

# Who Will Own the Water?

## The Free Trade Area of the Americas

"Tell us more about your home, Charlie. Who owns the water?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the water. Like to drink, and grow your food. Who owns it?"

"Nobody owns it. You can't own water where I come from."

"Somebody's got to own it," Littlejohn said. "Somebody always does."

"We believe there are Four Sacred Things that can't be owned," Bird said. "Water is one of them. The others are earth and air and fire. They can't be owned because they belong to everybody. Because everybody's life depends on them."

"But that would make them the best kind of thing to own," Littlejohn said. "Because if your life depends on it, you've got to have it. You'll pay any price for it. You'll steal or lie or kill to get it."

"That's why we don't let anybody own them," Bird said.

— Starhawk, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*

I can't write fiction these days. "Once upon a time, Jennie, a council of kings plotted to take over the earth. Realizing that armies and dictatorships were crude and obvious forms of control, easily seen and resisted, they instead dreamed up a series of trade agreements so obscure and convoluted that people could barely follow what

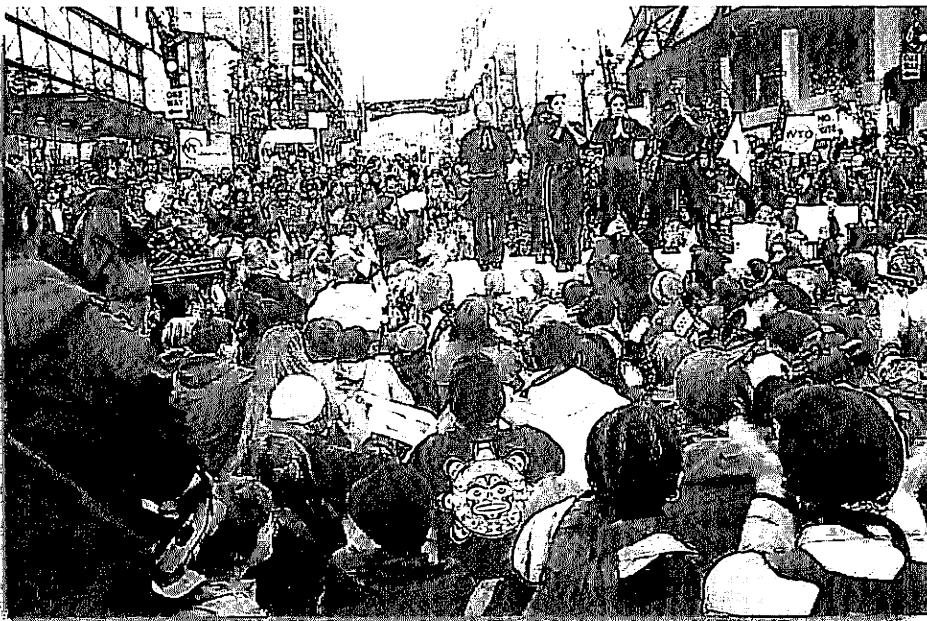
they meant. 'We'll just get the heads of governments to sign these,' the kings said. 'We'll give them lots of money to be sure they do. And the people won't know, until it's too late, that their own governments have signed away their water, their resources, their right to run their own schools, hospitals, prisons, and libraries, their right to make laws to

protect their environment or the safety of workers. We will rule the hemisphere, and then the world!' Not fiction.

In April, in Quebec City, thirty four heads of state from North and South America will set in motion a trade agreement that will allow corporations to sue governments in corporate courts, that will open up the water resources of the hemisphere to privatization, that will turn over to corporations the services we once expected democratic governments to provide: schools, hospitals, medical care, libraries, prisons, child care, elder care, museums, utilities, postal services, publishing, broadcasting, and more. The Free Trade Area of the Americas, or the FTAA, is the next step in the undeclared war to consolidate corporate rule over every area of life.

Who does water belong to? Water is life. We might say that every living being has a right to live and therefore a right to water. That water belongs to everyone and no one, to the salmon and the egret and the frogs and the child playing in the stream. And that the first task of human organization should be to guard, conserve, and fairly share the waters that grow our food and quench our thirst, so that everyone has enough, so that the land can flourish and the children be fed and the salmon return each year to their ancient spawning grounds. We can envision that world, where gardens flourish and no child goes hungry. We can dream of it. But if we want to live in it, we are going to have to fight for it now.

Another true story: In Bolivia, a subsidiary of Bechtel Corporation took



**photos from Seattle 1999**

left by Ben Read • opposite by Anne Hill

over the water delivery system. Immediately water rates rose beyond the means of many people. The poor were spending a third of their meager income just to buy water to drink. They rebelled. In massive, mostly nonviolent uprisings they blocked roads and took over buildings all around Cochabamba. The police and the army were not nonviolent. People were shot. Some died. The uprisings continued, and the government gave in. Now water is distributed by a people's committee, La Coordinadora. Bechtel had reregistered its subsidiary in the Netherlands, which has a bilateral trade agreement with Bolivia that protects the interests of large corporate investors. Bechtel is now suing the Bolivian government for hundreds of millions of dollars in lost potential profits. When a rich corporation sues a poor country, it is literally taking food out of the mouths of hungry children. It is as if Bechtel marched into Bolivian hospitals to throw sick people out of their beds, confiscate their medication, and rip the casts off broken limbs. Or as if they padlocked the doors of classrooms, tore half-read books out of children's hands and sent them out to the fields to work, knocked down the walls of their houses and replaced them with plastic and pieces of tin.

There is no safe, easy, legally sanctioned way to fight this battle. The details of these agreements are negotiated in secret. There is no public forum where we can vote on whether we agree or disagree with their provisions. Our governments have become so controlled by moneyed interests that they no longer serve to protect us. In the United States, in our last national election, we were asked to choose between two men who were both strong supporters of the takeover. And even that choice was denied us by a legalized coup.

In Quebec City, the authorities began in January to erect a nine-foot-high fence that encloses a four kilometer perimeter, to keep protestors away from the meeting. They have cleared an entire prison. They are threatening to arrest



anyone who gathers for any reason. They turn away suspected activists at the border.

And in a far corner of the galaxy, a tiny band of rebels plots to dismantle the greatest conglomeration of political, economic, military and police power the world has ever known....

Earth. In Chiapas, a small farmer loses his land when NAFTA allows the U.S. to flood the Mexican market with our cheap, surplus corn. The corn, genetically engineered to kill pests, kills the butterflies which once migrated across the continent. The corn strain once grown by the small farmer, bred by generations of his Mayan ancestors to be intimately adapted to the hills of his land, is lost forever when he loses his land. The Mayans believe that we are all made of corn.

Air. The hole in the ozone layer grows. A Canadian corporation sues the state of California for banning a toxic additive to gasoline and thereby causing them loss of profits. A corporation from the U.S. sues a Canadian government for banning an additive in its gasoline. Cities choke on exhausts, and automakers stall on alternatives. Meanwhile the pressure to extract more and more oil sends drilling teams protected by armies to commandeer the

lands of indigenous people who believe that oil is the Mother's blood, and if we take it from her, we will die.

Fire. The earth heats up: the climate changes. The U.N. now estimates global warming is progressing much faster than anticipated, that the earth's temperature may rise by ten degrees. The world's governments are unable to sign a treaty to reduce carbon emissions, for fear of causing an economic downturn and reducing corporate profits. Already forty percent of the ice caps have melted.

Victory. Every time the benevolent mask falls away, and the naked force that underlies the system is revealed, we win a small victory. Every time we resist intimidation, every time we gather in spite of their precautions, every time we dare the cost of raising our voices, we win. The cost may sometimes be high. But there is no safe way to avoid this struggle. And although it is not easy to step out into the streets in the face of clubs and tear gas and the threat of jail, it is easier now than it will be in five years or three years when they intend to ratify these treaties, or in twenty years, when two-thirds of the people in the world will be without adequate water. The fight is more hopeful now, when seventy percent of the ocean's oxygen-

*continued on page 62*



another decimal point of profits is added to the holdings of a billionaire. We know that food can be grown without poisons, that energy can be made from the sun, that people live better with pride and dignity when they have a voice in decisions that affect them. Around us are a hundred, thousand examples of success: from a Zapatista encampment in Chiapas to a permaculture farm in Canada, from the small Grameen banks of Pakistan that truly serve the poor, to the MST (Movimiento Sim Terra) encampments of Brazil where landless campesinos occupy unused estates and turn them into flourishing gardens, to the Watershed Councils of California's coastal counties.

And so these days I'm not writing fiction. I'm spending more time training people to stay grounded and centered in the face of tear gas than in the ecstasy of ritual. I'm teaching magic in the context of activism. And I am willing to risk my creaky, middle-aged body and my personal freedom on the streets of Quebec City or Washington or wherever the struggle moves.

There are things that are too precious to own. They belong to everyone, or to no one, because everybody's life depends on them. Held sacred, treated justly, they could sustain a world of freedom and plenty. We can lose that world forever, or we can fight for it now.

*Starhawk is the author of many published books on Goddess religion, from "The Spiral Dance" to "Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Tradition." She is a feminist, activist, teacher, Witch, gardener, drummer, and one of Reclaiming's founders.*

## The J'Argon by Sea Raven

The Year is 2157. The United States has become a repressive theocracy, where a great Evil holds sway. **The J'Argon** is the leader of a spiritual alliance that has voice, but not vote, in 22nd Century global politics. She is the Fourth J'Argon, and the first woman to hold the title. The J'Argon's long-time lover, partner, and soul friend, the Arch Deacon of the National Cathedral, is a leader in the Liberation Underground. The Arch Deacon must open his prophetic Christian mysticism to the J'Argon's ancient earth-based magic and awaken his own Adept Power so that together they can defeat the Dragon.

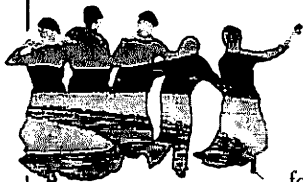


"Not since I read 'Mists of Avalon' have I felt so moved to my spiritual core. 'The J'Argon' is the most powerful narrative of spiritual intrigue, ritual, and power." — *Cristina Gonzales, Ph.D., Academic Dean, University of Creation Spirituality, Oakland, California.*

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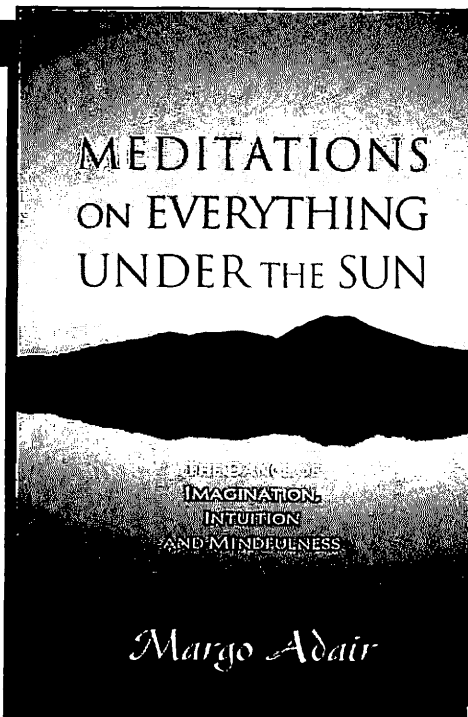
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*...an extensive and valuable resource for anyone interested in self development. I found Adair's concepts illuminating. I've been doing this work for over twenty years but her book gave me new insights and suggested fresh approaches. Highly recommended!*  
— Starhawk

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