

Reclamation of La Bruja with May Elawar, Episode 1

Eri: A big, big welcome and thank you to May Elawar for coming on this show, for being the first interview of the Birth Bruja Podcast. Thank you so much for being here.

May: Thank you so much, Eri. It was really an amazing surprise to get that email from you and to see what you're doing right now with your degree in Women's Spirituality. You're kind of walking it and living it with a program and podcast like this. So, congratulations.

Eri: Thank you. Thank you. Yes, upon the manifestation or the birth, shall we say, of this podcast, I immediately thought of you as the guest for this origin episode because I feel that you so powerfully and beautifully embody the nuances of walking in political activism and spiritual inquiry. The nuances of focusing on the micro while also having context of the macro, and for what I want to bring in my birth work, it's an acknowledgement of all. And so, when I was thinking about the topics that I would want to talk about as the foundation for this podcast, reclamation, intersectionality, again nuances – I'm probably going to say that word a bazillion times here – but those are all going to be strong foundations. Who better to talk about this than you, so thank you! Especially for agreeing to do it for basically a hug and a high five.

May: Absolutely.

Eri: So, to begin, would you mind just sharing a little bit about yourself. What are you doing these days, where are you from.

May: So, right now, I am a faculty member at the California Institute of Integral Studies. I teach in a program called Transformative Inquiry. We have a Masters in Transformative Leadership and a Ph.D. in Transformative Studies. And the word nuances come in and the word the transdisciplinary comes in where we look at the world. It's an inquiry-based program and we ask questions about how can we do this differently, how can we do it, you know, in a way that's sustainable, in a way that ensures the survival of all? And we don't limit ourselves to disciplines. We search for answers everywhere, all ways of knowing, all areas of study, all people, all life. You know, we look everywhere. And so, it provides this holistic transdisciplinary space of trying to come up with answers and better questions maybe to ask. So that's what I do professionally. I am originally from Lebanon. I came to the U.S. as a graduate student and then I stayed here and I've been in San Francisco for about 20 years, and I'm the mother of two teenage sons.

Eri: Thank you. So, you said something that's already so juicy, which is "ways of knowing". Can you talk more about that please?

May: Absolutely. Coming into academia as a younger person, I finished my Masters a long time ago when I was in my early 20s and it was in Political Science because I thought I wanted to be an activist. I wanted to make change in the world, and I thought politics was the way to go. And so, you go into a social science and you study and you learn theory and you learn about structures and institutions and the world. And you go into the world and you start to work. I worked in Washington, D.C. for about five years in various political lobby groups, and you realize that all you're doing is reinventing the wheel. The content might be different for your group, but the

way you're going about making change is the same as those in power that you are trying to critique and you're trying to change. And so that led me down another path. Well, where do we get the knowledge? Or how can we know what is needed to make a change? Like, if I'm looking at something and I know I'm feeling uncomfortable about what's going on, even though I totally believe in the issue, but the way it's being managed and the way the activism is being organized, or the way it's being led, you know, how can I trust that I know that there's something not right here? Where do I go in my body, in my heart to get that kind of knowledge, a different way of knowing? And that is eventually what led me down to this road of looking at, well, what is spirituality? Where does what I believe fit in to what I'm actually doing as an activist? And when you open up this thing, what do I believe? Then to me, that opens up this whole, like, well, what do I know and where do I find the things that I know? How do I come to know certain things? And this has led me down this kind of spiritual path that's integrated with my politics where there's activism on the outside, but there's a deep reflexive coming to know for myself on the inside going on all the time.

Eri: Yes, ah, so good! Thank you. Thank you. Yes, I see that very vibrantly in birth work, the struggle against what feels like a hierarchy, a top down, right, like needing science and statistics and folks with degrees to validate things that have already been expressed as valuable through the story telling or through the lived experiences. And to go back to this topic of reclamation work, I think that's a really big part, is to aide knowledge all the ways of knowing and acknowledge them as all as valuable and not from a top down. I know there are so many ways that we can go into this this, but the professionalization of birth work, just like the professionalization of community work, the non-profit industrial complex, I think that's going to be the struggle for us is simultaneously existing in structures that are problematic – existing because that's what's in the here and now, while simultaneously trying to transform in a meaningful way, exactly as you mentioned, that's not perpetuating, continuing to perpetuate problematic patterns in structures.

May: Right.

Eri: Thank you. Yes. Gosh, my Michigan background's coming out. I really want to high-five you right now.

In similar lanes, if we can talk about reclamation work –

May: Sure.

Eri: What does it mean to you? How would you define it or how would you explain it?

May: So, for me, initially if I want to say how I come to reclamation work is coming to voice for myself, reclaiming who I am to begin with. Being raised as female under various patriarchal structures in various places I've lived in my life has had its share of sort of silencing, has created sort of structure in norm that validates certain people, certain ways of knowing, certain ways of being, certain norms, right, that don't always privilege someone that is growing up female. So again, it's the first reclamation for me is a reclamation of self as female and what that entails, that yes, I do have a voice and yes, my voice is valid, and yes, I do know something about something. And that's to me where it starts. And then for me the person is always political, the person is always

political. So how can I in any way reclaim my voice in a system that doesn't allow that to happen? So, for me to be able to reclaim my own voice, I will need to look at the system at the same time and all women. And so, this led me down this path of looking at what has happened to women over the centuries? When did women lose their voice? When did women lose power under patriarchy? And there are many, many theories coming out around that, pre-Christianity, going back archeologically with the work of Marija Gimbutas and many, many others. And coming through, you know, through Europe, through colonization, what that did to women's voices, the witch burnings and the inquisition before that, enslavement and patriarchy. So really kind of deconstructing these structures to see, well, what happened? When did we lose that power to know, to speak up? To be change makers, to be leaders, when did we lose that power and how can we reclaim it? What do we need to reclaim it? What are the tools that we need to reclaim it? And so again, are we going to use the same tools to reclaim our power that were used to oppress us? Which brings up Audre Lorde and the Master's tools. Or are we as women going to create our own tools to reclaim our voice and reclaim our space? You know, tools that don't perpetuate the violence that we are struggling against, tools that don't perpetuate oppression, inequality, injustice. So, what are these tools? And this is where ways of knowing comes in again. You know, multiple ways of knowing beyond the way we have been indoctrinated to know, and really questioning structures at the roots so that we don't perpetuate these structures is really important. And then another really exciting thread here is, reclamation is, some might call it remembrance. Can we remember who we once were? Can we bring that forward? Or can we stop and look at ourselves now in all the glory and beauty and power that we embody as we kind of shed the internalized patriarchal oppression? Who are we and what do we want? So that kind of reflexive gaze, if you want, that also looks at how are we still engaging in these systems that we're trying to change honestly. How am I still perpetuating and how am I changing? And how do I create attention as we are like fish in water in these systems, which you were talking about. To me it's not like science against anything. It's science and everything, based on whatever value we hold. There's a place for science. Science is amazing but what is the value that we hold as we use science, and what are we diminishing as we use science, and how can we bring it all for the good of all, integrate it all for the good of all.

Eri: What you said just there is something that I think in the Women's Spirituality Program – apparently, shout-out to the Women's Spirituality Program at CIIS, is probably going to come up a lot. There's this phrase that we say so many times which is both/and.

May: Right.

Eri: As we are drawing inward to understand ourselves more fully, to understand the authenticity of us as individuals to simultaneously then extend outwards and to understand the context of why and how we got here. And particularly in these times, especially in the states, and I can speak more specifically about myself, the nuances of racism and colonials and in patriarchy, they all are incredibly present and alive in our experiences but then they have also been alive in the previous generation, and previous generation, and so a lot of my work within spirituality and social justice inquiry has been navigating being biracial, by coming from a mother with Mexican heritage, knowing that in that heritage there's also Spanish heritage and particularly with my

grandmother, she always celebrated the whiteness, celebrated the European heritage and then squashed and was very much against the indigenous blood. So, knowing that within even my brown side, there's very much a play of oppressor and oppressed. And then similarly with my father, my father is predominantly of German descent but yet his family comes from extreme poverty. So again, those nuances, being able to identify them within ourselves, again so we don't perpetuate but then also holding space for the way that they transform regionally, generationally. And I think in the bay there's a lot of power of bringing name to things and also, I think sometimes we get so caught up in this really organized, concise way of looking at identity, so that's there's these tiny little boxes, that sometimes we forget that to give room for that wholeness for contradiction, the more messy the more gray area, the things that we're never going to neatly organize within this lifetime. It just constantly changes and evolves. So yes, I think reclamation work for me and from what I'm vibing from you is a lifelong journey of constantly having a process of going inward, of finding that meaning that's untouchable. Whether someone says, oh, that feeling in your heart that you think is your ancestor, you just made it up. So, whether or not someone validates it or invalidates it, finding that aspect of ourselves is untouchable and from that fiery, abundant, unconditional place, making connections.

May: And finding that place, it's also like the core of creativity, is what I call it, and then you look at the word create itself and you're talking about birth. We're creating.

Eri: It's so good! It's so good!

May: It's the core of creativity, that space deep inside of us that's untouchable is where we create from, authentically create from. Not produce, but create, which is a different, nuanced way of looking at birth, perhaps, from that core.

Eri: To bring it back in around the topic of reclamation work – which is the topic of the show – can you please speak upon the Mother Line Project?

May: Absolutely. I was a student at CIIS before I began faculty there and I graduated from the Women's Spirituality Program – another shout-out to that amazing program – and I taught in that program for a while. And in one of the first classes that are offered, students are required to do a Mother Line Project. And the idea behind that is that in patriarchal society we come to identity through our father lines, through our fathers and grandfathers, in the way women change their name, in the way lineages are handed down, and even inheritance laws we look at the father line. And the mother lines get forgotten and not acknowledged in that process. So, we want to reclaim and re-enliven the mother line, and so students begin researching back along their mother line. They look at their mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and go as far back as they can. And so, what has always sort of intrigued and compelled me and drawn me to this project is that, as you hear these personal stories and these personal histories of mother lines, with each story spoken and told, you are really talking about culture and society and history and everything that was going on around the story that impacted that story. So, you're really learning about what happened in the world through these singular personal stories, which is incredibly powerful. Just incredibly powerful to hear the journeys, the journeys that

grandmothers took, the hardships that grandmothers faced so that the granddaughter could be sitting in graduate school, getting a degree in something called Women's Spirituality is so – inspiring is not the word, it's just moving – I mean, there's tears and laughter and joy and connections and differences and learning, and there's like building of community of women as you see the struggles and as you see the power to survive and thrive and as you see the beauty and as you see the body and the love and the music and the food. Somebody once had a mother line project using recipes that were handed down. And with each recipe there was a story, and the story might seem personal but it told the story and history of the world at the same time. So, reclaiming the mother line is incredibly powerful on a personal level for each woman that has done this that I've experienced, and it's powerful on a social level as it causes transformation. And I can speak to my own mother line. So, I entered the program exactly one year after my own mother had passed away, and my mother passed away pretty young. She was only 55 when she was very sick. She had MS. And so, a year later, I was in class and I was told to write my mother line. I could not have thought of a better tribute to my mother's life than writing that mother line a year after she passed away. I could not have found a better tribute. I could not have found a better gift to give my children than that mother line that I wrote. And so, for that, I think the mother line is a necessity for every woman and every man.

Eri: Yes, I was just going to say –

May: And every child, yes.

Eri: Yes. One of the most profound realizations for me when I did that project with you was seeing all the ways in which even as a "white conscious, strong, empowered, feminist woman", identifying all the ways that I've been deeply encoded to devalue things. To place value on education from institutions, to place value on certain personality characteristics, I think seeing the ways that growing up, for example, I kind of saw some of the cultural things on my mom's side is more frivolous and emotional and dramatic, and for some reason valuing the cultural things of my father's side a little more because it was less colorful and less communication actually. I felt more controlled and polished. I didn't realize I had that belief or that value until that paper. Also, seeing how it was easier to access information about, as you mentioned, the father line than it was the mother line, how I had to dive deep and ask the same questions multiple times to be extracting this information. And there's so much hush-hush, particularly around topics – because I asked much around experiences of menstruation and childbirth and female bodies. That was something that was really rich for me at the time and still is. And so, to see how much shame has been transposed but then how within that culture of shame, how it's tied into patriarchy, how it's tied into trying to keep our daughters safe, how multi-faceted that belief was. And then even that being said, having a more recent conversation with my mom, seeing how each generation of women believed that they were raising their daughter in a radical way. Like my grandma told my mom, "you're much more free and liberated than I was," and then meanwhile, my mom is like "you're much more free and liberated than I was" and I'm probably going to say the same thing to my child. But then in retrospect, looking back, and being like, wow, even besides the language, what I learned through body language, through the subtle things. And I know that's also something that we've talked before is – excuse me. We talked

about this before and you touched upon it earlier today about the reclamation of female bodies. Like what does that mean to be able to feel okay, let alone good in your skin to not be apologetic about the literal physical space that you take up. I can go off in that, but I want to pause here.

Would you mind actually sharing just a little bit around what you seen regarding the reclamation of female bodies within the Mother Line Project or other similar –

May: I mean you said something very interesting that we want to stay safe, we want our daughters to be safe. And so, when one asks that question, the other question is what's the danger? What are we afraid of? And that is a huge question because on the surface it looks like, yes, every generation is more free than the generation before it, so why are we still afraid?

Eri: Right.

May: Why are still afraid? I don't believe we've gone to the root of it. I have this story that I say about Lebanon. And it's kind of connected, maybe not. So, when I go back and I say something like, well, I teach women's studies, women's issues, women's spirituality, woman-woman-woman, feminism, people say, well, why do you do that? Look at you, you live in America, you teach, you're free, you travel. You know you're free, right? I'm like, well, you consider me free? Yeah, but under Lebanese family law there are many ways that I'm not free. As someone who has two children from a non-Lebanese father, I don't have the right to give them citizenship, Lebanese citizenship, as a mother who married outside. However, I can wear a string bikini and go swim on the beach and that's free. So, thinking of the body as a commodity, as an object. But then the real rights that we need as something that we still haven't claimed or gotten. So that's one way the body has been kind of used to say you're free, but the danger is there. And so, with mother line papers and mother line stories, the most painful ones are ones where you see on intergenerational pattern of physical and sexual abuse of women that exists in some families. That comes up so often, it's huge. And grandmothers suffered from it, the mother suffered from it, the student has suffered from it. So how do we stop those cycles? And it brings me to something else that you and I talk about a lot, restorative justice as a way of healing. So hurt people hurt people. When my body has been hurt and my body has been oppressed and my body has been violated and I'm walking around hurt, perhaps I don't recognize or can't speak up for another violation that's happening. Or perhaps I violate. How do we stop these cycles? That's one way this has come up around women's bodies. And I mean, why, again. We live in patriarchy. It's really, oh, we can keep pointing to that. I'm not talking about men, I'm talking about patriarchy as the system and the structure.

Eri: Right.

May: You know, has men and women as its other or his other, but not woman as a stand-alone. Men and its other, basically. And it owns the other and decides for the other. That's what patriarchy has done. And I think we're still there. I think we're still there as property, as defined by, and there's been waves of resistance against it now with the #MeToo and so on. And we just keep chipping away until this danger, the danger that we exist in a rape culture dissipates at some point, perhaps.

Eri: Yes. I just want to reiterate something that you said which is patriarchy isn't a "us versus them".

May: Right.

Eri: It's not like men versus women. Patriarchy is something that all genders can be strengthening and participating in. And so much came up when you were speaking, and one was I had a training this past weekend around prenatal yoga and a lot of the topic that came up was around the inherent distrust of female bodies. And one way that could look like, which we've seen specifically in rape culture, is that it's the drawing from ideo-Christian roots which is that sin is inherently within the female body, and therefore if she were to inspire lust or craze, it's her fault. So, policing of our bodies because we're inherently dangerous in that way. And then viewing back to birth work, there's this inherent distrust that our bodies are like death traps for a baby. Particularly when we are looking at birth within a medical institution, especially when you get into the birth room, there's a lot of interventions, there's a lot of monitoring, and again it's just this inherent feeling that, oh, we're going to keep an eye in case we need to rescue baby from your body. And how big that is in terms of the meaning around birth and also in terms of the strategy. I mean, if I had a dollar for how many clients I've had, particularly women who come from an engineering or a tech sort of mindset, where they go in with so much fear, one big one is pain, this fear that they won't be able to cope with it, which is legit – and that's a whole other conversation – and then the other one is this fear that they're going to do something wrong. They're going to sleep the wrong way, that they're going to eat something wrong, thinking that one action is going to just totally transform this experience and it's going to be all on them. And again, returning to this concept of other ways of knowing.

May: Yes, exactly. The body knows. The mother's body knows. But we've been conditioned to not trust that knowing.

Eri: And the story telling piece.

May: Exactly.

Eri: It's like a radical notion these days to be hearing birth stories, and it's like, how is it that I am a grown-ass woman and I've only recently heard my birth story with my mom. That seems weird to me.

May: I have two birth stories. I have two children. I did not trust my body with my first child. I did not trust my body. I did not know what was happening and I ended up having a C-section with my first child. And so, I do have gratitude to science and western medicine because we would both not have survived. But also, there was a point where an intervention, if I had listened to my body would not have led us that far. And it's okay to share the birth story, right?

Eri: Yes.

May: So, I was due and I would go to my "doctor" every other day and the baby wasn't coming and I would tell my doctor that, I think I'm losing water because I wake up at night and I have to change my underwear a few times and there's water all the time. And the doctor who was a male at that time said to me, if your water breaks, you'll know it. It just gushes out. And I

believed that. So, then the baby wouldn't come and I had to be induced, so I go to the hospital on a Saturday morning to be induced, and they put the Pitocin, and every time I have a contraction the baby's heart beat would stop. And then the doctor came in and said, well, we're going to break your water and he stuck something to break my water. There was no water. It was dry inside. And I knew that something – I knew but I didn't know.

Eri: Right.

May: And I didn't know to ask anyone else because I trusted the doctor. So, I had an emergency C-section when they found that out because we were both suffocating.

With my second child, it was different because I had had that experience. So, I had a unique situation in that I was pregnant with my second child and taking care of my mother who had very progressive Multiple Sclerosis. So, I didn't go to any checkups. I was healthy. It was fine.

Eri: Is this here in the States?

May: Lebanon, but they were both born in the States, like six months Lebanon and I came here the last three months. I hadn't had an ultrasound. He was fine. No biggie. So, it was the month that I was due, and I went to my doctor – I changed doctors, of course. I had this amazing woman doctor now. She wasn't there. And I said, you know I have pain up around my chest area, like something's pushing. And I had this young Stanford-educated, whatever woman doctor. Not my doctor. She was just there subbing. I said, is the baby breech, and she said, no, I don't think so. And she touched it and I'm like, something's not right. No, you're fine. So, I walk out and I'm paying or paper work, and I tell the receptionist, I don't feel good. Can I see someone else? I knew to say that.

Eri: It's so important.

May: I don't feel good. She said, well, we don't have any doctors, we have the midwife here. I'm like, yes. So, I went and I sat with a midwife. She put her hands on my belly and two minutes later said, this baby's breech. We've got to get the baby out. The baby came out the next day. Had I had a contraction with a breech baby, I don't know what would have happened.

Eri: Thank you, thank you for sharing that story. So many things. A. for folks who are newish to birth work, yes, breaking of the bag of water is not like in Hollywood where it's just a big gush. I mean, don't get me wrong, it can happen, but in my experience and also from what I read, very rarely does it happen like that. Typically speaking, it's more of a slow trickle, as you experienced. So, I want to note on that. And then, second, yes – so, if I could wave a magic wand where from now all of the clients that I ever engage with from now on, it would be that they know that they have a choice with medical providers. Because of the power complex, because we place value on professional education and institutions, we inherently believe that others are experts of our bodies and they are experts of this experience. So, it's like, oh, I'm pregnant. I've never done this before, therefore, you, doctor – putting all of the power in their hands, which is understandable because that's how we're often programmed.

May: That's exactly what I did.

Eri: Again, it's understandable and it's important to remember that we have a choice and particularly around birth. This isn't just a casual thing. If there's a time to be more picky in regards to doing work to find a medical provider that, A. you feel good around, like their personality makes you feel good, their attentiveness makes you feel good, and then on top of their approach to work is within your value system, birth is the time to do it. And particularly for folks in the Bay, we're really lucky to have a variety of resources within medical institutions, one hospital to another, has very different cultures. And there's a lot of hospitals around here who offer midwife support within the hospital, so you actually have, each shift has an on-call midwife and an on-call OB. So, the best of both worlds, as they often say.

May: Right.

Eri: And in maybe another episode we can talk more about the nuances of the differences between midwifery care and traditional OB care. So, there's that.

But then also for folks who don't feel safe within the medical institutions which make sense, especially how we know how historically folks of color don't receive the same treatment, they're not trusted. There's a lot of publicity these days around the horrific mortality rate for black babies and black mothers which in the Bay, actually, also, there's a specific study to our area that's really horrifying and also like, okay, let's fuckin do something about, right? So yes, those of us in the Bay who don't necessarily feel comfortable within medical institutions to know that there are resources around home birth or there's resources around birth centers. Again, we'll talk more about those in other episodes. It's so rich.

But yes, to draw it all back, it's important that we as birthing people, however you are, to first return to your center to know what's important to you, to know what's meaningful to you, and to prioritize that to value that experience, and then from there to make choices on medical providers, on lifestyle changes or things that we want to weave in. That's how we cultivate empowering birth experiences that set really profound beginnings into parenthood, maybe for the first time or for the second time.

(Big breath) I really meant that.

So, we are, unfortunately, dwindling into the end of our conversation. But for a last question I just wanted to ask, in terms of advice or heart-to-heart transmission of wisdom that you would like to offer to folks who have never given birth to a baby before or folks who have never supported a loved one through that experience, what sort of transmission and meaning would you give?

May: Well the first piece of wisdom is pay attention to your body and to what your body is telling you and trust that your body is telling you something throughout the process. And to do that, get to know your body. Get to know your body. Some people can journal about how they feel, for example. Observe, you know, sensations. Don't ignore them. Don't ignore sensations as, oh, well, that happens and this has a scientific name and that's what it means. And, like you were

saying, Eri, we are lucky that there are resources that can help us make sense of some of these sensations sometimes and what they mean and not to just take someone's word, someone who is not in your body as the truth and the truth for you. It's really, really, really get to know your body and your sensations. And it is such a beautiful experience once the baby is in your arms. I mean, there is nothing like it in the world. And if I was to do it all over again, I would want that experience to start from the minute I knew I was pregnant. There is nothing like it in the world. It's a beautiful experience. So how can you celebrate it which is not very much what the media and normative culture tells us. You don't really celebrate being pregnant. You get fat, your legs are swollen, you're tired, you might get pimples. I don't know what all these myths are, but how can you celebrate it from the minute you know? Because it's magic.

Eri: And continue to celebrate it even after baby comes to have that celebration extend to our bodies, to continue to extend to our bodies in the post-partum period. Having that patience. Having that reverence just the same way we –

May: Celebrate what the body can do. I mean, to create life and then push the life. It's a celebration. That's my best piece of advice. Don't wait until you hold the babies. Start from day one.

Eri: Thank you. Thank you so, so much for being here.

May: Thank you, Eri, and good with the podcast.

Eri: For folks who are interested in learning more about May and her work and ways to reach out to her, we'll include that information in the show notes.

So, thank you.

May: Thank you, Eri.