also might get involved in putting the spotlight on Abundance as a way of being and a philosophy with a lot of potentiality for communities starting to solve the climate crisis for example.

In an earlier conversation, you clarified that you refer to Abundance as a “her,” not an “it” and that this language is important to you. I'm curious how this way of thought informs your approach to food, which might be called vegan even though you avoid that word. Is there a relationship between veganism and projects such as FaunAcción, Mariposas Rebeldes, and the Weelaunee Coalition?

For me, the relationship between all these projects and groups is trying to build a Web of Abundance in the South from Tennessee to Atlanta, and in Mexico, is that we're all trying to create safety and abolish systems of oppression whether it's capitalist farming, the carceral state, or systems that kill marginalized Indigenous, trans, queer, and gender nonconforming bodies.

They're all about new proposals and new ways of building up. I am very careful about the “veganism” word, since veganism is understood as another simplistic, activist thing where you just buy stuff if you have the money. For me to replace one oppressive system-capitalist farming- with another oppressive system, which is based on maximizing profit and monocultures and extractivism, is dangerous. So I am trying to build around notions of fairness, justice, equity, and respect being present in food systems, in ways we relate to each other.

I think that in FaunAcción, Mariposas Rebeldes, and Weelaunee Coalition, all these conversations are present. We're trying to be more creative. What we want to do is always coming from the grassroots. We're interested in the abolition of the gender binary, capitalist farming, extraction and private property. This is a big question that I could talk on and on about. Food is so important for culture, spirit, and environment, and it's a way of keeping us safe and healthy and therefore strengthening abolition.