Spider Woman Imagery in Second Wave Feminist Fiction – *Lady Oracle, The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* and *The Temple of My Familiar*

by

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B.A. University of Victoria/Malaspina College partnership, 1997

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Faculty of Humanities

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University of Victoria

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a journey into the realm of Spider Woman—the Cosmic Weaver—and explores ways in which Spider Woman figures and textile imagery became increasingly important and powerful healing metaphors in literature, during the rise of second wave feminism. Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, and Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* illustrate the importance of these healing metaphors in women's fiction. Framing the analysis is Mary Daly's concept for creating a gynocentric literature (*Gyn/Ecology*) that escapes patriarchal linguistic constraints through the process of “spooking, sparking and spinning” new words and new stories on a “loom of our own.”
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The front cover image is a painting by Susan St. Thomas entitled “Spider Woman”
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portfolio images.

The image on page 156 is a photograph by permission of Carol Sowerby at
http://www.kaleidoscope-eyes.net
I have many people to thank for their support and encouragement while I was writing this thesis - a seven year project, all in all. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Margot Louis, who supervised this project for most of its duration, and who generously shared resource materials, ideas, criticism and support, to Dr. Misao Dean, who supervised the final leg of this thesis project and brought insight and energy to my finals drafts and preparation for defence, and to my committee members: Dr. Proma Tagore, Dr. Naomi Walsh and Dr. Debby Yaffe, each of whom shared their expertise and expanded my worldview. As well, I would like to thank the Department of English, the Department of Graduate Studies, The Graduate Fee Reduction and Assessment Committee and the Financial Aid Office for ongoing support of my program. My thanks the Special Collections at the University of Arizona library for rare and valuable resources on Spider Woman and Paula Gunn Allen. I would like to also thank Kathryn Barnwell, Helen Demers, Keith Harrison, Jay Ruzesky, and Christine Welsh who planted the seeds of this project years ago. And to MA Goddesses Cynthia Cecil and Laura Ann Cranmer—thank you for your faith in me, and for your brilliance in the world. Shine on.

I thank my many friends and family on Thetis Island—being part of such a nurturing community has been a blessing—with a special thank you to Thetis Island Community Association, the Health and Education Fund Committee, the Community Centre and the Community Access Program computer. The support and resources have been invaluable. My thanks also to all aboard the MV Klitsa and Kahløke for safe and friendly ferry travel — which you all know I truly love. To my friends and family in the off-island world — I am grateful for your emails and phone calls! To my earth angels all around the globe — Thank you. I am so lucky to have this web of light in my life. To Kevin and Kyle Hughes, thank you for bringing your special gifts to my life. To my canine companion, Brutus, thank you for your happy disposition and for helping me stay fit with island walks every day. To my sister, Anne Moyle, to my all time friends Deborah Adams, Linda Cayer, and Audrey Buell and to the clan at Spinstervale, heart-filled thanks. To my mom, Betty Moyle, a lifetime of thank you. To the ancestors - my deepest gratitude for your stories that remind me who I am.. And to my sons Kris and Ben — thank you for helping me grow. Blessings to all.
For Margot

my guiding thread through the labyrinth of this thesis project

with thanks.
CHAPTER ONE

“A Loom of Her Own” – Word Weavers of the Second Wave

Introduction

Spider Woman¹—the Cosmic Weaver—and textile imagery as healing and empowerment motifs became increasingly important during the second wave of feminism.² The following thesis looks specifically at literature written by women during this 1970–1990 time period, and traces the evolution and expansion of Spider Woman and textile motifs in three novels spanning this era: Lady Oracle (1978) by Margaret Atwood, The Woman Who Owned the Shadows (1983) by Paula Gunn Allen, and The Temple of My Familiar (1989) by Alice Walker. The primary ideological framework for this study is Mary Daly’s concept of “spooking,” “sparking,” and “spinning” an authentic literary voice, outlined in Gyn/Ecology (1978), in which she includes Spider Woman deities and associated textile imagery³ as motifs for healing, empowerment and transformation. This introductory chapter begins with a look at Gyn/Ecology, both at the importance and the limits of Daly’s analysis, then outlines her concept for developing gynocentric writing.⁴ Next, Spider Woman imagery in the established western literary canon is discussed, followed by a look at Spider Woman’s revitalised role within second wave feminist culture, and an introduction to Spider Woman imagery as a powerful vehicle for healing and transformation in the three novels.
Gyn/Ecology – A Radical Feminist Manifesto

Gyn/Ecology, published in 1978, was considered in its time “one of the most striking events on the feminist landscape” (Madsen 3) and Mary Daly regarded as “one of the most revered visionaries of the contemporary women’s liberation movement” (Bridle 1). Gyn/Ecology was, for many readers of that era, a brilliant deconstruction of the politico-religious doctrines of patriarchy in and beyond western culture; moreover, Daly’s radical analysis looks at the power of words and stories to create and reinforce cultural paradigms, as well as the power of the individual to reshape language as a means of resistance and social transformation.

In time, however, Daly’s analysis was discredited by some critics due to the limits of her essentialist, eurocentric and academic perspective\(^5\) and may seem a surprising choice for an ideological framework for this thesis. Certainly, in the light of a more contemporary analysis many of the dismissive criticisms hold some credence. It is important, however, that Daly’s work in challenging patriarchal discourse be acknowledged as a vital component in the development of second wave feminist consciousness, and further, to recognize that both because her work was loved and because it was not, marks its importance.

Feminism, as an organic political movement, changed with rapid momentum during the twentieth century, from the strident women’s liberation manifestos challenging mainstream white male-dominated culture found in many of the earlier second wave publications, such as Gyn/Ecology, to the more expansive and inclusive ideological approach of later years, concisely stated by Andrea Lebowitz in Star Gazing: Charting Feminist Literary Criticism (1991):
Feminism is not confined to women nor to social political action groups... but instead puts women at the centre of focus and looks for new ways to balance the power and agency between women and men and between what have come to be known as feminine and masculine values and characteristics. (Lebowitz 3)

Thus it is evident that during the second wave feminist politics grew in its awareness of myriad manifestations of oppression, including those of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, health and education. Daly’s focus in *Gyn/Ecology*, limited in scope by comparison, is honed around the development of gynocentric literature—women’s “authentic” voices—and resonates with criteria of early second wave, radical, white, academic, feminist, lesbian, separatist polices. There are, however, threads of brilliance within this text that transcend time, as is evident in the frequent allusions to Daly and *Gyn/Ecology* in contemporary writings, such as *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power and Popular Culture* (2004) by Jane Caputi.

This thesis shows that some of these brilliant threads are found in Daly’s conceptual framework of “spooking, sparking and spinning” in which she encourages the retrieval of personal and cultural stories cast into the shadows, including the silenced stories and the stories of the ancestors; in which she recasts the feminine as sacred and the sacred as feminine, and reclaims the creative power and global dimensions of the weaving deity Spider Woman; in which she shows the power of writing as a tool of resistance and liberation, and its potential to spin and weave new linguistic worlds. These richly textured threads transcend temporal, geographic and political boundaries and can guide revisionary writers and artists,
regardless of sex, gender, and other walks of life, into uncharted realms and new
dimensions.

Gyn/Ecology – Limits and Strengths

Gyn/Ecology is, thus, an integral component of the feminist canon, a pivotal text
of its time— with both limits and strengths in its analysis— and one that generated,
and continues to generate, powerful and transformative criticism and debate within
and beyond the feminist movement. For example, in 1981, Cherrie Moraga writes:

The deepest political tragedy I have experienced is how with such grace, such
blind faith, this commitment to women in the feminist movement grew to be
exclusive and reactionary. I call my white sisters on this... We are challenging
white feminists to be accountable for their racism because at the base we still
want to believe that they really want freedom for us all. (Moraga xiv, 62)

Ultimately, challenges such as these served to further dialogue between both
feminists and other political activists, and helped sustain movement and growth
into what some regard as feminism’s third wave, which is poly-vocal and
transcontinental in scope, and incorporates expanded recognition of the many and
various cultural apparatuses utilized to establish and reinforce social models.
Indeed, some earlier feminist ideologies have, over time, become outmoded; it is,
however, imperative to avoid oppressive acts of censorship by omitting words of
the feminist foremothers. Women’s writings from many and varied sources are
vital to uphold integrity in this discourse, which has, historically, been disrupted,
discarded and edited. Mary Daly points out that the ongoing “erasure of our
tradition forces us to relearn what our foresisters knew and to repeat their blunders”
(Daly, G/E 23). Likewise, Adrienne Rich writes:

One serious cultural obstacle encountered by any feminist writer is that each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere, as if each of us had lived...and worked without any historical past or contextual present. (Rich, OLSS 11)

Context is one of the strengths of Daly’s Gyn/Ecology, which is rich with feminist context, both past and present, and just as Daly used numerous and various writers as springboards or jousting partners to give Gyn/Ecology its impetus and fighting energy, many writers following Daly have used her arguments both as inspiration and provocation, which has helped shape various innovative literary landscapes. Gyn/Ecology, therefore, while at times problematic was, and is, an important contribution in the ongoing evolution of feminist consciousness, and a crucial component of the literary canon.

Another strength of Gyn/Ecology is Daly’s courage to recast women’s lives as sacred and divine. Building on the work of Kate Millett and Germaine Greer, who a decade earlier had examined the historic and global tendrils of patriarchy’s violence toward women and debasement of women’s sexuality,7 Daly draws on feminist spirituality in Gyn/Ecology—a radical and, for some, heretical ideology at the time—as a source of liberation and regeneration of women’s spiritual, sexual and creative energies. Daly writes:
Spider Woman, who is Isis/Ishtar/Daughter/Self in Be-ing. When we find her we have not merely reached The End but The Beginning, who spins and spirals outwards, inwards, in all direction. (Daly, G/E 403)

While each of these figures emerges from a specific historic ideology, for Daly, what matters is that their central position has been lost to women. Thus, Daly invokes/evokes a single figure, the Goddess—Spider Woman—as a source of power to fuel the creative journey of “spooking” away false or outmoded cultural myths, “sparking” dynamic female friendships, and “spinning” the world anew, to weave authentic, gynocentric, words on a “loom of her own” (Daly, G/E 315).

Gynocentric Literature: “Spooking, Sparking and Spinning”

The search for an authentic voice in women’s literature was a common concern for many second wave feminist scholars who were theorizing women’s writing both in and beyond North America. Daly’s concept of invoking Goddess energy as a power source to create “gynocentric” writing can thus be seen as being aligned with the larger body of feminist activity during this second wave of feminism. Daly’s work differs, however, in that along with her theory she offers a template for the development of gynocentric writing—“spooking,” “sparking,” and “spinning.”

“Spooking” is the term Daly uses to describe a process for reclaiming power; especially important in her work is claiming the power of authentic speech by recognizing patterns of oppression embedded within the institutions of patriarchal society, and naming them:
These deceptive perceptions were implanted through language – the all-pervasive language of myth, conveyed overtly and subliminally through religions, "great art," literature, the dogmas of professionalism, the media, grammar. Indeed deception is embedded in the very texture of the words we use. (Daly, G/E 3)

Daly is “concerned with the mind/spirit/body pollution inflicted through patriarchal myths and language on all levels” (Daly, G/E 9) that has lulled women into a state of “animated death” (Daly, G/E 318), and thereby rendered women’s role in society since the creation of patriarchy—which dates back several thousand years in some areas of the world— a muted and fragmented existence for many.

The systems of oppression are multi-level, including hierarchies of sex, gender, race, economics, education and health. The main body of Gyn/Ecology is Daly’s discussion of cross-cultural patterns of what she terms “goddess murder,” referring to sanctified violence designed to disempower, or kill, women. Beginning with a look at the sexist treatment of women within the primarily male-dominated orders of the Catholic church and the US military, Daly then looks at the maiming or murdering of women within culturally ordained rites - including footbinding in China, suttee in India, genital mutilation in Africa, witch-burning in Europe and gynecology/psychiatry in America. These procedures, Daly asserts, were developed by men to be administered on women, usually by women (often by mothers or other close relatives), and keep women in a state of shock and mistrust of each other, turning to men—the oppressors—as rescuers. Daly’s warning is to regard with caution not only the myths and stories that are presented in books, on TV, in movies and other media sources, but also at every aspect of life, and
question its integrity. Whom do these images and stories serve? How do they shape personal, cultural and global experiences?

Deconstructing words sometimes reveals the empowering etymology behind the multi-media illusions projected by patriarchy. Daly delves into the possibilities of excavating into deeper meanings and earlier versions of some cultural mythologies - before they were reversed or otherwise adapted to support the ideologies of a patriarchal culture. “In order to reverse the reversals... we must deal with the fact that patriarchal myths contain stolen mythic power” (Daly, G/E 47). Daly’s spooking—stealing back mythic power—can rekindle the “spark” of creativity that “spins” words to reflect with deeper integrity, the experiences and perceptions of human lives.

But spooking, according to Daly, is sometimes difficult and dangerous work “that cannot always be done alone” (Daly, G/E 318); other energy sources are required—like-minded energy sources—and for this, Daly recommends that women reclaim the “sparking” power of female friendships and the gynergetic connection of “[w]omen finding and creating deep bonds with each other” (Daly, G/E 369). For Daly, “[s]parking means building the fires of gynergetic communication and confidence” (Daly, G/E 315), and tending to our female friendships, because within these relationships lie dynamic synergy that can facilitate healing for ourselves and our world:

As a result each Sparking hag not only begins to live in a lighted and warm room of her own; she prepares a place of a loom of her own. (Daly G/E, 315)
Daly warns, however, that when women gather together to build looms, spin yarns and weave dreams and visions, they must beware of a tendency to use female friendships as leaning posts, that "when women bond out of weakness there is a danger of victimizing each other" (Daly G/E 368). At the time of Daly's writing, passionate and loving female friendships within western culture were, for the most part, disregarded; family and cultural systems revolved around the male with women's primary roles within a patriarchal household being those of wife and mother. Daly encourages women to join together against propaganda that limits relationships and life choices and "attune...to the instilled fears and how they are used to keep women in line" (Daly, G/E 20). Women, within traditional patriarchal society are meant, for the most part, to be subordinate and compliant; therefore, it is no small feat to challenge the status quo. Within the constraints of these oppressive forces, forging passionate female friendships requires courage.

Another form of sparking, highly evident in Gyn/Ecology, is Daly's use of intersexuality, both with feminist forerunners—especially Virginia Woolf and Matilda Joslyn Gage—whom Daly would only have known through their writing, as well as with her contemporaries—including Nelle Morton, Emily Culpepper, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Janice Raymond and Jane Caputi—most of whom she knew in person, and some of whom she worked with very closely. These women's words—brilliant threads of thought—are frequently quoted in Daly's text as support for Daly's endeavour of "spooking," "sparking," and "spinning" together new perspectives, and weaving a gynocentric, gynergetic textual tapestry rich with patterns of possibilities for women "Be-ing" in the world.
Once regarded as women’s sacred arts—historically and in many places globally—spinning and weaving were disempowered by colonization, especially with the development of “sweatshops” where women spin, weave, and sew in “life-consuming” environments (Daly, G/E 5). Long ago, however (and in some cultures, not so long ago), spinning and weaving were integral and important components of women’s social and spiritual lives, recording the stories of their people in the textiles they wove, thus connecting generation after generation.\(^{11}\) For Daly, writing—the spinning and weaving of words—is another sacred art; she believes that women who follow the example of “the spider, [whose] spinning movement is her spinner’s creation [who as] she travels she makes her knowledge visible” (Daly, G/E 413), recall an ancient connection with Spider Woman, and reveal the “magic [of] words” (Daly, G/E 402). For Daly, gynocentric literature begins with the magic of words—birthing new words, and “forging a Metalanguage that could break through the silence” (Daly, G/E xx)—to name women’s experiences, sensibilities, passions, desires, and relationships.

**Spider Woman: In and Beyond the Western Canon**

Spider Woman is the magical source of Daly’s linguistic empowerment; however, Spider Woman has not always been such a powerful and life-affirming literary figure. Magical weavers do appear in the literary canon, but more often than not in roles of subordination to men and gods. Classical stories, such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,\(^ {12}\) wove a cultural mythology to reflect and reinforce the ruling order wherein “the energies of the
Spider are drained off in the enterprise of guiding and protecting males” (Daly, G/E 397). The faery weaver in Tennyson’s 1832 poem “The Lady of Shalott,” who sacrifices her life and her art for the love of Lancelot, and E.B. White’s children’s story, Charlotte’s Web (1952), in which Charlotte, a self-sacrificing spider, who weaves messages in her webs, are two more recent examples of magical weavers still fulfilling this particular role within patriarchal discourse. It was during the second wave that feminist spirituality emerged in the mainstream, and feminist theorists began to reclaim the figure of the spinner and weaver as an emblem of women's power. Mary Daly was one of the first feminist scholars involved in this movement; she explored beyond the reigning patriarchal ideologies, spooked away the harmful and outmoded myths, and embraced Spider Woman as her source of power, inspiration, healing and transformation. She then helped to facilitate the birth of Spider Woman deities and textile imagery in a gynocentric literature, weaving Spider Woman’s ancient connections into second wave feminist consciousness.

Second wave feminists, who adopted Spider Woman as a symbol of empowerment, also discovered that Spider Woman has many different images and stories and is known by many different names as each figure emerges from a specific cultural and history. Among her numerous manifestations, Spider Woman is sometimes portrayed in three aspects, thus referred to as the “Triple Goddess” whereby as the “Maiden”, she spins the wheel of life; as the “Mother” she weaves the web; and as the “Crone” she cuts the thread of time (Morgan 24). The Laguna Pueblo Spider Woman is also a “three-in-one” goddess; she and her daughters
Iyatiku and Naotsete are co-creators, although Spider Woman holds the ultimate power over destiny. As “Creator of All,” this Native American Spider Woman is connected to everything in the universe, and teaches the creative/procreative power of interconnection and harmony. In some stories, she is said to have “wove[n] a web-thread to the top of each being’s head. To remember and connect with Her love all we have to do is open the tops of our heads by chanting and She will spin herself into us” (Morgan 24).

Thus, Spider Woman’s art of weaving can be seen as multi-dimensional and teaches not only how to spin together and interlock strands and yarns, but also how to grow and tend to the sources; to create textures and colours; to build a loom; to design and weave the project; to cut the threads when the project is complete; then, to move on to the next cycle of creation. Commonly associated with the creation of baskets, cloth and personal adornment, weaving is, ultimately, a storyteller’s art bringing together myth, music, movement, colour, visualization and imagination though dance and song, ritual and ceremony—texts, textures, and textiles—in myriad manifestations. A shape-shifter, Spider Woman may appear in various human forms regardless of age, colour, and gender, as well as all other life forms, but is most popularly recognised in the earthly realm in her guise as a spider spinning her web.

Suspended between the earth and the sky, catching the dew and reflecting the sun within her web, Spider Woman links the four elements and the realms of earth and sky, and by her example shows ways that human beings can work with nature to nurture all of creation. Spider Woman’s web, a microcosm of the universal web
of life, charts individual and cosmic pathways to both the physical and metaphysical realms, to all stories of all time, all places, and all space.

Spider Woman: Spinning into the Second Wave

Spider Woman imagery was revitalized in the 1970s second wave era, especially within the ecofeminist movement, and found increased popularity and reverence in women's art, music, writing and theatre throughout the 1980s and into feminism's third wave. This historical timeline can also be viewed as a flower blossoming, or a spiral expanding as Spider Woman and textile imagery became increasingly important healing and empowerment motifs. Women embraced Spider Woman iconography and wove it into the evolving feminist lexicon. Janine Canan suggests that the 1976 release of Merlin Stone's text, When God Was a Woman, heralds a turning point in women's writing after which time Goddess-centred "books published by feminist writers spread like a crescendoing chant" (Canan xxi). Indeed, women's writings from this time onwards can be seen to incorporate dimensions of the sacred female experience, often utilizing Goddess imagery and symbolism. Helen Diner's text, Mothers and Amazons: The First Feminist History of Culture (1973), published slightly earlier than Stone's, is also markedly important for this study because Diner names the Mother Goddess as cosmic weaver and indicates the wide-spread phenomena of her existence:
All the mother goddesses spin and weave. In their concealed workshops, they weave veins, fiber, and nerve strands into the miraculous substance of the live body. Everything that is comes out of them; they weave the world tapestry out of genesis and demise, threads appearing and disappearing rhythmically. (Diner 16)

By 1976, Merlin Stone’s text, along with Margaret Atwood’s novel Lady Oracle, Robin Morgan’s book of poetry The Lady of the Beasts, and Hélène Cixous’ essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” are examples of texts which draw on Goddess imagery to recast women’s experience as sacred. Stone engages a feminist rewriting of the classical Goddess myths; Atwood deconstructs and sometimes subverts popular and classical mythology using Spider Woman figures and textile metaphors extensively, as we will see in the next chapter; Morgan employs Goddess imagery, and especially noteworthy is her use of Spider Woman and textile imagery in her poem “The Network of the Imaginary Mother;” while Cixous unweaves and reweaves linguistic tropes with the revitalized goddess Medusa as her source of literary shape shifting power. These offerings of Spider Woman and textile metaphors in the mid-1970s does, as Canan suggests, mark a turning point in women’s writing; gaps in the Western canon were becoming increasingly evident — “there seem[ed] to be a great hunger...for images of the Goddess, and a great generative force supplying them” (Canan xxiii). Women were attempting to fill in those gaps by creating a woman-generated language system, and were being published. Spider Woman and weaving imagery became increasingly popular and vital metaphors in women’s writing, such as in Robin Morgan’s poem:
Each unblinking eyelet linked now
To another in the shuttles of the loom.
"Thin rainbow-colored nets, like cobwebs,
all over my skin."
I affirm
all
of my transformations.

(Morgan, from "The Network of the Imaginary Mother" Canan, 123)

By the late 1970s, Spider Woman and textile symbols such as spinning wheels, threads, looms, labyrinths, webs and cloth were important motifs, not only in women’s writing, but also in women’s visual and performance arts. Betsy Damon, for example, in 1976 created and performed her theatrical presentation, The 7,000 Year-Old Woman, 19—"a modern ritual imbued with ancient meaning... in which she brought the prehistoric Goddess into the streets of New York" (Gadon 274). Two years prior, Damon had dreamed this Goddess figure and “eventually all the different parts of her came to consciousness” (CBC 6). In The 7,000 Year Old Woman, Damon becomes the Goddess, becomes the holder of memory and continuity throughout the ages. Covered from neck to knee with small bags of flour in various colours, each of Damon’s bags symbolizes “women’s inner space, the womb, the container of life” (Gadon 274). Damon sheds these small bundles one by one, offering them to her audience, until at last she had only her own naked self to offer.

This little woven bag is a recurring motif in Damon’s work as seen in her 1980 ritual performance, A Shrine for Every Woman, where the “small cloth bag served
as a receptacle for women's stories" (Gadon 274). Damon presented this ritual in
locations around the globe, creating a healing space, inviting women to share their
stories and become visible in a world where "women know themselves only
through the words of the male" (Gadon 275) – the sacredness of women’s lives,
along with the woven bag and the woven word, merges in her art, truly celebrating
Spider Woman’s art as a metaphor for healing and empowerment.

Within this same timeframe, Nelle Morton and Donna Henes experienced
Spider Woman visions that became turning points in their lives and their work.
Morton, a theologian and writer, shares her experience in the essay “The Goddess
As Metaphor,” first published in a feminist periodical, Womanspirit, in the early
1980s and later included in an anthology by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow,
Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality (1989). In Morton’s
vision, the Goddess, Morton’s mother, and a magical spider bring healing
messages. The spider gives Morton a small piece of woven material saying:
“Your mother spun this for you.” As Morton “took the material the spider
dissolved into [her], as did the Goddess and then [her] mother” (Morton 114).
Morton writes:

The Goddess ushered in a reality that respects the sacredness of my existence
that gives me self-esteem so I can perceive the universe and its people
through my woman-self. (Morton 115)
Donna Henes had a similar epiphany. A sculptor in the early 1970s, Henes was designing and casting spider webs until one day in 1975 she received a silver web as a gift:

It was clearly a veil, and I put it on my face, and I had a vision of Spiderwoman...I proceeded to do my first public winter solstice celebration, "Reverence to Her." (CBC 7)

Henes is now an acclaimed shaman, ceremonialist, artist and writer whose work, clearly influenced by her Spider Woman vision, "emphasizes community involvement and creative expressions of interconnectivity" (Pegasus 2).

As is evident already in the early 1970s, Spider Woman figures along with associated arts and imagery are a significant part of feminist spiritual discourse and by the late 1970s had found their way into many facets of women’s culture, both in and beyond academia. In 1977, Maxine Hong Kingston published her autobiography, *The Woman Warrior*, which juxtaposed ancient stories of a magical woman warrior on whose back the wrongs of her people had been tattooed—words woven with ink and blood—with the restrictive traditional Chinese teachings enmeshed with the puzzling American culture in which she lived; Yolanda Lopez produced portraits in oil pastel and acrylic on canvas, *The Guadalupe Series* (1978), which featured Goddess and weaving motifs and addressed the domestication of the Goddess/women through the processes of colonization; Paula Gunn Allen published her Spider Woman poem, "Grandmother" (1978); and Mary Daly published *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) – an interdisciplinary and global analysis of women's oppression and concepts for healing and empowerment.
Gyn/Ecology was a catalyst of controversy and change in the feminist movement, bringing to light new gaps in both the literary canon and in feminist spiritual discourse. Audre Lorde, for example, in her essay, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" (1978), questions Daly's appropriation of African culture and exclusion of African Goddesses as empowerment figures. Lorde writes:

To me this feels like another instance of knowledge, crone-logy and work of women of color being ghettoized by a white woman dealing only out of a patriarchal western-european framework. (Lorde, 95-6)

Lorde's letter and subsequent essays by other non-white women opened up dialogue between women from varying social, political and economic backgrounds, sometimes with white women, and sometimes with each other. This was a time of exploring the strands of difference weaving through the oppression of sexism that women from various walks of life endure. It was a time of exploring even beyond the male/female binary and looking towards family and community healing, working to free all who are oppressed.

From this historical point, women's literature, and other modes of artistic expression, began to blossom – the powerful momentum of the second wave movement carried strongly into the 1980s, during which time feminist spirituality became mainstream and further sub-waves began to emerge. For example, the Goddess and weaving metaphors became emblematic for the ecofeminist movement as seen in the title of a collection of essays compiled by Gloria Feman Orenstein and Irene Diamond, *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of*

Spider Woman imagery also began to appear in other artistic media: Judy Chicago incorporated textiles and embroidery into her series of images that became The Birth Project (1980-1985); Judith Anderson created her etching and verse entitled "The Mandorla of the Spinning Goddess" (1982); Susan Seddon Boulet painted "Spiderwoman" (1986), and Meinrad Craighead, whose book of image and verse, The Mother’s Songs: Images of the Mother, was published in 1986, found herself drawn to the desert of New Mexico where "Spider Woman and Changing Woman of Native American mythology inspired her paintings" (Gadon 242). In film, Donna Read began production of the Goddess trilogy,\textsuperscript{25} and CBC compiled a four-part radio broadcast, The Return of the Goddess, which aired in January 1986. In the space of a decade, Spider Woman had evolved from a place of relative obscurity within Western culture to a position of mainstream popularity. She
reflected a growing awareness of the broken web of life on earth — the many interconnecting strands within ourselves, our families and friends, our communities, our geo-political affiliations, our environment, and even our universe, sitting precariously on the cusp of extinction.

The Novels: Mending the Web

Spider Woman’s art of storytelling helps to mend the web; stories help to remember what is already known, help us dream new dreams. Stories are crystal balls, Glowing Globes...[that] help us to foretell the future and discover the past, for they further the process itself by transforming the previously unknown into that which we explicitly know, and therefore can reflect upon, criticize. Thus they spark new visions. (Daly, G/E 22-3)

Margaret Atwood, Paula Gunn Allen, and Alice Walker are three such Spider Woman storytellers, the novels—Lady Oracle, The Woman Who Owned the Shadows and The Temple of My Familiar—three such crystal balls, each offering a glimpse into the complexities and intricacies of human society. Mary Daly’s process of calling on Spider Woman as a source of power, then “spooking, sparking and spinning” to create gynocentric literature, will be utilized in my analysis of each of the three novels. Daly’s concept provides a sturdy framework for looking into the crystal balls, these “[g]lowing [g]lobes” of “new vision.” Common to the literary landscapes of Atwood, Allen and Walker are Spider Woman figures and textile imagery, as each writer draws on her own current and background cultures and countries, politics and histories. Thereby, each text can be seen as a geo-
political body, interweaving multiple threads of experience and imagination, and each writer a spiritual activist invoking Spider Woman as a source of power and healing.

Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*, published in 1976, is the earliest of the novels and resonates with concerns of the earlier second wave feminists, such as Millett and Greer, and the sexist propaganda of male-authored literature. As well, *Lady Oracle* pre-dates many platforms raised by Daly in *Gyn/Ecology* - especially confronting harmful belief systems that render women’s bodies as profane and legitimized sites of war, rape and famine. Atwood also looks at the power of “interior colonization” and the resultant fragmentation of women’s lives through restricted gender roles, the development of multiple identities as a means of self-expression, and the appeal of suicide. Cultural mythologies support these ideologies. For example, the myth of the “doomed woman artist,” reached iconic dimensions during the mid-twentieth century, not only as portrayed in fictional films such as The Red Shoes (1949), but also as seen in real life. Joan, Atwood’s heroine, whose art is writing, believing these myths, stages her own death and to all appearances drowns – but actually flees the country. From her place of exile and limbo—between the worlds of the past and the future—Joan, through her writing, embarks on a quest into the wilderness of her soul and the fragmentation of her personality, seeking her true identity – her authentic voice.

Joan’s journey to self-realization is Atwood’s vehicle to “spook” North America’s dominant culture—which is interlaced with patriarchal versions of Greek, Roman and Celtic myths—where women are most often portrayed as
chattel, and are ideally subordinate, silent and obedient; and, where the magical, and often oracular, qualities, of Spider Woman figures, such as Penelope, Ariadne and Arachne,\textsuperscript{28} are, most often, appropriated for the benefit of gods and men.

Atwood also shows how rare and tentative female friendships are within a society where “sparking” between women is obstructed; but despite these barriers, the key to Joan’s healing lies within her female friendships and relationships. Atwood “spins” Joan’s healing journey in Joan’s own words; the story follows the labyrinthine path of Joan’s memory, full of twists and turns and repetition, weaving letters, poems, visions and gothic romances within the main storyline. Thus, Atwood’s narrative, rather than adhering to a distinct genre or conventional linear form, becomes eclectic in content and labyrinthine in design.

*The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, published in 1983, another web-like narrative interweaving stories, letters, dreams and visions, resonates with concerns of women of colour, especially within the mestiza\textsuperscript{29} cultures. Allen’s heroine, Ephanie, is torn and tormented by conflicting aspects of her identity – her Laguna self and her “anglocized” self, her life on the pueblo and life in the city, her love for men and her love for women, her desire to be a mother and desire to be single—each becoming a separate sphere of her life. Overwhelmed by this fragmentation and the homogenizing, homophobic and genocidal forces at work in her life, Ephanie hides away in the shadows until depression and despair lead her to attempt suicide; thus begins her healing journey. With Spider Woman as her guide, Ephanie begins to “spook” away the lies that have shaped her life. Spider Woman helps Ephanie, like Atwood’s heroine also a writer, interweave her disparate stories—
stories of the present, the past, the long-past and the future—and through this process, Ephanie begins to heal—to rekindle the “spark” of life within herself. Spider Woman teaches Ephanie that separations—hierarchies, binaries, boundaries and margins—only exist in human imagination, that everything is connected, equal and necessary in the multi-dimensional web of the universe. Allen innovatively “spins” a shimmering multi-dimensional web, weaving together past, present and future, and body, mind and spirit into a seamless discourse.

Alternately, The Temple of My Familiar, a literary patchwork quilt, is designed with numerous and curious seams. Published in 1989, near the end of the second wave era, Walker’s text resonates with her “womanist” vision, wherein she weaves together seemingly unrelated stories told by a variety of voices from around the globe (throughout time and place) and shows how they connect and affect each other’s lives, even when unbeknownst to each other. Walker’s “spooking” brings to light not only many of the ways Black women experience oppression, but also ways in which oppression manifests in other segments of society. Walker’s characters reflect the “sparking” power of, not only female friendships, but male friendships as well as female/male friendships, and the creative ways in which human beings resist the oppressive forces of imperialist re-mapping. Walker's words weave the possibility of a consciousness in which stories are not status symbols, but rather, each is a vital component of a collective story blanket. The voices in Walker’s text are poly-vocal, multi-gendered, cross-cultural, and multi-dimensional, “spinning” together day-to-day life with dreams and visions, weaving
together the power of stories held by letters, tape recordings, painting and textiles into her narrative.

Walker's text draws inspiration from her character M'Sukta, the ancient weaver, who weaves narrow strips of cloth, each encoded with symbols telling stories from her Ababa culture; M'Sukta then stitches the panels together with curiously arranged seams creating fabric for blankets and garments. Similarly, in Temple Walker "spins" a composite of stories from many different places, spaces and voices, with numerous recurring themes and characters, stitched together within the frame of the novel, creating a linguistic landscape richly textured with colour, shape, rhythm and movement. Like M'Sukta's little hut where she weaves her sacred textiles, Walker's novel can be seen as temple, the site of healing and transformation where she weaves her sacred text. Thus, Atwood, Allen and Daly, Walker can each be seen, in various and diverse ways, to invoke the healing and transformative power of Spider Woman, to weave her story.
End Notes

1 Spider Woman is an English translation for the name given to the Cosmic Weaver by many indigenous North Americans, including the Pueblo, Navaho and Hopi. It is important to note that there may be cultural differences among the representations of these figures. With respect and deep gratitude for my home and teachers on Turtle Island, "Spider Woman" is the name I use throughout my thesis, unless otherwise noted.

2 Rosemary Tong describes "[f]eminist thought [a]s a kaleidoscope... not one, but many theories or perspectives... [E]ach...attempts to describe women's oppression, to explain its cause and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women's liberation" (Tong 1). In this way feminism can be viewed as an ever-evolving movement that is at once deeply personal and deeply political.

4 "Gyno-centric: Woman-centred" (Daly, Wickedary 137).


6 The relative scarcity of publications from feminism's first wave – from the 1840s to the suffragette movement – together with the scattered remnants and fragments of women's writing back throughout the history of western culture to Sappho of Antiquity, are indicative of this suppression of women's voices in the west.

7 See Kate Millett's Sexual Politics (1969) in which she argues that much of male-authored literature was basically sexist propaganda, and Germaine Greer's The Female Eunuch (1970).

8 Such as Adrienne Rich's "dream of a common language" (1978), Judy Grahn's search for our "mother tongue" (1984), and Hélène Cixous' "l'écriture féminine" (1976).

9 "Gynery n: the female energy which both comprehends and creates who we are; that impulse in ourselves that has never been possessed by the patriarchy nor by any male; woman identified be-ing - Emily Culpepper" (Daly, Wickedary 77).

10 "Be-ing v 1: Ultimate/Intimate Reality, the constantly Unfolding Verb of Verbs which is intransitive, having no object that limits its dynamism 2. the Final Cause, the Good who is Self-commuting, who is the Verb from whom, in whom and with whom all true movements move" (Daly, Wickedary 64).


13 Feminist spirituality is not synonymous with Feminism, the first being a sub-current of the latter.
"Shape-shifting: transcendent transformation of symbol-shapes, idea-shapes, relation-shapes, emotion-shapes, word-shapes, action-shapes" (Daly, *Wickedary* 96).

See works by ecofeminists Susan Griffin (1978), Deena Metzger (1983), and Alice Walker (1983). Also relevant is the work of Alice Cook and Gwyn Kirk (1983), telling the story of the Greenham peace movement, for which the spider web was emblematic (see page 126).

Many women writers such as Atwood, Walker, and Allen used poetry and fiction alongside essays, to explore and promote feminist ideas.

A response to Mel Brook’s comedy routine, *The 2,000 Year Old Man*.

In their 1991 essay, "Ecofeminist Visions," Cathleen McGuire and Colleen McGuire write:

Ecofeminists are often perceived as environmentally-oriented women who are feminist, or alternatively, as feminists who focus on the environment. Yet ecofeminism is not simply a subset of feminism or ecology. It is in many respects a meta-feminism, if you will, offering a distinct and more broadened methodology for understanding the world. (McGuire and McGuire, 1991; see 1 http://eve.enviroweb.org/what_is/index.html)

See works by feminist theologians Mary Daly (1978), Carol Christ (1980), and Nelle Morton (1984); and works by popular writers of goddess spirituality such as Charlene Spretnak (1978), Starhawk (1979), and Vicki Noble (1983).


See works by feminist archaeomythologist Marija Gimbutas (1982, 1989), feminist historian Gerda Lerner (1986), and visionary historians Monica Sjoo (artist) and Barbara Mor (writer).


"[I]n our social order [there is] a birthright priority whereby males rule females. Through this system a most ingenious form of ‘interior colonization’ has been achieved ... However muted its present appearance might be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (Millett 33).

Janis Joplin, Judy Garland, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Marilyn Monroe

"*La Mestiza* is the product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values from one group to another... From the racial, ideological and biological cross-pollination, an “alien” consciousness is in the making – a new mestiza consciousness" (Anzaldúa, "La conciencia de la mestiza" 428).
Womanist

1. From womanish... A Black feminist or feminist of colour... Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behaviour.

2. ... A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually... Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally universalist.


4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

(Excerpt from In Search of Our Mother's Gardens xi-xii)
CHAPTER TWO

Margaret Atwood and *Lady Oracle*: Transforming the Myth of the Doomed Woman Artist and the Healing Power of Ariadne’s Labyrinth

Introduction

Spider Woman and textile imagery gleaned from earlier literary sources are plentiful in Margaret Atwood’s 1976 novel, *Lady Oracle*, not surprisingly, given Atwood’s extensive academic background in English literature. Atwood, having taken stock of culturally ordained, prescriptive mythologies (Atwood *SW*, 219-220) has, in *Lady Oracle*, re-packaged—with humour and an eye to the ridiculous—many of these myths, legends, and fairy-tales, in a way that Mary Daly would surely praise for its “spooking” power. Atwood clearly illustrates the power of mytho-culture to shape the individual, and the struggle of the individual to break away from limiting or harmful roles.¹ *Lady Oracle* also brings to light the healing potential of re-visionary myth-making, and the transformative power of the story weaver, whether in a tower or apartment bedroom, whether working with strands of wool or strands of thought. In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood, the magical word weaver at the centre of the web of plot lines and characters, spins a fictional counterpart—Joan, the protagonist of *Lady Oracle*—through whom Atwood illustrates the power of the word, the power of the media, and the power of western culture to shape a psyche and inform a life. In addition, Atwood brings important second wave
political issues into view through humour and, especially, through the rather
duffoon qualities of her “fool heroine.”

Written in the earlier days of second wave feminism, *Lady Oracle* resonates
with issues of importance during that era such as exposing the roots of sexual
discrimination and deconstructing the societal apparatus that reinforce female
subordination and servitude. Feminist spirituality as a power source for women
was not yet part of the mainstream literary landscape, nor were women yet as
widely published as they would be in the next decade. Therefore, Atwood was
exploring relatively uncharted terrain by giving voice to a young woman’s spiritual
quest and desire to create an authentic life given the limited options faced by many
women within western culture. Atwood challenges eurocentric myths designed to
restrict women’s access as contributors in the world of art and literature, where the
female role is that of a spectator, rather than an agent, of cultural evolution. Joan
strives to live her life as a wife and published writer, and thus challenges a myth
woven into numerous fairy tales, legends and stories, as well as Victorian literature,
and twentieth century popular culture – the myth of the doomed woman artist.
Joan’s psyche, deeply impressed by the common message encoded in these tales,
has been particularly influenced by Tennyson’s heroine in his poem, “The Lady of
Shalott.”

This magical figure, a disempowered rendering of the Cosmic Weaver, Spider
Woman, is confined to a tower to weave only the images she sees in her mirror,
and is forbidden to leave or be a part of the world whose reflections she transcribes
into tapestries. In Atwood’s text the plight of the Lady of Shalott can be seen as a
metaphor for the woman artist’s imprisoned potential, and her marginalized position in society. Joan’s experience reflects a dilemma many women face: choosing between the solitary and largely unrecognized life as an artist/scholar/professional and the social life within family and community. Atwood defies this binary construct by creating a heroine who becomes both an artist and a wife; the cost, however, is the fragmentation of Joan’s personality and creation of a multiple identities with mutually exclusive lives. The tension of this fragmented existence almost results in Joan’s demise; instead, Atwood takes Joan on a labyrinthine journey in search of integration through self-realization.

The sacred symbol of the labyrinth is associated with another Spider Woman figure, Ariadne, the Lady of the Labyrinth, a shadowy figure in Lady Oracle, yet ever-present with her labyrinth in its various manifestations: the labyrinth appears in Joan’s automatic writing sessions during which she follows an Ariadne figure—whom Joan calls ‘Lady Oracle’—through the mirror’s passageways; the labyrinth becomes an important element in the gothic romance Joan is writing; and the labyrinth lends shape to the overall narrative design. Here, Atwood challenges literary protocol and disrupts conventional linear form by interweaving diverse genres such as letters, gothic romances, nursery rhymes, visions and dreams into Joan’s meandering story, which begins shortly after her staged “suicide.” Thus, Joan revisits the circumstances and influences that led her to view death as a viable solution to her dilemma, revealing the effects of “interior colonization,” and illustrating multiple ways in which this innate sexism plays itself out in Joan’s affluent anglo-urban echelon of Canadian society. Undoubtedly, many women’s
lives are “spooked” into submission through various oppressive societal constructs reinforced by cultural myths; as well, female friendships—both within and outside the family system—are often disrupted by the same cultural apparatus. Overall, within western culture, women are taught allegiance to men and distrust of each other, as evident in Joan’s life; thus, there is less possibility of gynergetic sparking and gynocentric creation. Interestingly, even though Joan engages with men socially and romantically, ultimately, women are the catalysts for Joan’s spiritual quest and healing journey as she shuttles in and out of various story lines, among diverse versions and perspectives of her experiences, and winds her way into the centre of the labyrinth wherein lies the truth she seeks.

To look more closely at Spider Woman imagery in Joan’s labyrinthine narrative, Daly’s concept for the development of gynocentric writing, although published two years after Atwood’s texts, is a useful tool for analysis. *Gyn/Ecology* could not have directly influenced *Lady Oracle*; however, the two texts rose from the same second wave impetus. These texts can be seen to embody the growing awareness of women’s silencing both through language and through lack of language. For example, in *Sexual Politics* (1969), Kate Millett points out that “under patriarchy the female did not herself develop the symbols by which she is described” (65). Atwood and Daly’s texts both work to re-construct narrative patterns, words and metaphors to speak the unspeakable, the denied and taboo. As well, Atwood uses humour to “spook” outmoded and harmful myths internalized by many women within the western world and, thus, shows us how ridiculous these stories really are.
This chapter will, first of all, look at some of the myths, legends, fairytales—especially magical spinners and weavers—and other intertextual influences Atwood weaves throughout *Lady Oracle*, then focus on the myth of the “doomed woman artist” and ways in which Joan has internalized this myth. Several critics including Shuli Barzilai, Russell Brown and Lucy Friebert look at intertextual influences of Tennyson’s character, the Lady of Shalott, on Joan’s life; as well, Friebert along with Alice Palumbo and Carol Ann Howells examine the symbolic meaning of the labyrinth/ maze in *Lady Oracle*. This inquiry expands on both these analyses, and shows how Atwood rewrites both legend and myth, and save Joan’s life. Atwood leads Joan to the women—both real and imaginary—who “spark” her courage to journey into the labyrinth, where healing and transformation are possible, and new endings/beginnings are created.

**Intertextuality in *Lady Oracle***

In addition to the Lady of Shalott and Ariadne, numerous other characters from the traditional English canon and popular culture are woven into *Lady Oracle*, creating a rich and multi-layered intertextuality. Interestingly, many of these stories gleaned from ancient myths, fairy tales and popular culture contain a dark interconnecting thread – that of the myth of the doomed woman artist. Beginning with a look at characters from antiquity, this inquiry then looks at two fairy tales, then, the power of popular culture and multi-media to further reinforce these debilitating myths.
An important connection with antiquity is discussed in Carol Beran's essay, "George, Leda, and a Poured Concrete Balcony," in which she recognizes *Lady Oracle*’s Reverend Leda Sprott "as a character with a name from Greek mythology" (Beran 22) Leda was a beautiful women raped by Jupiter in the form of a swan: their daughter was Helen, whose abduction began the Trojan War. Leda’s story is woven into a web constructed by Arachne. According to *Bulfinch's Mythology*:

Arachne filled her web with subjects designedly chosen to exhibit the failings and errors of the gods. One scene represented Leda caressing the swan, under which form Jupiter had disguised himself. (Holme 129)

Arachne’s woven tale of Leda and the swan also appears, albeit briefly, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: “She wove, and pictured Leda as she lay/Under the white swan’s wings” (Ovid 124). Arachne is punished for not conceding to Athena; as well, Arachne dares to criticize the actions of the gods; this is why she is turned into a spider. Catherine Keller in *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism and Self* suggests that Arachne was “originally a Spider Goddess demoted to mortal maiden status by patriarchal myth” (Keller 217). Keller continues by writing: “the Athena who glorifies the Fathers will be pitted against the Arachne who challenges them” (Keller 217); moreover:

the opposition of a patriarchal goddess and mortal victim displays not only the traditional competitiveness between women. It also hints at the split self that turns woman against herself. (Keller 217)
Joan’s life echoes this myth; she too is rewarded for writing gothic romances as dictated by the patriarchal formulas that reinforce stereotype sexist roles, and is punished for weaving an alternate vision, published in her book of poetry *Lady Oracle*.

Joan is also related to the mythic figure of Penelope, whose name means “She with a Web on her Face” (Keller 217). Penelope must weave a death shroud in memory of her husband King Odysseus who is missing from war and assumed by many to be dead.⁹ Once her tapestry is completed, his death will be official, and a new king proclaimed. As long as her work is in progress, however, Penelope’s autonomy is assured; therefore, as a survival mechanism she weaves during the day and unravels her work at night. Atwood’s heroine maintains her autonomy in another unique way: Joan manipulates the threads of identity needed for her various roles; thus, she weaves new identities on demand, re-invents the tapestry of her body, her clothes, her lifestyle. But, less meticulous than Penelope, Joan does not unravel the previous identity/identities but creates double-binds until her life has become “a rat’s nest of dangling threads and loose ends” (Atwood 313), and she begins to consider suicide as a means of liberation.

Margery Fee, in *The Fat Lady Dances*, discusses the prevalence and impact of this “suicide/death motif” in *Lady Oracle*. Fee sees, in particular, two popular stories by Hans Christian Andersen—“The Little Mermaid” and “The Red Shoes”—as extremely influential on Joan’s worldview. Both stories feature a female artist—one a singer and one a dancer—and both sacrifice their art for the sake of a “normal” life. Joan’s life decisions are “based on the clear message that
she has received throughout her childhood and adolescence – that a woman cannot have both a marriage and a career at the same time” (Fee 46). The heroine of “The Little Mermaid,” Joan tells us, became “a dancer, though, with no tongue” (Atwood 229); the little mermaid sacrifices her beautiful singing voice for legs and a mortal soul so she can marry her beloved prince. Julie Fenwick comments on the result: “walking causes agonizing pain, the prince marries someone else, and the mermaid dies” (Fenwick 1). Similarly fated, the dancer in the fairy-tale version of “The Red Shoes” is

an orphan who is given a pair of red shoes that dance her around the countryside, something she initially enjoys. However, she has to get the public executioner to cut off her feet in order to stop dancing. (Fee 46)

Emily Jensen points out that:

While Joan's reference in the novel is to the film version of The Red Shoes, it is clear from her own dance scene that she is also familiar with Andersen's version of the fairy-tale in which the dancer's feet are cut off. (Jensen 30)

The warning message of the Hans Christian Andersen fairy-tale version of “The Red Shoes” clearly has an effect on Joan, who believes:

You could dance or you could have the love of a good man. But you were afraid to dance, because you had this unnatural fear that if you danced they'd cut your feet off, so you wouldn't be able to dance. Finally you overcame your fear and danced, and they cut your feet off. The good man went away too, because you wanted to dance. (Atwood 355)
The film version of *The Red Shoes*, which had deep impact, not only on Joan, "but on a whole generation of little girls" (Atwood, *SW* 224), takes this sacrifice even further – a prima ballerina cannot stop dancing, so she commits suicide. Margaret Atwood and Rosemary Sullivan both observe that *The Red Shoes* draws in its audience by use of the deeply embedded iconography of the fairy tale princess complete with lavish costumes, shimmering red hair, sparkling jewelry and romantic settings (Atwood, *SW* 224, Sullivan 3). In one particularly elaborate scene, the ballerina, beautifully clad in a sparkling sequined net gown, spinning and weaving her dance passionately amidst draped veils hung from rafters above the stage, is a bewitching spider figure in the centre of the web-like set. This charmed world of the ballerina—played by film star Moira Shearer—can exist, however, only as long as she gives her life to her choreographer. Shearer’s character falls in love and marries in secret; but it is not possible for her to be both a famous ballerina and happily married; thus, this tormented wife/dancer finally dances off a bridge and into the pathway of an on-coming train. During Shearer’s dramatic and artfully played death scene, she “begs her husband to remove the red shoes” (Sullivan 6).

*The Red Shoes*, both in its incarnation as a fairy tale and—perhaps even more poignantly—as a popular film, reinforces and expands a belief perpetuated in western culture described by Julie Fenwick as the “underlying theme of the risk to women of certain choices – to seek forbidden knowledge, to exercise creativity, to desire, to speak, to dance” (Fenwick 1). The myth of the doomed woman artist—a weaver, oracle, poet, singer or dancer or other independent creative force—with its
deeply embedded roots, continues in contemporary society with new and even more powerful packaging. The fateful message to women artists embedded in these stories is clearly internalized by Joan, who not only takes to heart the plight of Moira Shearer in *The Red Shoes*, but whose life, ultimately, emulates the story of another ill-fated artist: “The Lady of Shalott.”

The Lady of Shalott

Atwood’s allusions to Tennyson’s “Lady” interweave the ominous message encoded in “The Little Mermaid” and “The Red Shoes” – that a woman cannot be both an artist and a wife. This core belief is problematic for Joan as she—an artist/writer/weaver of words—must suppress or conceal her artist self, first from Paul, for whom she is mistress, and later from Arthur, whom she marries, as well as from his entourage of friends and political associates. For Joan “this is yet another rendering of the story in which a woman is offered a choice, between love and art, that is not really a choice because either alternative entails disaster” (Fenwick 6).

The story of the magical weaver in “The Lady of Shalott” romanticizes the imprisoned artist, her unrequited love and subsequent death, and thus reinforces the concept of suicide as a culturally condoned option for “unhappy” women; it perpetuates a belief system so long held in western culture that its gynocidal underpinnings may go unnoticed, exemplifying what Kate Millett describes as:

perhaps patriarchy’s most powerful psychological weapon…its universality and longevity…when a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely to speak itself aloud. (81)
The success of this process of internalized colonization is evident in Joan's high school doctrinatation into the worldview of Tennyson: she recalls first reading "The Lady of Shalott" in a Grade Nine textbook, *Narrative Poems for Juniors*:

I was a romantic despite myself, and I really wanted, then, to have someone, anyone, say that I had a lovely face, even if I had to turn into a corpse in a barge-bottom first. (Atwood 150)

Joan, as a young teenager, was already was willing to sacrifice her life in order to fulfill her fantasy of being the object of a handsome man's desire; as an adult, the story of "The Lady of Shalott" becomes a powerful template for Joan's life. For example, after graduation, Joan travels to England chasing dreams of Camelot—looking for her knight in shining armour. She is disappointed, however, when she discovers that, in reality, London "is not as romantic as she expected it to be" (Jensen 32). Expecting "castles and princesses, the Lady of Shalott floating down a winding river in a boat" (Atwood 150), Joan finds instead "a lot of traffic and a large number of people with bad teeth" (Atwood 150). Not dwelling on her disillusionment, Joan romantically links herself with "royalty," a Polish Count named Paul, but Joan soon begins to feel restricted by his control of her life. Through Paul, however, she discovers her love of writing. Paul is a writer of "nurse romances" (Atwood 162), and becomes Joan's connection both with the publishing world (Atwood 164-5) and with the formula—framework or loom—to weave her own "trashy novels." As novice writer of gothic romances, Joan delights in spinning the prescribed yarns and becomes an enthusiastic weaver of words.
Successful at her task, Joan is soon fulfilling requests from her publisher for more material: “Material, they called it, as if it came by the yard” (Atwood 165).

Especially, she delights in creating clothing for her characters and spends

whole afternoons in the costume room of the Victoria and Albert Museum...[She] thought that if [she] could only get the clothes right, everything else would fall into line. And it did. (Atwood 164-5)

Here, Atwood brings to light ways in which western culture relies on costume to establish and maintain character and status—that clothing encodes a story—to the degree that for Joan, clothing becomes the signifier by which she transforms her life. Thus, Atwood reveals an intricate connection between textiles and text as exemplified in the scene in which Joan becomes attracted to Arthur—or, to the character she imagines him to be, based on what he is wearing:

He was wearing a black crew-neck sweater, which I found quite dashing. A melancholy fighter for almost-lost causes, idealistic and doomed, sort of like Lord Byron...I fell in love. (Atwood 174)

Joan immediately romanticizes Arthur, and wins him over through pretence and lies. To “please the handsome prince” (Atwood 230) Joan pretends to be “inept and vulnerable” (Atwood 94) and makes up a personal history that she believes will impress him, believing that “every myth is a version of the truth” (Atwood 94). Joan dedicates herself to Arthur’s political cause and to being a devoted wife, but continues to write in secret (Atwood 220). Her life echoes that of the Lady of Shalott writing in the tower - which for Joan includes such diverse location as the
bedroom, the library, and the apartment when Arthur is out (Atwood 225), and publishing under a pseudonym. Unwilling to give up either her husband or her writing, and attempting to avoid living out the myth of the doomed woman artist, Joan creates two mutually exclusive identities. At home she is Joan Foster, Arthur’s wife; to the publishers she is someone else completely: Joan had submitted both the name and photo of the overweight, but flamboyantly dressed Louisa Delacourt, Joan’s deceased spinster aunt.

I was two people at once, with two sets of identification papers, two bank accounts, two different groups of people who believed I existed... As long as I could spend a certain amount of time each week as Louisa, I was all right, I was patient and forbearing, warm, a sympathetic listener. But if I was cut off, if I couldn’t work at my current Costume Gothic, I would become mean and irritable, drink too much and start to cry. (Atwood 225-6)

Keeping balance, for Joan, is an ongoing struggle that becomes compounded when, while working through a scene in her current gothic romance, she begins to explore automatic writing, a technique she had first attempted as a teenager (Atwood 117-8). Now, years later, with husband Arthur watching a hockey game on TV in the next room (Atwood 252), Joan once again lights a candle and sets forth into the mirror, this time to further the story line of her fictional heroine Penelope, and “that was how it began. The mirror won, curiosity prevailed” (Atwood 234). Joan’s experience is so profound that she sets her gothic aside and begins a three-month series of meditative journeys into the mirror’s labyrinthine passageways, guided by the light of a candle and an otherworldly figure whom Joan calls Lady Oracle (Atwood 235). Like the Lady of Shalott, Joan weaves the visions
she sees in her mirror and some of her poetic images eerily, or perhaps ironically, 
echo Tennyson; also like the Lady, when Joan offers her vision to the world, she 
meets with dire consequences. Unlike the Lady, however, Joan does not die; 
instead her personality fragments once again, creating space in her life to embrace 
another aspect of herself as a prophet-poet.

Joan’s poetic writing is accepted for publication and for the first time she is 
confronted with accountability as she is not fulfilling the formula for a gothic 
romance, nor is she publishing under a pseudonym. This time, published as Joan 
Foster, her writing represents herself, in all her peculiarities (Atwood 247). In 
addition, she must tell Arthur, who “becomes distant…and treats her as if [she’d] 
committed some unpardonable but unmentionable sin” (Atwood 250). Joan’s 
promotional tour sets in play the emergence of a third identity, her role as publicly 
acclaimed artist/poet, Joan Foster, complete with extravagant costuming worthy of 
a Pre-Raphaelite image of Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott:

Joan Foster, celebrated author of Lady Oracle, looking like a lush Rossetti portrait, radiating intensity…Prose poetess Joan Foster looked impressively Junoesque in her flowing red hair and green robe.

(Atwood 11)

In an interview Joan confesses that the poems were “dictated…by a spirit hand” 
(Atwood 253), thus increasing her mystique and accenting her role of prophet-poet. 
This is quite a different “Joan Foster” from her role as “wife” to Arthur – the 
supportive listener to a man either preoccupied by political involvement or
depressed by defeat. Joan appeases Arthur by playing the role of the inept housewife:

Arthur enjoyed my defeats. They cheered him up. He loved hearing the crash as I dropped a red-hot platter on the floor... he liked to hear me swear in the kitchen... My failure was a performance and Arthur was the audience. His applause kept me going. (Atwood 222-3)

At home Joan does what she can to please Arthur, even to her own degradation; however, Joan Foster as poet is the centre of attention, a celebrated artist, and soon becomes romantically involved with the Royal Porcupine, also an artist, and every bit as theatrically bent as Joan. As with her initial attraction to Arthur, Joan is drawn to the Royal Porcupine because of his clothing:

He too had red hair, and had an elegant moustache and beard, the moustache waxed and curled up at the ends, the beard pointed. He was wearing a long black cloak and spats, and carrying a gold-headed cane, a pair of white gloves, and a top hat embroidered with porcupine quills. (Atwood 254)

They begin a playful affair through which Joan lives out her romantic and sexual desires (Atwood 271), and yet another secret self is born: Joan is no longer living a double life; she has become triplicate:

I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many. The Royal Porcupine had opened a time-space door to the fifth dimension. (Atwood 261)

Joan, to express herself more fully, creates separate lives and multiple personalities; she has chosen to be a doting wife, gothic romance novelist/spinster,
prophet-poet/lover. These characters are woven on separate looms with distinctly different patterns/cultural roles, and "none is completely real" (Atwood 230). With Arthur, Joan downplays her physical appearance and plays the part of the submissive wife; as a writer of gothic romances, Joan is Louisa Delacourt, an unobtrusive spinster; and as Joan Foster, author of Lady Oracle she is spontaneously creative and playful; she dances, writes poetry and is unabashedly sexual. In time, Joan feels the strain of maintaining these separate lives, and, aware of more repressed identities waiting in the wings, Joan plots suicide as a means of escaping her predicament – thus activates the myth of the doomed woman artist exemplified by "The Lady of Shalott."

With melodramatic flair, Atwood subverts this myth: Joan only pretends to drown in an elaborately concocted and clownishly acted boating "accident" (Atwood 324). After this staged death, Joan flies to Rome and ends up in the village of Terremoto where she buries her funereal clothes—"her former self" (Atwood 17)—then cuts and dyes her "trademark" (Atwood 11) red hair, thereby transforming her appearance so she can "pass for a secretary on vacation" (Atwood 11) with a "new personality (a sensible girl, discreet, warm, honest, and confident, with soft, green eyes, regular habits and glowing chestnut hair)" (Atwood 195). Once again Joan is re-defining herself by re-weaving her appearance and, thus, her personality. Joan is now the Lady of Shalott reborn; an unfinished revision of the old myth for which Joan can create the conclusion. But, as with her other personae, this incarnation of Joan, is caught up in loose ends. She is not really dead, and her friends back home who helped her stage this suicide have kept her up to date on the
aftermath. From her “otherworldly” position Joan learns that after her “death”, she became a cult figure (Atwood 333), that “sales of Lady Oracle were booming, and every necrophiliac in the country was rushing to buy a copy” (Atwood 334). Joan realizes:

I’d been shoved into the ranks of other unhappy ladies, scores of them apparently, who’d been killed by a surfeit of words. There I was, on the bottom of the death barge where I’d once longed to be, my name on the prow. Winding my way down the river...Maybe they were right, you could stay in the tower for years weaving away...but one glance at real life and that was that. (Atwood 334)

Here again, Tennyson’s Lady is the story whereby Joan reflects on her own life and the symbiotic nature of Joan’s connection with the Lady thus far is clear: as a teenager Joan fantasizes lying in the death barge with Lancelot admiring her; as a young adult, Joan travels to England in search of Camelot; eventually, she does marry “Arthur,” then becomes the Lady herself, a prophet-poet weaver of words, costuming herself as a Pre-Raphaelite interpretation of this doomed Arthurian heroine. This self-costuming is consistent with Joan’s tendency to create costumes—both for her own multiple selves and for her fictional heroines—to portray definite roles for prescribed plot lines. When Joan can no longer maintain her separate lives as wife or poet or lover, she activates the myth of the doomed woman artist.

On one hand, the myth of the doomed woman artist encoded in the Lady of Shalott is Joan’s blueprint for self-destruction; on the other, however, this Spider Woman is Joan’s inspiration—both in life and in her writing—and through
Atwood's subversive "spooking," the myth becomes Joan's source of enlightenment. Joan is drawn into the labyrinth—to follow the thread of memory and secret rites of passage—where she connects with the guiding energy of Ariadne.

Ariadne

Ariadne, the Lady of the Labyrinth, can be seen as another de-throned Spider Woman, and appears as Lady Oracle in Atwood's novel; her labyrinth is a sustained metaphor and organizing thread in the novel. The labyrinth is potentially a site of deep and powerful transformation for Joan; first, however, she must have the courage to face what awaits in the centre, a journey Joan aborts time and time again. Interestingly, although Joan does not have many close female friendships, it is women—including Aunt Lou, Reverend Leda Shaw, and Joan's fictional gothic heroines Penelope, Charlotte and Felicia—who "spark" Joan into self-affirming action, guide Joan into the labyrinth, and into the mysteries that lie within herself.

Ariadne's guiding energy first makes its presence known in *Lady Oracle* through Reverend Leda Shaw, whom Joan meets while spending time with her Aunt Lou. Reverend Leda Sprott, leader of the Jordan Chapel Spiritualists—a woman who "didn't mind what you believe, as long as you also believed in her powers" to connect with the "Other Side" (Atwood 114, 109)—tells Joan that she has "great gifts...Great powers" (Atwood 115) and "should try Automatic Writing," thus, Leda "becomes a sort of spiritual mother to Joan" (Beran 22). It is Aunt Lou, however, who passes on Leda's method of Automatic Writing,
incorporating the candle and the mirror (Atwood 117) to induce a trance-like state.
Years later this technique is woven into the plot of Joan’s gothic heroine, Penelope, in *Love, My Ransom* (Atwood 231), resuming Joan’s own interest in this occult art. Later heroines, Charlotte and Felicity from *Stalked by Love*, lead Joan into the centre of the garden maze.¹⁵

Joan’s experiments with Automatic Writing lead her into the mirror’s labyrinthine passageways and corridors, and a tentative connection with the Ariadne figure, Lady Oracle, until one day, when a candle goes out¹⁶ during one of her sessions, and Joan abruptly puts a stop to this psychic exploration:

> I think the candle really did go out and that was why I was stuck there, in the midst of darkness, unable to move. I’d lost all sense of direction; I was afraid to turn around even, in case I ended up going farther in. I felt as though I was suffocating. (Atwood 237)

Thus far in her labyrinthine explorations, Joan did not “get to the end of the corridor” (Atwood 236) in her mirror journey, nor did she find what she is seeking — “the thing, the truth or word or person that was mine, that was waiting for me” (Atwood 235).

What she does gain from these Automatic Writing sessions is a book of poetry, later published as *Lady Oracle*; a book so strange and unconventional that Joan denies any personal connection with the characters or scenarios (Atwood 236), viewing it instead as a “Gothic gone wrong. It was upside-down somehow” (Atwood 247). In time, Joan begins to see that the images in *Lady Oracle* are parts of herself with whom she needs to reconcile; however, Joan ignores the call of her
inner self by creating distractions—such as becoming involved in an affair and assisting in the design of a "terrorist plot"—and further alienating her from her true self. Believing that her life "couldn't possibly have a happy ending," the only way Joan can imagine escaping from the "snarl[ed]" web of deceit her life has become is to plan her own ending—"a neat one. Something terminal, like scissors" (Atwood 312).

Mary Daly points out, however, that "[j]ourneying to the Centre is undoing the knot, not cutting the knot. To try to cut the knot is merely to take a misleading short-cut" (Daly, GE 406). Daly also advises that:

There are nonknots, which should not be confused with knots. These should be recognized as snarls... Unlike a knot, it is not characterized by the complexity of integrity, but by inherent confusion. (Daly, G/E 406)

Joan's "snarled" lifeline is, indeed, characterized by confusion and it is only in the re-telling of her story, after her "death," from an alternate perspective on "the other side"—in Terremoto—that Joan sees the order and patterns that have shaped her life. Although Joan laments after her suicide that she doesn't immediately "see her entire life flash before [her] the way it was supposed to," (Atwood 329), she actually does. The novel, *Lady Oracle*, is exactly that: Joan's life flashing before her as she follows the thread of her memory both from her "real life" adventures from childhood up to the present in Terremoto, and her imaginary life, as she interweaves excerpts from her gothic romances throughout her own story. Joan finally musters up the courage to send Charlotte into the garden maze—thus,
vicariously, Joan sends herself into the labyrinth—to find the “truth” that awaits her at the centre, the truth Joan sensed waiting for her in the mirror maze, but that she could not face at that time. A growing symbiosis between Charlotte and Joan becomes increasingly evident, and the distinction between fiction and real life for Joan becomes progressively blurred as her heroine’s stories seemingly take on their own authorship.

The formula for gothic romance dictates that Felicia die so that Charlotte can marry Redmond and become the fourth Lady Redmond, but Felicia was still alive and Joan “couldn’t seem to get rid of her” (Atwood 337). Rather, Joan was beginning to pity Felicia and despise Charlotte, and *Stalked by Love* was beginning to mirror the love triangle of Joan, Arthur and the Royal Porcupine, complete with the snoopy Fraser Buchanan threatening to expose the affair (Atwood 339). Joan realizes this story line is “all wrong” (Atwood 339), and while the characters are obviously carrying it off into a very different direction than Joan had planned, she has yet to see how keenly these twisted events in *Stalked By Love* mirror her own unresolved life. For example, is it possible that Charlotte, who makes Joan all itchy, “like wearing a hair shirt” (Atwood 340), is actually the fragment of Joan’s psyche acting the part of the doting and virtuous wife?

When Felicia realizes that she must die to make way for Charlotte, we can see Joan’s own dilemma: to be Arthur’s wife means being sweet and considerate like Charlotte, not spontaneous and passionate like Felicia. When Felicia sees her death in the mirror—her death by drowning in a river—Joan confronts her own “death,” her own fears, and her own simple desire for happiness with the man she loves.
(Atwood 339). Did it mean a continuing life of lies? If so, where was the true happiness? But, while Joan knows that her gothic romance is “all wrong,” she does not yet guess what her fictional characters are trying to show her. Joan only knows that:

Charlotte would have to go into the maze... She’d wanted to ever since reaching Redmond Grange... [b]ut... did the maze mean certain death, or did it contain the answer to a riddle, an answer she must learn in order to live? (351-2)

Here Joan merges Charlotte’s desire with her own, and it appears that in truth, it is Joan who would have to go into the maze; it is Joan who has wanted to ever since arriving at Terremoto; and it is Joan who wishes to find the answer to the riddle of life that might just be revealed within the maze. Through the tenacity of Charlotte and Felicia, and Joan’s innovative writing, the deathtrap journey of the gothic maze is transformed into the labyrinthine journey of inner hearing and inner knowing (Daly, G/E 412).

Echoing the ancient myth of Ariadne, Charlotte enters the maze with a guiding yarn of wool (Atwood 353) which she unravels as she travels along the passageways. Arriving safely at the centre, and finding it empty, Charlotte panics and tries to flee “but she made the mistake of trying to wind up the ball of knitting wool as she ran and her feet became hopelessly entangled” (Atwood 353). As Charlotte falls, Felicia tries to strangle her, and Redmond comes to the rescue, but Joan will not go through with this “happy ending” even though “[t]hat was the way it was supposed to go, that was the way it had always gone before, but somehow it
no longer felt right” (Atwood 353). Through Charlotte, Joan discovers that the monster at the middle of this gothic maze is the murderous Felicia.

Margery Fee observes that at this point, “Joan loses her narrative thread... and it is here where Stalked by Love begins to diverge from the convention of the Gothic” (Fee 72-3). Joan, as the author, does not follow through with the rescue of the virtuous maiden by the roguish hero, saving her from the villainous wife; and Felicia, representative of the reputed evil Minotaur, is not slain. Joan rewrites the scene and sends, instead, Felicia into the maze. Felicia does not unwind a ball of yarn to guide her way through the maze; she uses her mind, memorizing “small details, the shape of a bush, the colour of a flower” as she winds her way through the passages. This time the centre plot is very different—it is not empty; nor does it contain characters from Stalked by Love—it contains four women from Joan’s own life (Atwood 361-2), “shadowy women who are fragments of Joan’s psyche” (Ross 472), each in their turn being an alter-ego or counterpart of Joan, but with a separate, although perhaps simultaneous existence.18

Lucy Freibert observes that “when all of them claim to be Lady Redmond, Felicia understands that all wives are one” (Freibert 31). Felicia is not the only one privy to this discovery; Joan also begins to understand that these women are reflections of the “multiple manifestations” of herself (Rigney 70). They are all trapped together at the centre of the maze, with the pathway to the centre now closing in, trapping Felicia/Joan with the others. Felicia opens the door and discovers her husband, Redmond, on the other side and recognizes him as the killer of all the Lady Redmonds, and agent of her doom. She stands fast on her side of
the door as he undergoes his metamorphoses and becomes, one by one, different men that Joan has both loved and feared during her life—essentially, each an aspect of her own male within; the male correspondent to the female roles she has adopted during her lifetime.

Refusing to budge from her side of the door, Joan/Felicia watches as "Redmond" becomes "Death"—her utmost fear and desire. Rather than falling prey to a Death Monster in the middle of the maze, Joan journeys more deeply, into the centre of the labyrinth; where death merges with rebirth. Joan can, if she chooses, begin a new life. Through facing death, albeit through her fiction writing, Joan learns that she has the strength to face death in her real life; she neither hides nor tries to escape, but instead defends herself when threatened by an assailant at the end of Lady Oracle. As well, by openly acknowledging her multiple identities, Joan has faced the fear that an "explosion" would occur if she “brought the separate parts of [her]self together” (Atwood 230), and embraced the “spark” of reunion. Atwood, thus, not only aptly revises the myth of the doomed woman artist but also reclaims the ancient power of the labyrinth—both for the symbol and for the Lady presiding.

The journey into the labyrinth in “the classical myth of Ariadne...exemplifies the spinster whose thread helps the hero emerge from the depths” (Weigle 19), whereas Atwood points out a danger inherent in relying on unreliable external sources: Charlotte/Joan, panics and attempts to escape the labyrinth, but cannot rewind her yarn quickly enough, becomes entangled and nearly falls prey to her deepest fears. Alternately, Felicia/Joan is guided through the labyrinth by her senses, her inner knowing and memory. At the centre, she is able to see beyond
fearful and false myths and envision something new. In so doing, both Felicia and Joan are released from the hierarchical, dualistic, sexist roles in which they have been cast within western mytho-culture, as are Ariadne, Theseus, and the Minotaur. Atwood’s new mythology reclaims the power of the labyrinth for women’s healing and transformation and places Ariadne on her rightful throne as the “Lady of the Labyrinth.”

Conclusion

In Lady Oracle, Spider Woman figures Ariadne and the Lady of Shalott reclaim a place of power in western culture. Atwood “spooks” away the notion of goddess/woman as self-sacrificing muse or helpmate for men as the ridiculous myth it is. Atwood also aptly “spooks” to light the multi-dimensional infiltration of the doomed woman artist in western mytho-culture, and ways in which Joan defies this fate and “sparks” a new life for herself. As well, drawing on numerous textual, as well as multimedia sources, Atwood illustrates the power, and inherent danger, of myth to shape a life as well as the symbiotic potential of myth, life and art. Atwood's use of intersexuality is intended as more than mere academic show — her use of mocking humour is purposefully employed strategy and her way of “spooking” institutions/people through ludicrous representation. Through Joan’s antics—echoing the antics of another clownish redhead of the same era, Lucille Ball—Atwood debunks convention through outrageous humour; she topples old paradigms, and “spins” into both ancient and modern sources to create new narrative designs, news types of character representations, new ways of living -
thus creating new mythologies for our time.
End Notes

1 In her “Introduction” to Essays in the Feminist Companion to Mythology, editor Carolyne Larrington provides a useful interpretation of the role of myth in western culture:

Mythology, the study of myth, introduces us to new ways of looking at social structures... For westerners, our interpretation of our mythological heritage conditions the ways we think about ourselves. Myth has been appropriated by politicians, psychiatrists and artists, among others, to tell us what we are and where we have come from. (Larrington ix)

2 Clara Thomas writes about this in her essay, “Lady Oracle: The Narrative of the Fool Heroine.”

3 The Goddess has been progressively “dethroned” by the historical process during which patriarchy supplanted earlier societal constructs. (Lerner 134) Barbara Walker, in The Women’s Book of Myths and Secrets, writes:

Probing ancient views of the Goddess is instructive. It shows a female figure almost always more powerful than the male. It not only shows that she is his Mother, the author of his being; she is also the deity who infuses all creation with the vital blood of life. Gods prosper only when they partake of her wisdom or adopt her powers... The strength of the Goddess was harnessed to support new male religions as the strength of women’s nurturing caretaking instinct was harnessed to a patriarchal marriage supporting men. (Walker 346)

This belief system is perpetuated by Robert Graves in The White Goddess (1946), a popular academic text first read by Atwood when she was 19, and one that affected her life and her work. Atwood writes in Second Words: “For Graves, man does, woman simply is. Man is the poet, woman is the muse, the White Goddess herself, inspiring, but ultimately destroying” (Atwood, SW 224). In Lady Oracle, Atwood attempts to reframe this myth and claim agency for women as poets/artists, and in so doing exposes numerous ways women’s creative energies are fractured, as are the surviving remnants of the Goddess herself. (Atwood, LO 149) Ultimately, within patriarchy, reverence for women, both mortal and sacred, is heresy - a foreboding force to confront.

5 A conversation with Ann-Rosemary Conway on February 20, 2006 at the Look Show in Victoria, BC, where her painting “Brigid’s Appearance” was being shown, sparked the idea that the Lady of Shalott, although hidden away and restricted in her creativity, is a remaining thread of connection with the Celtic Triple Goddess Brigid and the goddess cultures that pre-existed patriarchy and male-dominated monotheism.

In The Book of Goddesses and Heroines Patricia Monaghan tells how Brigid met this same fate, and how:

[r] itual... preserved Brigid’s name and symbols for more than 1,000 years after she ceased to be acknowledged as a goddess. But little is left of the legends told of one of the greatest of all Celtic goddesses, a deity so... intensely related to the feminine force that no man was allowed to pass beyond the hedge surrounding her sanctuary. (Monaghan 60)

These symbols, and reverence for Brigid’s power are finding renewal in works by contemporary artists such as Ann-Rosemary. Research for her painting led Ann-Rosemary to “trace [Brigid’s] origins back through the Christian St. Brigid, to the celtic Goddess Brigid to pre- celtic Sheela-na-Gig Brigid, to the Far East Indian Shakti birth mother Shakti” (quote from email correspondence with Ann-Rosemary Conway). In this light, the Lady of Shalott can be seen as a shimmering strand of Shakti, the Life Weaver.
6 In addition to the works I will discuss, many studies have been done on intertextuality in *Lady Oracle*, including works by Shuli Barzilai and Sussina Singh, who look at connections with the Grimm Brothers' story of "Rapunzel," Barbara Hill Rigney who finds connection with the tale of "Snow White," and Julie Fenwick, who looks at connections between *Lady Oracle* and *Anne of Green Gables*.

7 In *The Women's Book of Myths and Secrets*, Barbara Walker tells a different version of the story of Arachne and Athena:

> Arachne the spider was a totemic form of the Fate-spinner, otherwise known as Clothos or Athena or the Virgin Moera. The classic myth of Athene's jealousy of the maiden Arachne which caused her to turn Arachne into a spider who continued to practice her incomparable skill in spinning and weaving, was mistakenly deduced from an icon showing Athene with her totemic spider spinning the web of Fate, from which the future could be foretold. (Walker 957)

8 It is interesting to note that Margaret Atwood's 2005 novel, *The Penelopiad*, retells the myth of Penelope and Odysseus in voices of Penelope and the twelve hanged maidens.

9 In *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, Jan Marsh provides us with an excellent synopsis of Tennyson's poetic tale "The Lady of Shalott":

> [T]he lady is imprisoned on an island, forbidden to look directly on at the world, watching only through a mirror whose reflections she weaves into a tapestry web. Solitary and mysteriously accursed, she dreams of her own "loyal knight", and confesses herself "half-sick of shadows," yearning for experience in the world outside her tower. So when the shining image of Lancelot, the red cross knight, appears in her mirror, she suddenly breaks the ban. (Marsh 149)

The Lady then arranges herself in a barge and floats down the river to Camelot where Lancelot discovers her, but by this time she has died.

10 Drawing on the linguistic work of both Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida, Frances Gray asserts that "no sign can be isolated; that a sign is always a sign within a system and that to change one sign is to change the system as a whole" (Gray 224). The idea of clothing as a signifier is interesting; it then has the power to change the entire system in which it functions — and we see Joan putting this idea into action.

11 In his poem "The Lady of Shalott" Tennyson writes:

> For ere she reach'd upon the tide
> The first house on the water-side
> Singing in her song she died,
> The Lady of Shalott
> (ll. 150-153)

In her book of poetry, *Lady Oracle*, Joan writes:

> Her glass wings are gone
> She floats down the river
> Singing her last song
> (240; italics in original)

12 Pre-Raphaelite painters, especially John William Waterhouse and William Holman Hunt, represented Tennyson's Lady as an elaborately clothed, pale-complexioned beauty with flowing red hair.
In "The Curse of Eve," an essay in *Second Words*, Atwood discusses the "peril of creativity...provided by the suicides of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton and the rather goulish attention paid to them." Further, writes Atwood:

Female writers in the twentieth century are seen not as eccentric and unfeminine [as were nineteenth century female writers], but as doomed. The temptation to act out the role of the doomed woman artist either through one's life or through one's characters, is quite strong. (226)

As a twentieth century author, Joan is particularly vulnerable to this myth; had she been a nineteenth century writer, Joan might, as biographers have portrayed writers such as "Jane Austen, The Bronte sisters, George Elliot, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinsson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning," have lived a life of "eccentricities and weirdness" (Atwood *SW* 225).

14 In *When the Drummers Were Women*, Layne Redmond tells Ariadne's story from a feminist perspective:

The story of Ariadne and Theseus is among the better known myths... The labyrinth is a widespread symbol of initiation. Ariadne is the goddess of the labyrinth; her name in Greek means "very holy". She is the daughter of the moon goddess Pasiphae - "the all-illuminating." By offering Theseus her ball of thread, Ariadne guides him through the experience of initiation (Redmond 119).

This is quite a different story than that told in classic texts such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Ovid 176) and reference texts such as Bulfinch's *Mythology* (Bulfinch 152) or *Myths of Greece and Rome* (Guerber 223) wherein Ariadne, in love with Theseus, helps him successfully navigate his way to the centre of the labyrinth and kill the evil Minotaur, thus liberating his countrymen and taking Ariadne with him to Naxos, where he abandons her. Their stories then continue on with a multitude of variations; however, it is important to note here that in the classic version of the myth, Theseus is the central character of the story. If we consider Layne Redmond's research findings, the goddess Ariadne is yet another example of pre-patriarchal female divinities that were reassigned to servitude in a patriarchal paradigm. In *Lady Oracle* inklings of this more ancient myth interwoven with the classical versions as Joan embarks on her journey into the labyrinth.

15 It is interesting to note that both Penelope and Charlotte have forerunning literary namesakes who are also magical weavers - Queen Penelope, who wove and re-wove her tapestry while awaiting her husband Odysseus to return from the Trojan War, can be found in Homer's *Odyssey*, and Charlotte, the magical spider who uses her crafty web-weaving skills to save Wilbur the pig from death, can be found in E.B. White's children's classic *Charlotte's Web*.

16 The candle going out is as dangerous as losing hold of Ariadne's thread; both the candle and the thread are connections with real time and the everyday world. "Ariadne's thread of memory is red, symbolically represents the sun and is, as is the candle, a ray of light for the journeyer exploring the depths of the unknown; it is the strand of thought that leads to new knowledge while keeping the initiate grounded in present knowledge" (Eliade 417). When Joan's candle goes out she is literally lost in the darkness without a guiding force to help her return to her "real" life - until Arthur finds her in this suspended state and shakes her back to consciousness (237). At this point Joan discontinued her journeying into the mirror maze, "threw out [her] remaining candles and went back to Penelope," surmising that she "wasn't cut out for the occult," and deletes Penelope's mirror scene - "she would have to make do with rape and murder like everyone else" (237).

17 At this point I would like to take a moment to discuss the meanings of "labyrinth" and "maze" which are often considered interchangeable. According to Penelope Doob, author of *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages*, the two words, although arising from different etymologies, have the same meaning (Doob 1). I suggest that the terms, over time, have developed somewhat different interpretations; that while a labyrinth is still for the most part
considered a spiritual symbol, and to walk labyrinth, a religious rite (Eliade 418-419), the maze has taken on connotations of a trap – a place of fear and foreboding – as in the gothic maze. Margaret Atwood comments that:

Mazes are interesting. Apparently they were originally built for two reasons, religious initiation or defense...In gothic tales the maze is just a scare device. You have an old mansion with winding passages and a monster at the centre (quoted in Sandler 25-26).

Additionally, while a gothic maze with the monster in the centre is akin to the labyrinth of Antiquity with the Minotaur in the centre, there is at least one distinct difference. The maze is often seen as fraught with perils – with monsters and demons to overcome at each turn, with blockades and dead ends and the threat of death. The labyrinth, on the other hand, says Elinor Gadon, “is not a maze to get lost in. Rather there is only one pathway, in and out” (Gadon 106). As well, Layne Redmond’s research reveals life-affirming qualities of the labyrinth. She writes:

The classic labyrinth is a single path meant for meditative circumambulation. It was originally a spiral, but slowly evolved into the maze of angular turns familiar to us today. To enter it is to experience a ritual death; to escape from it (Redmond 119).

Therefore, while the terms labyrinth and maze were at one time, or in some situations, considered interchangeable, it is useful to note that divergent qualities have evolved and thus converge in Lady Oracle.

18 Joan’s multiple identities include these five apparitions in the centre of the labyrinth/maze: Joan Foster, Pre-Raphaelite prophet-poet; her gothic romance pen name persona, Louisa K. Delacourt, remains a secret identity, along with Joan’s two additional identities rooted in the past - the fat child who dreamed of being a ballerina like Moira Shearer, and the symbiotic identity Joan has with her mother. One further alter ego joins these four in the centre of the maze - Felicia. She is the fictional manifestation of Joan’s wild and sensual self, who revels in romance and fantasy.

19 My thanks to Debby Yaffe for this insight.
CHAPTER THREE

Paula Gunn Allen and *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*: Grandmother Spider – Mending the Tears

Introduction

In Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, there is no mistaking the presence of spider imagery or the central position of this novel’s Sacred Weaver. Feminist spirituality is inherent, and Spider Woman, as Grandmother Spider, is a central character in Allen’s text and a primary influence in the world of her protagonist, Ephanie, as is the plentiful spider and textile imagery. For Allen, Grandmother Spider—a Laguna name for “the spirit that pervades everything, that is capable of powerful song and radiant movement” (Allen, SH 13)—is the quintessential creator and healer, as well as “supreme storyteller” (Van Dyke 23) and word-weaver. In *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, Paula Gunn Allen draws not only on Spider Woman’s original power in pre-conquest Laguna territory, but also on the power of storytelling, as vehicles to further her heroine’s quest for identity, healing and transformation within a unique—and distinctly Laguna—narrative pattern.

Allen’s novel, published in 1983 and thirteen years in the writing, is innovative both in content and form. Where Atwood’s novel can be seen to echo her own struggle for gender equality, especially as an academic and a writer, Allen’s feminism has a broader scope engaging not only in issues of sexism generated by
mainstream white feminism, but also exposing policies of racism as evident in legislated genocide, and racial hierarchies that developed both outside and within Native communities. Allen’s novel also illuminates the plight of a Native lesbian woman caught in the mindset and under the scrutiny of western culture during an era in which homosexuality was considered a disease. These issues of gender equality, race and sexual orientation are pivotal points of struggle throughout Ephanie’s quest in *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*.

As with Joan’s experience in *Lady Oracle*, Ephanie’s quest is one for identity, for healing and transformation from a raw and fragmented self to wholeness; however, her life experience—a “half-breed,” raised in the land of the Pueblos—is markedly different. While Joan’s quest prompts her to face the sexism inherent in white society and find ways to challenge the myth of the “doomed woman artist,” Ephanie’s quest mirrors a new feminist consciousness, initiated by women of colour, that challenges myths generated by white culture—including white feminist culture—that reinforce both sexual and racial biases.

For Ephanie, “Eve and the Fall of Man” —a story promoted by patriarchal Christianity to “perpetuate the malignant nature of women” (Millett 72)—along with the specifically racist and annihilating catch phrase “Good Indian Dead Indian” (Allen, *Shadows* 160) become deeply etched in Ephanie’s psyche and abet her suicide attempt. The journeys of these two heroines—Joan and Ephanie—show ways that, within western culture, women have varying experiences of oppression; that every woman’s story is a vital thread in the healing of society as a whole; and that white women need to listen to women of colour and stop speaking on their behalf.
In white society, for example, Spider Woman figures such as the Lady of Shalott and Ariadne are fictional/mythical characters reflecting social codes of conduct for western women. In many aboriginal cultures, however, Spider Woman is the Creator of all life – she is not a metaphor; she is real. Lagun storytellers have retold Spider Woman’s stories generation after generation, stories of the art of weaving wherein weaving transmits cultural values. The art of weaving teaches interrelationship with the land – for example, with the plants and animals that provide fibres and dyes; weaving also incorporates sacred symbols that record the stories of the ancestors and thus represent Spider Woman’s web of life which interconnects the physical and spiritual realms. In many Native cultures the weavers are the record-keepers, simultaneously creating both the textiles and the texts of the culture. Paula Gunn Allen, a modern day record-keeper, is a weaver of words and innovator in the emergence of a First Nations’ literary tradition during the late twentieth century. Replacing the shuttle with the pen, writing has emerged as a primary tool of Indigenous resistance, spinning together fragmented remains to revitalize Aboriginal cultures.

*The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* is one such sacred woven creation; in it, Allen portrays Laguna Pueblo sensibilities and ideologies largely unfamiliar to eurocentric literary forms. Allen not only collapses mainstream categories of genre by interweaving “dream, ‘actual’ events, myth, history and internal dialogue” (Allen *SH* 153), but also “choose(s) Indian time over Industrial time as a structuring device” (Allen, *SH* 152). Allen moves achronologically throughout the *Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, and invites the reader to “*hear* and experience
English that follows patterns from the oral tradition” (Silko 48). This narrative structure can be somewhat baffling; similarly, the complex relationship with Spider Woman would likely not be recognized, nor would the stories of Grandmother Spider—so crucial to Ephanie’s Laguna heritage—be honoured as truth, but rather seen as folk tales and allegories. False representation through intentional misinterpretation and re-framing of stories are but some part of the imperial apparatus employed in the attempted eradication of aboriginal traditions.

In *The Woman Who Owns the Shadows*, Allen portrays the often invisible—especially to members of the dominant culture—yet insidious strategies through which mainstream society works to render Indigenous societies extinct and, most specifically, one women’s struggle to survive in spite of these oppressive forces. Ephanie’s life has been shaped by policies designed to erase her culture—the multi-faceted processes of assimilation. While the stories of Ephanie and her family are unique and distinctly their own, the struggles are not unlike those of many Indigenous people who were removed from their homes and homelands, and disallowed traditional ways of livelihood and cultural expression. In addition, attendance at government and church-run schools became compulsory for many; such institutions were designed to strip children of personal and ancestral identity, often incorporating physical and sexual abuse with socio-religious enculturation. These are tears in Spider Woman’s web that need mending; these are threads that Ephanie works to repair and reconnect both within herself and between herself and the world around her.
Ephanie’s mending process—gathering and weaving together both ancient and contemporary threads—is reflective of women’s creativity during the second wave of feminism. In this light, Daly’s concept for the development of a gyncentric literature—“spooking,” “sparking” and “spinning”—provides a useful framework for an analysis of Allen’s novel. What are the harmful myths that Ephanie must dispel? With whom does she spark, and what designs does she spin? As already discussed, western culture is deeply seeded with oppressive mythologies and patronizing attitudes, perpetuating various classifications and “isms” to reinforce power-defined binaries and hierarchies. Ephanie’s internalization of harmful western mythologies and ideologies is particularly problematic—“spooking” them away an almost insurmountable and extremely courageous feat—especially by oneself. Also problematic is Ephanie’s love for women—this “sparking” can be seen as her highest joy and deepest wound. Because such love is framed by the nuns as “sin,” Ephanie must find a way beyond this mandatory heterosexuality, and embrace and honour her lesbian self before she can whole-heartedly spin together her true identity.

When Ephanie does begin “spinning” on “a loom of her own,” her world view expands into what Gloria Anzaldúa would, in 1987, term a “mestiza consciousness” — the process of resisting victimhood, and moving from the place of dissection—straddling opposing worlds and being split apart from the constant pull—to a place of intersection; ultimately becoming a transmitter of information between diverse cultures for mutual enrichment, creating something new and ever-expansive. Thus, Ephanie’s renewed identity far surpasses mere reparation of
fragments from the past and denouncing stereotypes and projections. Drawing on her diverse personal, familial and cultural experiences, and integrated with her physically, emotional, spiritual and intellectual perceptions, Ephanie’s healing journey offers the world a new mythology and unique vision of identity.

Recovering Mytho-Cultural and Linguistic Honour

In her collection of essays, *The Sacred Hoop*, Allen writes that “myth” in western culture “is synonymous with lie... Essentially all parts of the definition indicate a prevailing belief in the fictitiousness of myths” (Allen, *SH* 103-4). By contrast, in Allen’s worldview

> [m]yth is a story of vision... and... acts as a lens through which we can discover the reality that exists beyond the limits of simple linear perception... [T]he mythic heals, it makes us whole. (Allen, *SH* 116-7)

Elizabeth Hanson, in her biography of Allen, suggests that Allen is fabricating fiction by “redesign[ing] her own creation myth and... evok[ing] a symbolic women’s universe created by women” (Hanson 35). Allen asserts, however, that her people “put women at the centre of their society long ago” (Allen, *SH* 266); therefore, she is not imagining an alternate reality, but instead can be seen as affirming the cosmology of her people. Carolyn Dunn and Carol Comfort, in the “Introduction” to *Through the Eye of the Deer: An Anthology of Native American Women Writers*, recognize within Allen’s novel this ancestral connection as well as
the innovative “reshaping” of Spider Woman creation narratives so they might reach a new and more expansive audience (Dunn & Comfort xi).

In The Woman Who Owned the Shadows Grandmother Spider scuttles up and around the story strands, weaving together physical and metaphysical time, place and space, offering Ephanie her stories. But at the onset of the novel Ephanie, lost in her feelings of alienation and absorbed into depression, is unaware of Grandmother Spider's presence. Ephanie is preoccupied with “[t]rying to keep attention on the slender thread that snaked silently through this year and that, curving. Bringing them together somehow” (Allen, WS 16). This thread takes us through Ephanie’s history, and the stories of the connections with and disconnection from her children and family at Guadalupe (Allen, WS 3), her Indian cousin Stephen (Allen, WS 44), her best friend Elena (Allen, WS 31), her memory of falling from the tree (Allen, WS 23), her body (Allen, WS 45). A partial epiphany is realizing that she is even estranged from her own name:

Ephanie. Too strange a name...Her body, choppy and short...Ephanie was for someone tall and serene. Someone filled with grace. But like her it was a split Name...A halfbreed. Which was the source of her derangement...Disarrangement. (Allen, WS 3)

Ephanie is silent. Long disconnected from her voice, her language, she suffers from “[t]onguelessness...The inability to speak is the prime symbol of powerlessness” (Allen, SH 138). The story of Ephanie’s healing journey to recover her voice and identity is intricately connected with the story of her wounds – the
tears in the fabric of her own life and in the fabric of her culture; the tears of silence.

Ephanie’s silence is deeply rooted in the doctrine and language imposed on her when, as a child, she was forced to attend a Catholic school run by nuns. Her early years had been shaped by her Laguna heritage; Ephanie’s mother, although ostracised by marriage to a “newcomer,” retained as much of her culture as she could and Ephanie was raised by Guadalupe women as a child of the mesas. Schools are useful tools for constructing the world; they reflect social constructs and instil values systems, and were intentionally utilized to anglicize and assimilate Native children. Ephanie becomes steeped in eurocentric culture and initiated into an alternate world—one of sin and death—a world diametrically opposed to the teachings of the web of life she had experienced on the mesas:

Ephanie thought everything was alive. As the old women of the village had taught her to think. She thought that made her crazy, what they taught. She lived mostly among people who thought everything was dead. (Allen, WS 38)

Ephanie’s craziness is not rooted in the gynocratic teachings of the Laguna women but in the mainstream society’s judgement that the Indigenous view is wrong—inherently heretical and evil—compounded by her own interpretation and internalization of this value system; Ephanie’s craziness is conceived as non-sense by mainstream culture. The old women in the village taught Ephanie to think and explore her world within and around herself, to embrace her Laguna
consciousness—to be ever-expansive and ever-connected—as reflected by the
myths and language. Although Ephanie did not speak the Laguna language

she knew its thought, its complication that piled one thing atop another,
folded this within that, went from within to without and made what was
without within. She knew that everything moved and everything
balanced, always in her language, her alien crippled tongue, the English
that was ever unbalanced, ever in pieces, she groped with her words and
her thought to make whole what she could not say... For her thought was
the Grandmothers’, was the people’s, even though her language was a
stranger’s tongue. (Allen, WS 70)

Catholic school stills Ephanie’s Laguna imagination, silences her tongue and
appropriates the stories. There, Ephanie learns that the consequence for disobeying
the rules—for independent thinking and action—is harsh punishment by nun, priest
or God. This doctrine of administering violence to foster growth is, inherently,
self-contradictory, and harmful.

Ephanie’s feelings of craziness and tonguelessness propel her to “prob[e] for the
single thread that ran along her days. A bobbin. Not seen but holding secure what
had been torn asunder” (Allen, WS 37). This bobbin threads back to traumatic
events of Ephanie’s childhood—incidents of sexual abuse by her Indian cousin,
(Allen, WS 14), her family doctor (Allen, WS 12), and the doctor at the Catholic
school (Allen, WS 13), as well as the forced separation of her from Elena, her
beloved companion, because, according to the nuns, they were beginning to “sin”
(Allen, WS 13). For Ephanie, the details of these memories all are hazy and
fragmented; even as an adult Ephanie only knows that “[s]he remembered
something. That had no words. That had no pictures” (Allen, WS 14). She does
not now, nor did she then, have “those kind of words to put on the feelings that rose up in her, hot with confusion and rage, redcheeked tightness” (Allen, WS 13).

English did not at that time provide many words to describe these taboo experiences—bringing female sexuality to language was a key project of second wave feminism—and perpetually institutionalized sexual shaming techniques of the dominant culture; instead these childhood traumas serve to reinforce Ephanie’s feelings of alienation and powerlessness, further binding her tongue.

Despite these strategies intent on assimilation, Ephanie’s “Indian self” does not disappear through the Catholic school program, nor does she integrate the two cultures; instead, a chasm emerges, an engulfing void. For example, on one hand, in her mother’s world, there is Grandmother Spider, the “guardian of [Ephanie’s] life” (Allen, WS 21), and on the other hand, colonization cultivates Ephanie’s “dislike of spiders” (Allen, WS 25). For example, when she has spiders living “in every fold” of her house, Ephanie’s children try in vain to remind her of the spiders’ venerable status before “she got out the vacuum cleaner and vacuumed up the webs, spiders and all” (Allen, WS 34). The force of anglo-christianization cut the thread of connection between Ephanie and Grandmother Spider, a disconnection that would take years for Ephanie to recognize. First, she must recover, and give voice to, lost memories—both celebratory and annihilating—of her life and those of her ancestors, thus regaining mytho-cultural and linguistic honour. This journey of self-affirmation is one that Ephanie undertakes with courage and determination, offering her stories to those she encounters along the way. Some listen.
Responsibility and Recovery — A New Cultural Cartography

Ephanie's work to reconstruct her life meets with ongoing resistance from people—white, First Nation and mixed-blood—who need Ephanie to reflect their ingrained stereotypes just as, she also realizes, she needs them to reflect her own inner and external prejudices. To become both autonomous and anonymous, and to recast her identity, Ephanie moves from her desert home to the West Coast. In San Francisco, Ephanie becomes part of the coalition consciousness evolving during the early 1970s—urban pow-wow gatherings (Allen, WS 54), the creation of Native centres (Allen, WS 55), therapy groups (Allen, WS 59) and new age spirituality (Allen, WS 62, 64)—to detect, confront and begin healing from the effects of oppressive ideologies.

Through involvement with these organizations, Ephanie begins to understand the relationship between myth and culture, and to discern between the sacred or "power-engendering myths" (Allen, SH 23) that affirm her life, and the "lies" designed to erase her as a Native and as a woman. The harmfulness of anglo-colonial culture and its application of the English language, myths and stories designed to reinforce a binary and hierarchical mindset, rigid gender roles and stereotypes becomes increasingly apparent. Ephanie begins to see, for example, that in her relationships with men—with her first husband, with her cousin, Stephen and with her second husband, Thomas—she seeks sanctuary from the pain caused by these stifling restrictions, and futilely searches through the comfort zone of condoned gender roles for "[a]pproval, the flattering mirror upon which her identity depends" (Daly, G/E 335-6); and yet these relationships serve only to
compound her pain. It is with women that Ephanie finds solace, and through her relationship with Teresa that Ephanie begins to remember her love for women, to remember her childhood love for Elena, and to remember the fall—from grace—that changed her life.20

Throughout her marriage, Ephanie retains her friendship with Teresa, a white woman she had met in a therapy group on arrival in San Francisco. One day, when Ephanie, Thomas and Teresa are swimming, Ephanie is caught in an undertow and nearly drowns (Allen, WS 106). Thomas swims to shore to have a better vantage point to find her (Allen, WS 107); meanwhile Teresa plunges into the ocean, follows Ephanie’s voice, locates her and saves her life (Allen, WS 107). That evening, Ephanie remembers something from the long past:

Something about Elena. A hand to help her across a long jump on the mesa. She knew something then. Something she did not say aloud. Something true (Allen, WS 108)

The true thing is the life-affirming bond that Ephanie has with women. Teresa’s gesture symbolically pulls Ephanie out of the undertow of assimilation, and saves her from psychologically drowning in the rip tides of compulsory heterosexuality.21 Through Teresa, Ephanie recognizes her deeper bonds with woman and her latent spark of lesbian desire – a spark that Ephanie had with Elena; a spark fraught with risk of heartbreak. In Ephanie’s experience, female friendships are not simply discouraged, but destroyed – as with the case of Sister Mary and Sister Grace, as with Ephanie and Elena (Allen, WS 156,13). These interrupted relationships are
indicative of patriarchal codes in which “cohesion between women represents a threat not only to male sexuality but to male power” (Holford 108). It is interesting to note, however, that where Ephanie is situated geographically is contingent to her experience of abusive interactions. For example, in the city hospital after the death of one of her twins she is subjected to reprimand and dismissal, rather than compassion and support, by nuns and other “well-meaning” women (Allen, WS 105-6); intimidated, Ephanie says nothing. Even though she presents herself as “western” and “civilized,” Ephanie knows that she will never be white enough to measure up to their standards.

Conversely, but similarly with Mrs. Soucie, at the pow-wow circuit, Ephanie does not feel Indian enough, so again feels unsure of herself and intimidated (Allen, WS 57). Home on the mesas and with her family, however, Ephanie experiences more gentle and loving relationships with women – especially with her mother, and before her death, Grandmother Shiwanna. Ephanie also talks kindly of Stephen’s sisters (her aunts), and although the marriage to Thomas does not last, Ephanie befriends his sister, Sally. And, of course, there is Elena, Ephanie’s first love, with whom there was no rift in their world – the rift came from outside.

It is evident, then, that the tension between Ephanie and women she encounters in her life more often than not stem from the innate power of white privilege and both overt and covert casting of racial stereotypes. Ephanie’s relationship with Teresa is fraught with these tensions; sometimes they discover sacred common ground (Allen, WS 101); sometimes they find no common ground at all:
Teresa lived in a world completely different from Ephanie. She didn’t have to work. She didn’t have small children to worry over. She didn’t need anyone, self-sufficient with her parents’ money, her strong mind, her white mind. Ephanie longed to say this to her, but she knew it would only deepen the rift, increase the pain. (Allen, *WS* 91)

But silence serves to compound rather than diffuse this rift—which is symbolic of First Nations’ and white women’s struggles.—and with the safety engendered by her growing intimacy with Teresa (Allen, *WS* 134), Ephanie’s voice of rage begins to erupt. No longer willing to be a specimen to be observed or theorized, Ephanie asserts herself as flesh and blood, her experience visceral. Her relationship with Teresa ignites Ephanie’s desire to live, to be seen and accounted for. Her rage mounts as she recognizes disempowerment of Natives by white society—even well meaning freedom fighters such as Teresa’s rural lesbian friends—who project their own self-victimization onto people of colour. They, therefore, tend to see Native people solely in terms of helpless victimhood, failing to see the point that Ephanie drives home again and again – that Natives have also participated in their self-victimization (or have victimized one another) and need to see their own responsibility and power before they can stop repeating this process (Allen, *WS* 137-143). The identity which liberal whites project onto Aboriginals is inaccurate and disempowering, and it is this perception that Teresa resists, looking for a moment “like one of the nuns when somebody stepped across the moral line” (Allen, *WS* 143). This denial and appropriation of her experience and feelings becomes unbearable, and although she is aware that Teresa is not the source of the rage, when Ephanie—for the first time since childhood—speaks her mind, brings
her thoughts into the world and gives her opinions, her point of view, Teresa gets
the brunt of it until, reaching her limit, she leaves, "shutting the door behind"
(Allen, WS 159).

After Ephanie's hurtful words send Teresa away, Ephanie spirals into a fury that
seems to have no recourse: "What do you do when you love everyone on every side
of the war" (Allen, WS 146), Ephanie had asked Teresa, who had no answer for her.
Ephanie's answer is to kill herself which will, she believes, stop the war within
her—the war within her divided self—for which there seems to be no reconciliation
despite all her research, and despite all the words, ideas, demonstrations and
movements (Allen, WS 66). Even with all she has learned, and all she has said,
Ephanie falls more deeply into her inner chasm, believing "it was all hopeless"
(Allen, WS 161), that "no matter which side of this stupid question wins, it's
Indians who suffer and it's Indians who die" (Allen, WS 144). Unable even to put
these feelings down on paper, Ephanie stabs the pages in her journal:

her thoughts...red and grey, roiling, tumbling like clouds...just before a
storm...[a]nd the words grew and grew in her mind..."Good Indian. Dead
Indian." (Allen, WS 159–60)

This deeply seeded belief, planted by patriarchy, woven into the language of
white supremacy and reinforced by books, songs, films, myths—virtually all aspects
of western culture—has grown into a choking vine within Ephanie. And, in her
mind, the connections take hold:
[Ephanie] finally saw it...heard, loud and clear. What had been done...And mouth opened wide she began to howl...Thinking...I will never be clean. I must die. I must kill myself. I must die. (Allen, WS 161)

No longer able to contain the words, the feelings and guarded silence, Ephanie is consumed by the thought that only by her death could she be very very sure not to pollute anyone, anything. My poor babies...I must die so I won’t get them all dirty. (Allen, WS 161)

Absorbed in grief and rage, Ephanie does try to kill herself; tries to hang herself by a rope tied to a pipe running through the closet, high up near the ceiling (Allen, WS 163).

Spider-like Ephanie hangs suspended in space and time when she sees "out of the corner of her eye a large spider lodged in the far corner of the closet that seemed to be watching her" (Allen, WS 163). Then, remembering the knife that she had placed in her jeans back pocket, Ephanie manages to pull it out and saves her own life by cutting the rope; thus reversing the myth that the "Fall" is bad. After recovering from her fall—this time into grace—Ephanie realizes "how grateful she was. For air. For life. For pain" (Allen, WS 163), saying to the spider who had witnessed her feat, "Thanks Grandmother. I think I’m going to be all right" (Allen, WS 164).

Herein is Ephanie’s epiphany. She realizes that everyone she loves, white, First Nation, or half-breed, has an inaccurate and disempowering perception of her and her people and this is devastating to her until she sees that she is unconsciously
sharing their inaccurate and disempowering perceptions of herself and her people. Ephanie recognizes that she abandoned herself long ago and when she embraces herself again she will have the resilience to engage with such representation without feeling unmade by them. Thus, Ephanie begins to take responsibility for her life and take charge of her own recovery, drawing on resources as an intellectual (Allen, WS 168-9) and a shaman (Allen, WS 173,184) to assist in her task as she not only follows threads to the beginning of the colonization of her people, but also to the colonization of herself. At this point, Ephanie’s individual history can be seen as a microcosm of colonization and illustrates interconnections between the personal and political in resisting oppression as part of healing, and healing as part of resisting oppression. Ephanie begins “spooking, sparking and spinning” these threads of connection; like a whirling dervish she spins together revitalized filaments of her self and her heritage.

Ephanie traces the genocide of her Indian ancestors, gathering information, making the connections, and would “rage, pace clutching her arms...What kind of world is this anyway” (Allen, WS 169) she asks, bewildered by it all; but Ephanie knows she must keep spinning her words to bring herself together:

She knew it had to come together. To knit an invisible seam. To become whole, entire... she was the place where the inside and the outside come together. (Allen, WS 174)

Sometimes Ephanie “wonder[s] if what she remembered was memory or dream; or if the memories were hers or someone else’s” (Allen, WS 169), and realises that it
doesn’t matter; what matters are the links between the stories. And, after long days
and nights of unrelenting perseverance—interweaving book-knowledge, dream,
myth, feelings and memory—Ephanie begins to understand the connections, and a
chorus of spiders hum (Allen, WS 175).

Ephanie continues to “w[e]ave her day in words” (Allen, WS 177), de-coding the
“tangled texts” (Allen, WS 178), “weaving the pattern behind the fragments” (Daly
412), still looking in the bins of books for some external validation of what “in her
mind she knew was true” (Allen, WS 178). She worked herself to the bone, until
“her once sturdy frame grew birdlike” (Allen, WS 178):

And ever, reading, musing, singing, mindlessly, praying, feeding the birds,
knowledge grew within her like the sun, like the night, growing fat and
glowing, growing steadily and serene. (Allen, WS 179)

Ephanie’s web begins to emerge when:

She understood at last that everything was connected. Everything was
related...And this is how the stories went, what they had been for. To fit life
into. To make sense. (Allen, WS 191)

Ephanie understands from a place of deep inner knowing that her life fits in with
the myth of Yellow Woman, who fell from the sky. Ephanie, too, fell from the sky;
a fall that catapulted her—as did Yellow Woman’s fall—into the world turned
upside down; the portal sealed behind her. Yellow Woman’s story becomes a
mirror for Ephanie—the “story tied to what [she] would not remember” (Allen, WS
191). When she remembers her own forgotten story, not only does Ephanie see the
striking parallels with Yellow Woman, she senses that she is—as her spirit guides have been trying to tell her—Yellow Woman, living a twentieth century dimension of reality; that Epanie is the Creation Goddess:

What happened in time immemorial, as the old ones called that time before time, happened now. Only the names were different...And not so different, she thought. (Allen, WS 191)

With this knowledge, accompanied by a powerful sense of cosmic purpose and connection, Ephanie’s repressed memory unravels and re-plays the story of her fall from the tree, remembering in vivid detail “where something had broken, something that had taken a lifetime to mend” (Allen, WS 205). Here, Allen revises the Christian idea of the “fall” as something that divides and degrades us into the idea of the “fall” as a sacred act – a leap of faith.

After her fall from the tree, at age twelve, Ephanie converts to Christianity, because she interprets the fall as a punishment for the supposed “sins”—of running around on the mesas, and for the things she and Elena did together which the nuns forbade. To appease God for her sins, Ephanie becomes a “good” Catholic girl:

She no longer cavorted along these roads, over the mesas, among the branches of the sheltering trees. No cartwheels. No flying leaps from the rooftops to horse’s back... No...running, shouting, free...Instead high heels and lipstick. Instead sitting demure on a chair, voice quiet, head down...Voice, hands, hair, trained and tamed and safe. (Allen, WS 202-3)

This is the moment in which Ephanie abandoned herself; began to be assimilated into white culture, began emulating western female stereotypes, seeking completion
through a heterosexual relationship and nuclear family model and her authentic voice silenced. She puts away her spontaneity and puts on guilt; she holds Stephen (who had instigated the rope swing escapade) responsible for her fall, but puts the brunt of the blame on Elena (who didn't stop her). Ephanie turns her back on her spiritual connection with the land and the ancestors, and puts on the shroud of Catholicism (Allen, WS 203). Forgetting the actual fall itself, she was split in two—before and after—thus creating the tear that rips apart the fabric of her being. And now, with “a connection mended that so long ago had snapped” (Allen, WS 206), Ephanie knows that “ever since she fell from the tree, [she had] forgot[ten] who she had meant to be, what she had meant to do... be a hero” (Allen, WS 204). She and Elena were going to “do brave things... together” (Allen, WS 204). A few years later Elena ends her friendship with Ephanie, but Ephanie realizes that she can not blame Elena for that either – Ephanie had abandoned herself first, after her fall from the tree (Allen, WS 05): she “had forgotten how to spin dreams” (Allen, WS 203).

Spider Woman and the story of Yellow Corn Woman teach Ephanie that the mistake is not in the falling, but in the blaming herself (and other people) for it. The realization that even terribly hurtful mistakes are part of our nature, part of our strength even—our daring, our courage—provides a kind of spiderline, a capacity to survive falls without being shattered and splintered psychologically by them. The Judeo-Christian idea that a fall demands punishment is replaced by a much more empowering vision of the fall – the leap of faith. Spider Woman teaches Ephanie that she has simply “misunderstood” (Allen, WS 211) that spiders do fall—
all the time—it is part of how they get around, to jump and fall; it is part of the process of spinning a web. Ephanie is invited by Spider Woman to make another leap of faith, and to begin charting a new cartography for her life—collapsing categories, blurring boundaries and creating a new and renewed paradigm for an evolving culture.

Dreaming a Mestiza Consciousness

Ephanie’s quest for identity has taken her to the centre of her own being, the centre of her own web and the connections that spin through into her own deep essence; and from her spirit self, in Ephanie’s dreamtime, comes a vision:

The woman wore a white, finely woven manta and shawl, each richly embroidered in fine black wool with geometrical patterns that told the story of the galaxy. Ephanie recognised only the spider among the symbols embroidered there. (Allen, WS 206)

The spirit woman begins to tell Ephanie the meanings of some of the symbols; and of the stories woven and embroidered within the shawl; stories of the galaxy and beyond. The spirit woman explains that the stories have changed for a changing world, but the patterns remains the same:

And in the living shadows that swirled around the spirit woman’s face, Ephanie saw moving patterns that imaged what the woman was saying. (Allen, WS 207)
In the patterns, Ephanie not only recognizes the spider symbol, but finds “what she so long had sought” (Allen, WS 208), a resonance with her own life design, and a deep knowing that she is tracing the pattern of the ancient ones; that her destiny is to walk with Grandmother Spider. The spirit woman then begins to shape-shift, first into Old Woman, then into various earthly and cosmic forms whispering to Ephanie that she “would receive a song” (Allen, WS 209) — a song about the teachings of life and death and the everflowing pulse of creation. To receive this welcome song, Ephanie must once again jump into the void—the place of infinite possibilities—and bring forth a new world:

And she dreamed. About the women who had lived, long ago. Who had lived near caves, near streams...Who had known magic...Who were the Spider. The Spider Medicine Society. The women who healed. The women who sang. (Allen, WS 211)

Ephanie finds the spirit woman’s “white, hand-woven shawl ... lying crumpled at the bottom of the bed... She [w]rapped it around her shoulders and chest. She lay back down on the pillow. Eyes wide open she lay. Remembering the dream” (Allen, WS 212).

And the spiders in the walls, on the ceiling, in the corners, beneath the bed and under the chair began to gather. Their humming, quiet at first, grew louder, filling all of the spaces in the room. Their presence grew around her. She did not move. And around her the room filled with shadows. And the shadows became shapes. And the shapes became women singing. Singing and dancing, in the ancient steps of the women, of Spider. Singing, they stepped, slowly, in careful balance of dignity and harmony, of respect. They stepped and they sang. And she began to sing with them. With her shawl wrapped around her shoulders in the way of the women since time
immemorial, she wrapped the shawl and she joined the dance. She heard the singing. She entered the song. (Allen, WS 223)

Within this song, this spiritual rite of passage, Ephanie claims her destiny. She steps into the dream and becomes both dreamer and dream. She is the storyteller and the listener, she is life and death, she is a woman of the Spider Medicine, a woman of the shadows, and in this dreaming—this epiphany—Ephanie grows tall and serene, fills with grace, and takes on the blessing of her name.\(^\text{23}\)

In this sacred rite of passage, Ephanie, as well as affirming her lesbian self, also affirms herself as part of a lineage of healers. Throughout her lifetime, Ephanie has felt the call to dance. But, again, she has misunderstood. Hers is not the Corn Dance, from which she was excluded because of her mixed heritage, nor is it the pow-wow circuit, which seemed to Ephanie more for show than for spirit. The call to the dance is so strong that Ephanie makes herself a dance shawl, embroiders it with the symbol of the rainbird—the only design she had at hand to use—and wears the shawl constantly, like a security blanket, during her time in San Francisco. Later, the shawl is lost, and no further dances beckoned Ephanie, until the call of the spirit woman—Grandmother Spider—who calls Ephanie to join in her Spider Dance of the medicine women of long ago. This is her dance; this is her ancestry. Ephanie must now tell the story and call others to join the dance of the Spider Medicine Society; an invitation which, according to Grandmother Spider, must extend beyond the Native community, saying “[g]ive it to your sister, Teresa. The one who waits. She is ready to know” (Allen, WS 210). Ephanie’s story is her gift, for she has learned from Spider Woman “the lesson of the giveaways” (Allen, WS
210), that there must always be the coming in and the going out; there must always be balance. Ephanie has taken in all of Creation and through the healing power of her story offers it freely for our understanding. She, a Spider Medicine Woman, a woman of the shadows—the place of transformation—owns her calling and weaves her web as “she enter(s) the song” (Allen, WS 213).

Conclusion

The Woman Who Owned the Shadows aptly illustrates the potential for ideological expansion within the feminist movement. If Teresa can really hear Ephanie's story then new lines of communication and understanding in the discourse on liberation from racist and sexist oppression will cultivate new perceptions. The development of a mestiza consciousness—a cross-pollination; a marriage of cosmologies—disrupts categories, blurs boundaries, thus weaves a new cultural fabric, a new story blanket for a new age. Allen’s novel is part of this new fabric; her text a world she imagines; a world that she perceives; a world that is viewed through Ephanie's quest—Allen, like Atwood, uses her heroine as a vehicle for social and political commentary.

Ephanie’s quest for identity, like Joan’s in Lady Oracle, leads to ritual rebirth—they both journey through the realm of death before they can begin to spook away the lethal myths that drove them to such extremes. For Joan, the myth of the “doomed woman artist” and the romanticized notion of a beautiful young corpse as a desirable icon, leads her to stage a mock suicide—and appear dead—to avoid this fate. For Ephanie, the myth of the “Good Indian, dead Indian,” and the frozen
stereotypes preserved in museums and in Trading Posts—as if she and her culture were already dead—pushes her to suicide. Ephanie embodies the myth of the “tragic mulatto” she will never be white enough to fit into mainstream eurocentric society; nor is she Indian enough to be accepted on the reserve; only in the borderland, where her mother lives, is she truly at home. This, however, is a place of shadows for Ephanie; she can not fulfill her destiny in this crack in the world. For Ephanie, illumination comes through the stories of Grandmother Spider who shows her not only how all being are connected, but how she—Ephanie—is interconnected with all things. Ephanie is both weaver and web of her life; she is the gatherer of threads, constructor of looms and weaver of the design; she is simultaneously the microcosm of her personal web and the macrocosm of the web of Grandmother Spider. For both Joan and Ephanie, on the other side of “death,” is a new identity, a chance to create a new mythology. *Lady Oracle* and *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* are each in its own way, a Spider Woman medicine bundle—a giveaway—offering healing and transformation through the sharing of gynocentric stories, both in the telling and in the listening.
End Notes

1 Cross-pollination of feminist writing was common during the second wave era—through conferences, coffeehouses, bookstore readings and general networking. Although she does not refer to Daly in her essays or criticism, Allen’s work—although in many ways contrary to Daly’s euronecentric perspective—shows evidence of, at least conceptually, being influenced by Daly—especially in regards to language and the keywords of deconstructionist discourse. It is interesting to note that during the time in which Allen was completing The Woman Who Owned the Shadows, she lived with her lover, Judy Grahn, who was writing Another Mother Tongue, on which Audre Lorde was assisting. Daly, in Gym/Ecology, quotes both Grahn and Lorde. After reading Daly’s text, Lorde wrote her a letter, later published in Lorde’s Sister Outsider as “An Open Letter to Mary Daly” voicing some concerns with Daly’s euronecentric analysis. Likely some “sparking” between Allen, Grahn and Lorde in regards to Daly occurred during that time, thereby influencing—perhaps even somehow sparking Allen’s writing. As Daly mined her own tradition, so Allen mined hers. Daly failed to see that her tradition was not the ONLY tradition.

2 The NFB documentary, The Spirit of Annie Mae (2002), follows the story Annie Mae Pictou’s involvement in the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 1970s and discusses the sexually and racially charge violence both within and outside the movements. Annie Mae was murdered in on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota in 1976—a crime that at the time of the film’s production was still unsolved, even with Annie Mae’s high profile with AIM. Similarly, Enough is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out as told to Janet Silman chronicles the work of the Tobique Women’s Group’s ten year fight to regain status and power both in their communities and under Federal law. Published in Toronto: Women’s Press. 1987. NFB film, Keepers of the Fire (1994) by Christine Welsh, portrays the work of several groups of Native women, including the Tobique Women’s Group, to re-institute gender equality, health and safety in their communities. Beverly R. Singer directed Hozho of Native Women (1997), which documents a conference discussing healing modalities utilized in Native communities in the early 1990s. An overall belief is that the traditional teachings of the culture contain everything needed to be whole and thriving on the earth, even given factors of modern society. See also Lee Maracle and Jeannette Armstrong for essays and fiction interweaving feminism and First Nations’ politics.


4 In her essay “Forging el Mundo Zurdo: Changing Ourselves, Changing the World,” published in This Bridge We Call Home edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Analousie Keating (2002), Analousie Keating writes:
   Racial categories are not—and never have been—benign; rather they were developed by those in power (generally property-owner men of Northern Europe) to create a hierarchy that grants privilege to specific groups of people while simultaneously oppressing and excluding others…drawing on and therefore reinforcing this violent history as well as the “white” nationalism buttressing the entire system. (524)

5 Cherrie Moraga, in the “Preface” to This Bridge Called my Back edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981), writes:
   We want to express to all women—especially to white middle-class women—the experiences which divide us as feminists; prejudice and denial of difference within the feminist movement. (xxiii)

6 In her essay, “In the Presence of Spirit(s): A Meditation on the Politics of Solidarity and Transformation,” published in This Bridge We Call Home, Gloria Anzaldúa and Analousie Keating,
eds. (2001), Ines Hernandez-Avila writes, “White feminists are not at our centre... they are not leading us... and their narratives will never be our stories” (537).

7 For a broader look at Spider Woman and American Native cultures see Allen’s essay, “Grandmother of the Sun: Ritual Gynocracy in Native America” in The Sacred Hoop, pages 13-29.

8 According to Allen’s research, “Spider Woman is the Sacred Hoop of Be-ing” (Allen, SH 11).

9 In her essay, “Earthly Relations, Carnal Knowledge” published in 1997, Allen writes:
   Long before context became an academic buzzword, it was a Spider Woman word. It speaks of things woven together, and of understanding the meaning of a thread in terms of the whole piece of goods... American Indian people live in the context of the land. Their literature must be understood in the context of both the land and the rituals... inextricably woven together.
   (Allen, “Earthly Relations” 176)

10 In the “Introduction” to Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada, Emma LaRoque writes:
   English is like an ideological onion whose stinging layers of racism and sexism must be peeled away before it can be enjoyed... [however]... it is English that is serving to de-colonize and unite Aboriginal people. (LaRoque xx, xxvi)
   Thus, Native writers use English to re-shape the traditional western linguistic landscape.

11 In The Sacred Hoop, Allen writes:
   It is reasonable, from an Indian perspective, that all literary forms be interrelated, given the basic idea of the unity and relatedness of all the phenomena of life. (Allen, SH 82)

12 In The Sacred Hoop, Allen writes:
   Achronology is the favored structuring device of American Indian novelists... the protagonist wanders through a series of events that might have happened years before, or that might not have happened to him personally, but that nevertheless have great bearing on the situation and the protagonist’s understanding of it. (Allen, SH 148)
   Further explanation of these differing concepts of time and narrative patterns is concisely explained in “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” an essay by Allen’s cousin, Leslie Marmon Silko:
   For those of you accustomed to being taken from point A to point B to point C, this... may be somewhat difficult to follow... Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider’s web - with many little threads radiating from the centre crisscrossing each other. As with the web, the structure emerges as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made. (Silko 48-9)

13 In the “Preface” to This Bridge Called My Back; Anzaldúa and Moraga, eds. (1981) Cherrie Moraga refers to “what Mitsuye Yamada calls ‘unnatural disasters,’ such as the forced encampment of Indigenous people to government reservations” (23).

14 In The Spirit of Annie Mae, Annie Mae refers to such institutions as “government run concentration camps.”

15 The following poem by Paula Gunn Allen written in 1978 to honour Grandmother Spider, is my source for the phrase “mending the tear.”
Grandmother

Out of her own body she pushed  
silver thread, light, air  
and carried it carefully on the dark, flying  
where nothing moved.

Out of her body she extruded  
shining wire, life, and wove the light  
on the void.

From beyond time  
beyond oak trees and bright clear water flow,  
she was given the work of weaving the strands  
of her body, her pain, her vision  
into creation, and the gift of having created  
to disappear.

After her, the women and the men weave blankets to tales of life  
memories of light and ladders,  
infinity-eyes, and rain.  
After her I sit on my laddered rain-bearing rug  
and mend the tear with string.

(Published in She Rises Like the Sun.  
Janine Canan, ed.)

16 In her essay “Gee, You Don’t Look Like an Indian from the Reservation,” in This Bridge Called My Back, Barbara Cameron writes that “[w]e are all continually pumped with gross and inaccurate images of everyone else and we all pump it out.” (49)


18 In her essay “Word and Language: A Haggle,” Paula Gunn Allen writes of “linguistic honour.” There is an enormous difference between the way western people approach the use of language and the way tribal people approach it. [Tribal people] say the words are sacred...We mean that you should recognize that when you speak, your utterances have consequences inwardly and outwardly and that you are accountable for those consequences. You can’t just say anything that comes to your head and then get distressed if another person acts on it. Now that other person may have misunderstood you, which means they have a responsibility to find out exactly what you mean before they act, but the principle is still there. Without linguistic honor there can be no community. There can be no ethic, there can be no creative vision, there can be no peace and there can be no relationship.  

19 A concept presented by Matt Hern in his presentation “Possibility in the Face of Probability” at the Commons Conference at the University of Victoria April 28-30, 2006.

20 As Allen says in an interview with Annie Eysturoy,  
For Ephanie to locate who she is, she has to move from thinking of her reference group as male to thinking of her reference group as female. (Eysturoy 102)

Similarly, Vanessa Holford observes that  
Ephanie seeks spiritual union with both men and women, but it is Elena and later Teresa with whom she achieves the twinning she seeks to create her own identity. (Holford 109)

22 Thus, I argue with Kathleen Donovan’s interpretation of Ephanie’s relationships with women, wherein Donovan sees Allen as suggesting here that “women punish other women for this intimacy” between women, and continues by pointing out how Ephanie experiences such difficulties:

Most of Ephanie’s contemporary (as opposed to mythic) relationships with women are hurtful. With the exception of her sometimes rocky relationship with Teresa, Ephanie’s relationships with other women are negative: Teresa’s Colorado friends, the nun at the hospital after Tommy dies, the women who are quick to assess responsibility for his death. (Donovan 134)

23 Daly tells us that “as we feel the empowerment of our own Naming we hear more deeply our call of the wild” (Daly, G/E 423).
CHAPTER FOUR

Alice Walker and *The Temple of My Familiar*: M'Sukta's Legacy
Honouring the Ancestors through Textiles and Texts

Introduction

The sacred weaver takes on a unique dimension in Alice Walker's 1989 novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*. Shutting back and forth through millennia of human history, Walker's narrative threads include stories of and by, not only weavers and textile artists, but also writers, painters, musicians and healers whose art is a means of connection — of sharing their lives, expressing emotion and embracing spirituality. The narrative strands intersect and intertwine in many and various ways throughout the novel, and not only weave a web of relationships, but also enrich the text with a multidimensional texture. In the centre of this web is M'Sukta — a West African woman, supposedly the last of her people, who is transported to England and housed in a museum display where she lives and weaves. M'Sukta is a powerful Spider Woman figure whose life and work connects most of the novel's characters in one way or another, and spins a cross-continental and multi-generational web of relationships.

This relational web, reflecting Walker's progressive vision of transformation and healing, includes individuals from many cultural backgrounds, and draws on sacred and powerful female figures from around the globe. In addition, Walker challenges myths perpetuated by American pop culture wherein diversity is
homogenised into a “melting pot,” and instead, celebrates uniqueness and difference—between cultures, between genders and between generations—and the healing power of heart-felt human connections. Further, Walker’s womanist perspective—an inclusive liberation theory which expands on mainstream second wave feminist politics—recognises ways in which women of many different racial backgrounds have worked with, as well as against, each other, as well as with men for freedom and peace, both in the past and in the present. Storytelling plays a vital role in this liberation movement, and female divinities figure prominently.

Storytelling, as Walker shows in *Temple*, has been throughout time, and continues to be, a primary tool of resistance, and is not limited to the printed word. Stories are recorded in texts, by individuals within literate cultures who have access to writing implements, and to the publishing industry; however, stories also live on through intergenerational oral transmission, through music and other arts—including gardening and cooking—as well as through textiles. Walker’s novel interweaves several of these modalities and thus brings to light the enduring and powerful desire of the human spirit to define and share life.

*The Temple of My Familiar*, historically, is situated near the end of feminism’s second wave, and resonates with the expanded spiritual, social and political consciousness of these later years, blended with Walker’s unique vision for the human family. Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* addresses the issue of gender equity, and in particular the struggle of a middle-class, urban white heterosexual woman artist within a deeply entrenched patriarchal social paradigm; Allen’s *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* works to disentangle threads of sexism, racism and
homophobia, and ongoing threat of death and cultural extinction, inherent in the life of many Native American women. Walker builds on this foundational work, picks up the shuttle and weaves with a still broader scope. Rather than focusing on one heroine's quest for identity, Walker introduces numerous racially diverse characters, both male and female (several of whom are or become couples), and invites her reader to join their quests for personal, relational, cultural and cosmic identities. The multiple story strands in Temple also offer diverse and alternate means of personal and cultural mapping,\(^6\) resistance to colonization, and liberation from systems of enclosure.\(^7\)

Walker's stories of colonization and systems of enclosure are radically different from those told by Atwood and Allen.\(^8\) The eurocentric resonance in Lady Oracle brings to mind a culture brought to North America by people who, for the most part, had a choice and sought a better life – within this immigrant culture the subordination of women was already policy. The Woman Who Owned the Shadows presents a long-silenced story – a Native point of view of forces that colonized North America, not only working to subordinate the Native women, but also to systematically eradicate Native cultures to ensure expansion of European colonies on newly claimed land. Similarly, The Temple of My Familiar retells a story often misrepresented by colonial literature—the story of African people who were stripped of all belongings, including clothing, and transported to America as slave labourers in the building of this “new country,” and who were subjected to, and endured cruelties and violence beyond measure. The African slaves, part of the Black Diaspora,\(^9\) were separated not only from their country, but also from their
families and cultures, and as with the First Nations population, creatively wove remnants of the past into a life that they had been forced into with, for the most part, only their flesh and bones to carry their stories forward. Like Allen, Walker argues that despite forces of genocide, the spirit and stories of their people live on, if only in the dreams and visions of a few insightful individuals, and the elders of a community are archives—rich and viable, yet often ignored within western culture.

*Temple* can seem like a potpourri of disparate stories; however, by the end of the novel the unity within Walker's text is clear. Also clearly evident are ways in which Walker's text resonates with Mary Daly's process for developing a gynocentric literature: Walker recovers stolen African goddesses, such as Isis and Medusa (Walker *TF* 268), and invokes their power to assist in the task of “spooking” away the lies and harmful mythologies, “sparking” gynergetic creativity and “spinning” a new worldview. Walker's storytelling, like Allen's, sometimes engages spooking, sparking and spinning simultaneously, thus whirling away even Daly's categories. In addition, Walker expands on Daly's gynocentric vision in *Gyn/Ecology*—which is limited by her eurocentric and academic analysis—and weaves a humanistic and global vision of healing and transformation through storytelling. For Walker, every story is needed in the mending of the global web and the creation of our collective story blanket; the intention of Walker's writing, as with her life, is to prayerfully honour the ancestors. ¹⁰ human and familiar. ¹¹

For Walker, the voices of the elders and the ancestors are vitally important for the continuation of life on earth. Through the storytelling of Lissie, who spins into
past and ancient lives, Walker acknowledges genetic memory and the transmutation of the soul; within Lissie's stories from the near and distant past lie tools to map a more peaceful future (TF 52–58, 82–27, 353–372). Lissie is a powerful transmitter of ancestral memories and a vehicle for "spooking" imperialist lies of African history. Similarly, when the journals of British Spinsters Elly Peacock and her niece, Eleanora Burnham, who lived during the British imperial regime, are finally brought to light by a twentieth century relative, the long-hidden words have far-reaching and life-altering consequences. Walker also shows the power of the weaver—the sacred record keeper in many pre-literate cultures—as exemplified by M'Sukta, Temple's Spider Woman figure, who lives on the cusp of the oral and written worlds and weaves the stories of her people into cloth. Ultimately, her oral storytelling is written down by others and, in time, becomes words in print connecting generations, continents and cultures.

This chapter will first look at some critical views of Walker's work, together with some of the spiritual, literary, social and political movements that influenced her novel; then, it examines ways in which Temple's polyvocal narrative—a tapestry of voices—weaves a web of relationships reflecting a new world vision—a vision in which women's spirituality is honoured. With Daly's framework for creating gynocentric literature Walker can be seen to reclaim the African Mother Goddess and "spook" away false representations of African and African American history; "spark" creative and passionate connections through the diaries of the British Spinsters and through M'Sukta's legacy of textiles and texts; and "spin" new visions for life on earth rooted in stories of the ancestors and elders — whose world
Walker honours as invaluable and integral to personal, relational and cultural re-mapping, and planetary healing.

Walker's textual design flies beyond Daly's framework, however, and creates a curious narrative form, drawing inspiration from M'Sukta textiles. Both Walker and M'Sukta weave narrative strips coded with recurring motifs and symbols, sewn together with curious seams. Each strip interweaves yarns from many and various sources, "glistening as if shot through with golden thread" (Walker, TF 217)—the sacred thread of female divinity—and thus creates a design that is both original and ancient, intent on carrying forward the teachings of all ages. Created with this special purpose and intention in mind, both text and textile become sacred sites—Spider Woman temples of healing and transformation.

Critical Voices

In the wake of Walker's 1982 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, The Color Purple, which along with her other earlier writings met with some harsh criticism, the response to Temple was markedly different. Critics have both explored and side-stepped this brilliantly conceived and woven multidimensional web of lives, and while some see the novel as overly ambitious or severely limited, others regard Walker's polyvocal narrative as an innovative exploration of human relationships—with each other and with other species throughout time and space. It is no surprise, however, that a novel as innovative as Temple—one that "has crossed the boundaries between genres, eliminating the boundaries between the sacred and the
secular, between body and mind" (Van Dyke 77)—would meet critical and ideological resistance. Donna Winchell succinctly writes:

_The Temple of My Familiar_ (1989) is likely to remain a novel often begun and seldom finished. Any novel that attempts to provide a spiritual history of the universe hardly makes for light reading. One that also demands a belief in the transmigration of souls is doubly difficult. (Winchell 115)

There have been, however, critics willing and able to take the leap of faith and partake of Walker’s cosmology and narrative strategies. Evelyn White calls _Temple_ a “mystical narrative...[written with]...bold strokes of fantasy...[in which]...a hundred themes and subjects spin through it...a whirl of time and places” (White 446–7). While certainly evocative, Walker’s novel is neither utopian nor dystopian but rather a weave of stories that portray a diverse array of human experience and potential. As well, her narrative is neither chronological, nor achronological, but shifts between the two and sometimes tries to represent a space where time is non-existent as Walker interweaves the lives and stories of her modern-day characters with characters from the past and characters from mystical realms and mythic time. Thus, _Temple_ guides the reader through several centuries of African-American history and “shouts out about the importance of recognizing one’s past and listening to one’s ancestors” (Jablon 138). These ancestral voices transport Walker’s reader outside patriarchal Judeo-Christian monotheism to cultures embracing female divinity. For Walker:
[The] mother goddess is African and black, and the geographical source of spiritual truth is Africa, not the Mediterranean...[T]he memory of the mother goddess tradition is a thread running through the narrative, linking its different strands, and indicating its continuing importance in the lives of all women of colour. (King 172)  

*Temple*’s narrative structure, which aptly challenges the conventions of formal realism by interweaving various genres including letter, diary and journal writing; tape recordings, dream memories, historical narratives, creation mythology and memoirs, creates a unique literary tapestry. This re-mapping of the linguistic landscape intentionally blurs established boundaries of categorization and separation, and thus concocts a literary gumbo creating “a harmonious mix of disparate elements” (Martikke 4). Walker’s writing process — eclectic by some standards — also weaves together disparate elements into a harmonious design. In addition to her personal experience with liberation politics and womanist ideologies, her academic journey as both student and teacher, her love of music and visual arts, and her personal life as a wife, partner, lover and mother, Walker acknowledges, in her essay “Coral and Turquoise,” the vital role of her spiritual sources:

Throughout the writing of *Temple*, I relied on the guidance provided by the synchronicity I experienced in my dreams, insights and intuitions, and events that corroborated, or resonated with them in the world. (Walker, CT 2)

One significant dream—the dire consequences of suppressing the spirit for the sake of convention—is a central tenet of the novel (Walker, *TF* 116–118) through which Walker illustrates the power of internalized colonization, and ways in which
oppressed people collude with the oppressors; this self-subordination can be seen to manifest in numerous ways throughout the novel. For example, Suwelo, an instructor of American history, perpetuates racist propaganda generated by mainstream academia in his eurocentred curriculum. Says Suwelo, “I had to be drunk or stoned to pass on such lies” (Walker, TF 380). Similarly, Carlotta reinforces female stereotypes by dressing in provocative clothing “so super feminine, in the old style, that it was as if she’d never noticed there was any other way a woman could be” (Walker, TF 244), and wearing shoes that her husband Arveyda “liked [her] to wear, even though they made [her] feet hurt” (Walker, TF 294). During the course of the novel these and other characters become conscious of their part in supporting dominant ideologies, and undergo radical changes in their quests for lives of integrity. This is another part of Walker’s central theme: each individual person has the ability to transform and heal the world. Through the power of the African Mother Goddess, the stories of the ancestors and the willingness of her contemporary characters to listen, the characters experience radical transformation, and M’Sukta plays a central role in their evolution. Thus far, critics have given little attention to the central role of this ancient weaver who brings stories of an alternate, matriarchal, goddess-centred culture, to subsequent generations both in and beyond her African homeland.24

Reclaiming the African Mother Goddess

Walker’s reclamation of the African Mother Goddess, and recovery of her power, was a radical undertaking and addresses concerns voiced by Audre Lorde in
her 1979 essay, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly.” In this response to *Gyn/Ecology*, Lorde points out to Daly that women do not “all suffer the same oppression,” and to imply that we do “is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other” (Lorde 67); in addition, women do not all draw on the same sources of power.

Daly's inclusion of African genital mutilation in her study, while important “in any consideration of female ecology” (Lorde 67), is not balanced with recovering from obscurity African goddesses as sources of empowerment and healing. As well as white-washing women's oppression, Daly white-washes female divinity by offering “only white, western European, judeo-christian examples” (Lorde 67). Writes Lorde:

> Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo, and Mawulisa? Where were the warrior goddesses of the Vodun, the Dohomeian Amazons and the warrior women of the Dan? (Lorde 67)

Daly's selective use of Black women's experience “dismisses [their] heritage and the heritage of all other non-european women, and den[ies] the real connections that exist between all of us” (Lorde 95). Lorde challenges Daly to look within:

> May I ask that you re-member what is dark and ancient and divine within yourself that aids your speaking. (Lorde 96)
Walker, in essence, is offering her reader the same challenge. In *Temple*, the sacred feminine from non-white cultures is revitalized; images of dark, ancient and divine female spiritual strength are reclaimed as sources of inspiration and creativity.\(^{26}\)

Black women’s spirituality has long been a theme in Walker’s writing; for Walker, “spirituality is the basis of Art” (Walker, Gardens 233). In her 1974 essay, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” Walker explores the ways in which Black women have managed to keep spiritually alive and create art throughout generations of slavery and poverty, and extremely limited outlets.\(^{27}\) For Walker’s mother, it was her garden. Walker remembers:

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible – except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty. (Walker, Gardens 241)

In that moment, Walker’s mother shone with the light of the Goddess, despite the hardship of her everyday life. Her extraordinary garden—that became part of every new place they lived—brought beauty to Walker’s childhood.

In *Temple*, Walker brings to light numerous ways that—in spite of oppression, dislocation and appropriation—women maintain threads of connection to “what is dark, ancient and divine” (Lorde 96), and resist the colonial re-mapping of their lives. Throughout the novel Daly’s elements of spooking, sparking and spinning seem often to merge as a unified surge of resistance and transformation, not only for the contemporary characters, but also for the ancestors. Women’s resistance stands alongside patriarchy from the beginning, and storytelling—which to Walker,
as with Allen, is medicine—holds the key to re-mapping lives, places and events
for personal power, cultural recognition and planetary healing.

**Textiles and Texts, Resistance and Re-mapping**

Walker’s revisionary history of humanity is a gynocentric perspective, with the
African Mother Goddess reinstated as the source of life, and women’s stories
honoured as transmitters of cultural truth. Here, Walker’s word-weaving spooks,
sparks and spins stories that challenge the reader on several levels. In *Temple,*
many characters, both male and female, bring threads to this new story blanket.
For example, Lissie’s stories, which emerge from both her current and past
incarnations, review human evolution, primarily from a Black female perspective.
Suwelo, who teaches American history, brings to light the colonization of
education though the western canon. Nzingha Anne also talks about the power of
western education to subordinate and degrade African people, and is furious at the
misrepresentation of African Goddesses and rendering of Africans as sub-human.
Walker shows that through the creative arts, Goddess-honouring spirituality and
cultural integrity survive in spite of imperialist systems of oppression. For
example, the creative arts of Zede and M’Sukta serve not only as outlets for
spirituality but also for the preservation of cultural stories.

South America-born, Zede, like her mother before her, was

The creator of clothing, especially capes made of feathers...These capes were
worn by dancers and musicians and priests at traditional village festivals and
had been worn for countless generations. (Walker, *TF 3*)
When Zede becomes a refugee in America she continues her work as a creator of clothing; she sews garments in a factory by day and designs elaborate feather capes at night. These feather capes, however, although created by the sacred arts she learned as a child, are no longer ceremonial wear; they have become costumes for the 60s-era rock stars and gay parade participants (Walker, TF 6-7). Although the sacred elements of her work are appropriated into mainstream culture, Zede’s art is integral to keeping herself, her traditions, and Ixtaphtaphahex—the Great Goddess of her people (Walker, TF 46) alive. Similarly, M’Sukta, a Black woman from West Africa, the last known remaining member of the Ababa people—a fictional name—is “taken” to England in the late 1890s and made part of the Africa display at a British museum. Imprisoned and alone M’Sukta is supplied with looms and yarn to provide visitors to the museum with token souvenirs; however, M’Sukta weaves for a much greater reason than making tourist trinkets – M’Sukta weaves to preserve her self and her cultural.

Lisa Aronson’s study, “The Language of West African Textiles,” reveals that for the Ijebu Yoruba of Nigeria, “cloth functions as language or as a facilitation of the spoken or written word” (Aronson, LWA 38); an associated article, “Ijebu Yoruba,” also by Aronson, adds that “[a]s emblems of chieftaincy, priesthood, and membership…title cloths… lie at the very core of power and leadership among the Ijebu Yoruba” (Aronson, IY 52). Within these textiles are woven colours and patterns that “represent the richness and diversity of an individual’s experience in life, including the acquired knowledge of the spirit realm” (Aronson, IY 55).
West African textiles are the texts—the stories—of the people, both individual and collective. Every aspect of the cloth—from the design of the power symbols, both animate and inanimate, to the number of repetitions of the pattern, to the way the cloth is finished and how the cloth is worn—is an integral component to the story. Textiles tell stories of the living and of the ancestors, burial cloths carry souls to the spirit world; likewise, prayers cloths carry offerings and requests to the spirit world. Traditionally, symbols held the stories and messages; however, modern day weavers use actual words as well as symbols in their textiles. (Aronson, IY 57-8).

Kente cloth also serves as a title cloth, historically worn by royalty and other important figures in Ghana’s society during ceremonies and special events. Ghana’s weavers “used looms to make four inch wide strips of Kente cloth, and wove the strips together to form larger garments. Their garments came in various colours, sizes, and designs, and behind each design was deep symbolic meaning” (Ghana – Kente 1). For example the Nyankonton design, seen below was:
created in exaltation of the beauty and mystery of the rainbow phenomenon. This cloth symbolizes DIVINE BEAUTY, GRACEFULNESS, DIVINE CREATIVITY, UNIQUENESS, and GOOD OMEN. (Ghana-Kente Cloth 1)

Kente cloth, as in textiles of the Ijebu Yoruba, has a two-fold purpose:

On the one hand, cloth is an inherently flat surface, like a page in a book, upon which abstract symbols or words can be written. Cloth is also pliable and therefore able to be wrapped around the body. In that capacity, the messages one wears are likely to say something about one’s identity, beliefs, or set of values.

(Aronson, LWA 38)

This being the case, M’Sukta’s garments serve her in many ways. First of all, her clothing serves as body protection and camouflage, especially necessary in her alien climate and her prison-like environment. But, M’Sukta’s clothing is also her connection with her land, her people and her deities; her cloth may be a conversation with her people, or as prayer. For those who understand the symbols and patterns, the colours and designs, M’Sukta’s clothing is a manifestation of her Ababa spirituality, culture and heritage – her story. For the Ababa it is supremely important to know

how to weave the tribal cloth, the magic of which is as long as it is woven, the tribe exists; as long as you know how to weave it, so do you. (231)

As long as she weaves, M’Sukta maintains a thread of connection with her matriarchal home, and with the sacred feminine – the African Mother Goddess.
M'Sukta’s life exemplifies the systems of enclosure that maimed the lives of not only Africans, but also populations around the world. Her life also exemplifies ways in which populations the world over resisted these oppressive systems and maintained personal and cultural integrity throughout life-threatening situations. In addition, M’Sukta’s influence weaves far beyond her loom and the textiles; she is the thread of connection between several generations of both women and men who are spooking colonial oppression, sparking creative friendships and weaving alternate lifestyles, and creating new stories for their lives and for the lives of future generations. Three British Spinsters, whose lives span several decades, are the record-keepers of M’Sukta's story; their stories as told in diaries, journals and plays, as well as in photographs and paintings, preserve aspects of M’Sukta’s life and traditions of the Ababa culture, but also a glimpse into colonial oppression as experienced by these “privileged” white women.

M’Sukta and the British Spinsters

M’Sukta’s entry into the narrative landscape of Temple denotes a curious choice by Walker. Why is this central character who, ultimately, can be seen as a manifestation of the ancient, dark, sacred feminine, brought into view through several layers of racial and cultural interpretation? Walker, a black woman deeply involved in liberation politics, as the author and omnipotent narrator, brings M’Sukta to light through a journal entry written by a young British woman, Elly Peacock, in the mid 1800s, read by her great-great niece, Mary Jane Briden, over a century later (Walker, TF 218), and through a painting of M’Sukta, also by Elly
Peacock, that Mary Jane shows to her centenarian great-aunt, Eleanora, who responds with tears (Walker, TF 216). It is possible that Alice Walker is extending a thread for her white readers to follow and find a connection through M’Sukta to the common ground of women’s oppression under colonial systems, and to a shared ancestry as human beings in “Mother Africa.” In this light, M’Sukta becomes more than mortal; she becomes a link with the ancients and oríshas,³⁰ and the Dark Goddess. Like the Dark Goddess, veiled in mystery, M’Sukta is veiled and seen only through words barely legible in a journal with “leaves... yellow and water-stained, and many words in the cramped script of a young woman writing by flashlight under the bedcovers, difficult to decipher” (Walker, TF 218). Elly’s great-great niece, Mary Jane, opens it “with a rapidly beating heart” (Walker, TF 218) and in reading the words, brings M’Sukta—and Mother Africa—to life.

As with the empowering implications for white women of the reclamation of European Goddesses, such as Ariadne in Lady Oracle, and for Native women from the recovery of the sacred feminine through Spider Woman in The Woman Who Owned the Shadows, reclaiming lost African Goddesses is a radical act on Walker’s part. From Walker’s perspective, not only were dark-skinned Goddesses—many who were spinners and weavers—erased, or reconfigured³¹ by male-dominated colonial institutions, but also their metaphoric counterparts in other cultures. The dark aspect of the Triple Moon Goddesses—the Crone aspect of the Maiden, Mother, Crone Triple Goddess—that reigned in old Europe, Asia and beyond, were no longer revered, but instead rendered as ugly, old and dangerous.³² Thus, Goddesses such as Hecate, Kali and Medusa became frightful and foreboding
figures, while simultaneously older women and non-white women became systematically disempowered under colonial rule.\textsuperscript{33} The spiritual resonance of M'Sukta, for the British women, is deeply moving; M’Sukta, thus, becomes a powerful catalyst for Elly, Eleanor and Mary Jane, helping them to resist patriarchal designs for their lives, remain unmarried—Spinsters—follow M’Sukta home to Mother Africa and become weavers of colourful images, words and dreams. Through the written words of Elly and Eleanor, Walker reveals the power of the diaries and journals as a means of resistance; as well, that with an audience—when read or spoken—words contain transformative power. Few black American women from M'Sukta's era could have written her story, as literacy skills were forbidden under slavery.\textsuperscript{34} It is also significant that Elly's diary and Eleanor's journals were enclosed in museum archives, unread, for decades—trivialized as unimportant. When Mary Jane liberates them, and shares them with a still wider audience, their transformative powers become readily apparent.

Joanne Ritchie in \textit{Cartographies of Silence} writes that "[w]hatever else they may be...diaries are statements of lives lived...They represent women speaking their own lives in their own words, unfiltered through a male record" (Ritchie "Dedication"). Likewise, Betty Jane Wylie, in \textit{Reading Between the Lines}, says that "[w]omen's diaries have been called lifelines...[G]athering what she needs, she spins her web of life from the diary-spindle; using the thread she weaves her design on the diary loom to create her individual web-story" (Wylie 42, 220).

Diary writing can thus be recognized as a "Spiner" or "Spider Woman" art; each "diarist/spinner/webster tells her stories in private to herself. She is the spider in
the centre of her own web, her own private domain...[a] silent, secret place that is always there” (Wylie 227-8). In an era when women's voices were often silenced or restricted, Elly and Eleanora’s diaries and journals represent the possibilities of women secretly weaving literary tapestries to keep their inner thoughts and dreams alive, and the value of these writings as historical sources.

Elly’s journal entries begin when she is in her mid-twenties, the late 1840s. She abhors the social conventions of the upper class of which she is part, and has managed to avoid marriage, claiming to her parents:

If I were to marry I feel sure I should slit my throat, or his, within a fortnight...I do not know why, except there must be more to life than opulence and material ease. (220)

Instead, Elly socializes with her gay cousin, Theodore—T. —who takes delight in taking her to the theatre, and to “forbidden” places, even dressing her in men’s attire to accompany him viewing brothels.

He has had clothes—trousers and overcoat similar to his own—made for me, and I push my worrisome long hair under any one of several capacious hats, and we’re off. For, as T. says so well, how am I to be a great painter if I never see anything...sometimes I feel I must have seen it all. (Walker, TF 220)

These past outings, however, do not prepare Elly for what she is to see and feel when, one day, T. takes her to a part of the Museum of Natural History that she has never been to before. Leading her throughout the labyrinthine corridors of the museum, “down halls and up stairs,” Elly follows T. until they come to a “medium-
sized room... with windows ... very high up, and ... a strange smell. At first it looked like a replica of part of an African village” (Walker, TF 221-2). Elly is both enchanted and disturbed by this display with its alien colours and designs, and its dreamlike quality, “the bright blue sky above, as if lighted by the sun, the cosy little huts” (Walker, TF 223). She is particularly attracted to the

gorgeous strips of woven cloth hanging on pegs by the door of one of the little huts. There was a figure... very lifelike... sitting on the floor near the doorway, apparently spinning. (Walker, TF 223)

Elly looks again and sees that “the figure was not spinning any longer. She was standing in the doorway!” (Walker, TF 223). Much to her shock and dismay, Elly realizes that the lifelike figure is in fact, a live person. Later, Elly records in her journal a detailed account of her first view of M’Sukta:

She was dressed exquisitely in cloth made from hundreds of the strips... which I now saw copied many of the colours, motifs, and symbols that covered the mud walls. The meek creature bent over her spindle, her little black fingers, on one of which she had placed a tiny, many-coloured cotton-thread ring, fairly flying. It was a simple wooded spindle she was using...There were looms of many sizes—one of them a tiny handloom on which she made the colourful inch-wide strips—propped against the wall near where she worked. (Walker, TF 223, 225)

Elly’s response to M’Sukta is complex—she is drawn into M’Sukta’s “otherworldliness”—both physical/geographical and metaphysical—and to the textiles: their colours and designs, images and motifs. As well, Elly senses that this little black woman, busy spinning and weaving, is a sacred entity; that this corner
of the museum, however out of place it may seem, with its little cluster of replicated mud huts, is M’Sukta’s temple; her textiles more than mere headbands to be purchased by tourists passing by. Elly’s keen eye for observation notes that “M’Sukta was little, about four feet ten, slender as a reed, and blacker than anyone I had ever seen” (Walker, TF 223), which brings to mind a vulnerable individual, who Elly goes on to describe as seeming “ageless – a very young child, an adolescent, or an old woman carefully preserved” (Walker, TF 223). Walker suggests, through Elly’s perceptions, a magical quality to M’Sukta – the Maiden, Mother and Crone aspects of the Triple Goddess. Elly sees M’Sukta come toward her “holding her spindle and carrying a large basket of cotton from which she was making thread” (Walker, TF 223), a description that invokes an archetypal image of the Great Goddess as Cosmic Weaver. At this point, Elly does not know anything about M’Sukta or very much about African cultures; however, on an intuitive level connects with a sacred African weaver, such as the Yoruban Goddess, Iya Moopo. In addition, Elly recognises the smell of fear emanating from M’Sukta, a smell which became stronger the longer they stayed at the exhibit, and exclaims:

This tiny childlike creature was afraid of us! Afraid of me! I felt myself immediately brought into focus…If she was afraid of me, then it was definitely my whole existence that was “wrong” and not the screaming colours of her clothing or her house. (Walker, TF 224)

Elly, unlike T., recognises the African woman’s humanity and not only acknowledges M’Sukta’s fear, but also takes responsibility for being the cause of her fear. Elly, “frantic for an answer now, feeling [her] whole being… involved’
(Walker, *TF* 224), begins to go to the museum on her own to visit the M'Sukta display, and in time develops a relationship with M'Sukta. We can imagine M'Sukta spinning and weaving while Elly paints her portrait and the two women becoming acquainted through their art. This connection sparks a righteous rage in Elly:

The history I knew was not hers, the geography I knew placed an elephant herd where her village had been, the science I knew did not teach me how to make dyes and medicines and the other things M'Sukta could do; the literature I read talked of savages and blackamoors, and that was when it was being polite. The languages I knew failed me entirely when I stood before her. (Walker, *TF* 229)

Like *Temple*, Elly's diary is fiction; it does, however represent how diaries can serve as a tool of self discovery and empowerment. In *Reading Between the Lines*, Betty Jane Wylie writes:

Like the poet who can not touch the moon or describe it, the diarist can not touch her life or describe herself, yet she can see and resee, that is, reread her diary... she cannot know herself, not fully, but she can begin to see a pattern in her life, a pattern of her soul, and maybe a dim outline of her self in her diary. (Wylie 220)

The words in Elly's diary also reach across time, bringing valuable stories to her great-great niece, Mary Jane. Gathering together items for her own sojourn to Africa, Mary Jane steals the duplicate set of her great-aunt Eleanor's journals:

Back at the library for the last time, she discovered on the shelves double sets of Eleanor's five volumes, their leaves uncut. She took a set, slipped the books into her capacious shoulder bag, and smiled her way past the recently
somewhat thawed librarian. Mary Jane knew she was off to Africa, was thinking of the two Eleandras...She thought also of Eleanora, whose books, she hoped, would reveal to her Mary Jane, as the diary of Eleandra, "the Lady Peacock," had, in a major way revealed Mary Jane to herself. (Temple, TF 234)

Through the writings of Elly and Eleanora, Mary Jane not only learns about the lives of her great and great-great aunts, but also about herself, and about personal, family and cultural patterns. She is privy to their secret, private world and finds resonance with her own longings and desires, and a rare and valuable gift of gynocentric writing weaving together the several generations of Mary Jane's matriarchal ancestry.

Thus, Mary Jane follows the literary trail left in Elly and Eleanora’s writings to Africa and M’Sukta’s connection with the Olinka. Through this sacred weaver, the lives of these three women become more freely and deeply creative; each, in her own way, draws on the sacred arts for personal and cultural preservation – as does M’Sukta throughout her fifteen years of imprisonment in the Museum of Natural History.

M’Sukta's Legacy — Weaving into the Future

Decades later, Mary Jane tells Ola the story of M’Sukta, "the sole survivor of her tribe" (Walker, TF 342) being "shut up for nearly fifteen years in the British Museum of Natural History" (Walker, TF 342) where she "spent her time...weaving" (Walker, TF 342) until somehow, "Mary Jane’s great-great aunt had sprung her—Mary Jane wasn’t sure how—and brought her back to Ababaland" (Walker, TF 342). Riding the wake of M’Sukta’s liberation are freer lives for Elly,
followed by Eleanora, and later for Mary Jane, all of whom travel to Africa and become co-founders of M’Sukta’s legacy which creatively manifests in literature, art, education and architecture, both in Africa and in America.

In Africa, Elly writes, paints and takes photographs; in time, Eleanora inherits her aunt’s “diaries about this episode... and also come[s] out to Africa” (Walker, TF 342). Eleanora had “lived among the Olinka and done many good works” (Walker, TF 342), but primarily had “come to Africa to write books... about the art created by the people before their villages were bulldozed” (Walker, TF 343). Her five volumes record the “amazing story, told to Eleanora Burnham’s great-aunt [sic] by M’Sukta herself, of a peaceful, equalitarian, ancient way of life” (Walker, TF 396).

Mary Jane, who inherits the archives of both relatives, as well as “a huge dose of gumption and the ‘can do’ spirit,” travels to Africa where she teaches “herself to paint” (Walker, TF 342), then starts and runs “an art school, the M’Sukta School”(Walker, TF 340). At the M’Sukta School, Mary Jane supports “seventy boy and girls... Her ambition was for the work of her artists to become part of what the Olinka (a sister tribe to the Ababa) was known for” (Walker, TF 340). Drawing on her great-aunt Eleanora’s written description of the African people’s art that “they casually did in the painting of their houses every year after the rainy season,” Mary Jane—known as Miss B. —and her students create their paintings on “every wall of the buildings, outside and inside...Whenever the school ran out of paper and canvas...they simply whitewashed over an old mural on one of the walls and started a new mural over it”(Walker, TF 343). Challenging convention by
marrying Ola, Miss B. avoids deportation and “[can] legally stay in Olinka: her school grew” (Walker, TF 345).

After Ola’s death—and especially after meeting Ola’s African American daughter, Fanny, who wishes to collaborate with her African half-sister Nzingha Anne and write a play about their father’s life—Mary Jane imagines herself writing a play “[f]or her own amusement… Just to surprise Nzingha and Fanny. She would name it something like…‘M’Sukta’ or ‘The Savage in the Stacks’” (Walker, TF 350). True to form, “after three decades of living in Africa,” she has achieved renown as “the playwright Mary Jane Briden” (Walker, TF 205).

Meanwhile, in the United States, “Fanny and Suwelo often read passages from the five volumes written by Eleanor Burnham and given to Fanny by Miss B.” (Walker, TF 395). Fanny and Suwelo design a house for themselves:

[M]odeled on the prehistoric household of M’Sukta’s people — a house designed by the ancient matriarchal mind and the first heterosexual household ever created... Each person must remain free, they said... And so they had designed a dwelling shaped like a bird. (Walker, TF 395)

Thus, M’Sukta’s story has crossed from Africa to England, back to Africa and finally across the Atlantic where connecting threads are cast into the lives of Fanny and Suwelo — their kin, friends and ancestors. The impact and power of an individual life is clearly illustrated by M’Sukta’s story; this Spider Woman’s web illustrates that “[w]e all touch upon each others lives in ways we can’t begin to imagine” (Walker, TF 344).
Conclusion

The Temple of My Familiar is a complex and sometimes daunting novel; Walker succeeds in compressing myriad voices and perspectives that somehow, somewhere within the narrative frame intersect and affect one another, often intimately. Inclusiveness is imperative in Walker's vision, as is respect - respect not only for the human life, but for all life, with special reverence to the ancestors. Temple shows that imperialist mapping of lives, cultures and countries are human constructs and mutable, as are traditional western literary forms. Walker’s broad scope “spooks” beyond boundaries and categories; her characters transit the globe with fluidity; male and female characters explore various forms of relationships; and her narrative style embraces various “genres” of writing to create the storyline. Further challenging white colonial culture, Walker invokes the Black Goddess divinity as a creative “spark” for many of her characters, most of whom are storytellers in their own way – such as painters, photographers, musicians, writers and weavers.

The art of weaving holds a sacred place in Temple; M’Sukta is an important vehicle for bringing to light the power of textiles, showing that cloth sometimes encodes a message—a prayer, conversation, story may be woven into the designs—and that wearing the cloth is wearing this message. Thus, in M’Sukta’s weaving every thread is not only part of, but also integral to the wholeness of the textile; similarly, in Temple every character is not only part of the story, but is vital to the wholeness of the text. Walker “spins” a mystical narrative that is anchored in reality, yet offers many visions reflective of evolving feminist perspectives. In
*Temple* the characters both hurt and help each other, regardless of sex and race; the varied tendrils of societal oppression permeate the text as the stories—both individual and collective—unfold revealing both commonalities and differences in human struggle for survival and freedom. Walker, a Spider Woman storyteller, in *Temple*, weaves a luminous web of hope for earth's future.
End Notes

1 See Appendix One – Walker’s Web of Relationships: Temple’s Tapestry of Voices.

2 In a 1981 audio interview with Kay Bonetti, Walker says, “There is no such thing as a pure ethnic tradition; we are all part of a multi-cultural tradition in America, at this point in time. We are world citizens with myriad influences.”

3 Walker’s novel not only gives voice to women of the Black Diaspora, but also to South American women fleeing their countries as political refugees, and white women escaping British/American tyranny.

4 See Walker’s essay, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” in which she talks about ways, including gardening that kept the creative spirit of Black women alive throughout decades of slavery and poverty.

5 Hal and Lissie make Suwelo a gumbo, which he tastes for the first time and discovers that it is the “kind of flavour that make you feel as though you were tasting all of life” (Walker, TF 275).

6 In Islands in the Salish Sea: A Community Atlas, Sheila Harrington writes:

    A map is a representation of selected and limited observations about a specific place, at a specific time. Because a map is selective and how it is mapped is also a human choice, it is actually a statement about relationships and values.... [A] map can be an instrument of power, asserting authority; the person who makes the map has decided what, where and who are included and what, where and who are not. (Harrington Islands 15, 17)

    In Temple, Walker takes on the authority of re-mapping her own history—the what, where and who— from an African American womanist perspective, which might be seen as creating new personal cartography through the process of “mental mapping, [which] is the geography of perception” (Harrington 17).

7 Colonization and systems of enclosure relate closely with mapping. Maps “reveal what connects and divides us... [and] are a statement about relationships and values” (Harrington 14–15). The boundaries and categories established by colonial institutions dismissed the cartography of the native inhabitants and redefined their own image – both the land and the people. See the “Introduction” by Burt and Archer in Enclosure Acts. Walker’s act of re-mapping her personal and cultural territory though storytelling is an act of resistance and revivification of ancestral and historic geographies.

8 In “Midnight Birds,” Margaret Atwood perceives that Black American women are writing about the same world as white women writers, “though it is seen with honesty, passionate and painful clarity, through a different window” (Atwood, MB 362). Certainly, Atwood, Allen and Walker are all writing about North American western culture and the processes of colonization; however, each of these different windows is situated in a vastly different house, neighbourhood and landscape – as well as highly differing spiritual, social and political influences, and cultural backgrounds.

9 Black Diaspora: “Diaspora invokes images of bodies and acts of movements. The dispersal of Africans from the continent resulted in the presence of African bodies in non-African places. These Africans eventually claimed their new homelands and developed cultures of resistance and subsistence. However, their gaze has remained on the original ’nodal point’ (Gilroy, Black Atlantic, 1988), the mythic place in their social history” (Gourdine ix).
10 In *The Same River Twice*, Walker writes, “The way I understand my work is that it is a prayer to and about the world” (SRT 38); thus, her storytelling can be seen as a sacred act of creativity for world peace, healing and unity.

11 **Familiar**: “3: a spirit often embodied in an animal and held to attend and serve or guard a person” (Merriam Webster 419).

12 A Spinster, according to Mary Daly, as defined in *Wickedary* is:
   a woman whose occupation is to Spin, to participate in the whirling movement of creation; one who has chosen her Self, who defines her Self by choice neither in relation to children nor to men; one who is Self-identified; a whirling dervish, Spiraling in New Time/Space. (167)
   As we will see, the three British Spinsters are three such women.

13 Mary Ann Briden, née Mary Jane Haverstock is the great-niece of Eleanor Burnham (born 1885, is 100 years old when Mary Ann connects with her in 1985), and the great-great niece of Elly Peacock (born 1823).

14 In her essay, “Coral and Turquoise,” Walker writes of the importance of the central dream in *Temple* (Walker, *TF* 116–118), “the dream about our collusion with the forces that suppress and colonize our spirituality” (CT 2).

15 In her essay “Coral and Turquoise,” Walker writes of the cloth that was a source of inspiration for writing *The Temple of My Familiar*. This old and worn cloth was from Guatemala, and had “curious seams running through it” (CT 1). It sparked Walker’s imagination about the story of the cloth, the weaver of the cloth and how it was used before she purchased it. Similarly, M’Sukta’s clothing was designed with “curious seams running through it” (CT 1), the cloth being “made from hundreds of the strips that decorated the pegs by the door of the hut” (223).

16 Temple “3: a place devoted to a special purpose” (Merriam Webster, 1213).

17 Examples of these extreme positions can be illustrated by contrasting the seething review by J. O. Tate with the praise of Jennifer Grim. Tate, essentially, can find nothing good about Temple, or indeed, any of Alice Walker’s writing, and says:
   
   A larger, fatal failure of articulation extends to the heart of the book, its “voices”: interrelated narratives that are supposed to transcend time and space. They do not connect...But Miss Walker has transcended more conventions than those of time and place—she has hurdled the conventional demands for technical competence and architectonic ability as well.
   
   (Tate 49-50)

What Tate does not see—and Jessica Grime does—is that the connections are made gradually so that apparently disconnected strands are woven into a single web over the course of the book. Grim—who finds Walker’s novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, to be “extraordinary,” its characters “magnetic, even with their all too human flaws and stumblings; they seem to contain the world, and do it justice”—sees not only the integrity of the characters, but also how when woven together, they are the larger picture:

   Out of the telling of their stories emerges a glorious and iridescent fabric, a strand connecting all their lives and former lives and seeming to pull all of existence into its folds. (Grim 88)

18 Bonnie Braendlin, Susanne Martikke and Adam Sol look at Walker’s experimental narrative techniques; Ikeane Dieke and Madelyn Jablon explore the importance of memory for personal and
cultural healing; and Clara Juncker, along with Joanna Harader and Jeanette King, embrace Walker’s revisionary mythology – especially the reclaiming of Africa’s Great Mother Goddess.

19 Clara Juncker observes that “above all, the African art of Walker’s millennium-spanning novel is ancestral, rooted in connections to ancient pasts and selves” (Juncker 44).

20 Whereas King argues that Walker is reclaiming the African Mother Goddess as a power source for women, Joanne Harader argues that Walker is asking us, not to worship the Goddess as a feminine divinity, but to “embrace and worship the female qualities of God” (Harader 3). I agree with King and offer, in support, words from a keynote speech given by Jean Shinoda Bolen at the Gather the Women Canadian Congress in Victoria, BC, June 2006: “The Goddess is not God in Drag!” In Temple, we see an example of the Goddess in man’s image on the movie set in Guatuzocan, where Zede is helping with costumes for a film about an Indian goddess. Not only was the goddess conveniently an “albino,” but tall and blond “like Bo Derek,” (119) and costumed in the style of a Las Vegas showgirl (TF 119–20) —what Carlotta might call “a female impersonator” (385)— Goddess in man’s image and very akin to “God in Drag.”

21 Traditional, in this sense, refers to established narrative codes within western culture. Evelyn White also comments on Walker’s “abandonment of traditional plotting and constructs of reality” (White 446).

22 Marielke’s eagle-eye view sees the interflow of the various elements, and the narrative patterns and textures thus created by these varying storytelling techniques. Adam Sol and Bonnie Braendlin offer two other perspectives. Sol observes that “the techniques [Walker] chooses are those used between friends or intimates: oral storytelling, of course, but also letters and journals” (Sol 2) that invite the reader to come closer. Bonnie Braendlin, on the other hand sees this narrative variance as a constant disruption that moves the reader “toward disengaged reflection upon self and society” (Braendlin 49). Throughout the novel both critical viewpoints can be seen as operative in creating a textured and unified whole.

23 This echoes a theme in Gloria Anzaldúa’s essay “La Prieta” (1981) published in This Bridge Called My Back, in which she writes:

I see Third World peoples and women not as oppressors but as accomplices to oppression by our unwittingly passing on to our children and our friends the oppressor’s ideologies... for we are not screaming loud enough in protest. (Anzaldúa, 207)

24 This is an example of “la mestiza consciousness,” which Gloria Anzaldúa writes of in her 1987 essay, “La conciencia de la mestiza: towards a new consciousness,” describing it as “the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another” (Anzaldúa 428). For Anzaldúa, this is a step in the evolution of human consciousness and progress towards a world of peace. In Temple, we see M’Sukla’s influence acting in this capacity.

25 See Note 31.

26 Later in this chapter, I will discuss the far-reaching implications—to women of both black and non-black ancestry—of the disappearance of the dark goddess and the deep healing powers she brings to Walker’s novel.

27 Singing and quilting were permitted to some degree. See Walker, Gardens 238–239.
28 Walker’s fictional character of M’Sukta is based on similar true stories such as portrayed in *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman*, a film by Zola Maseko.

29 Sylvia Federici, in a workshop at *The Commons Conference*, University of Victoria, April 30, 2006, referred to these systems of enclosure as the “zoo-i-fi-cation of the human species.” Human beings have been “zooed” by deceptive myths that cast illusions of “free and brave” lives within the binding rules of patriarchal institutions. As Lissie says in *Temple*, “But at the zoo, at least there were no illusions about who was free and who was not” (Walker, *TF* 371).

30 According to Luisah Teish, *orisha* is the Yoruba term for

[T]he host of deities...[who are] the personifications of the forces of nature...They are prehuman archetypes of human personalities, with *extrahuman* powers and the ability to interact with people and things to affect change. Their primary function is to act as intermediaries between humans and the Great One. (Teish 56)

31 See Walker, *Temple* (267–69) and Demetra George (155–56) for stories of the destruction of Medusa as symbolic of “the period in pre-history when the white male world of Greece decapitated and destroyed the black, female Goddess tradition and culture of Africa” (Walker, *TF* 270). As well, according to George, it is significant that Medusa “embodied the third aspect [of the Triple Moon Goddess of North Africa] as destroyer/crone, and she was revered as the Queen of the Libyan Amazons, the Serpent Goddess of female wisdom” (George 155). The fall of Medusa is also discussed by Patricia Monaghan (231–232), Buffy Johnson (81), Bryan Holme (133) Barbara Walker (629), and Marta Weigle (75).

32 According to George, Desertness connotes that which is unknown, hidden, concealed and evil... As the conscious ego rejects and denies the experience and wisdom of the dark phase, these contents grow to embody our worst fears and assume the frightening form of demonic "shadows" in individuals and society. Society's attitudes towards people of colour, women's sexuality, the occult, the unconscious, the psychic arts, the aged and death itself are all manifestations of these fearful dark moon projections. (George 5)

33 The subordination of women as slave labourers and breeders necessitated the eradication of female divinity, a movement that manifested in full force during the “witch hunts.” According to Miss Lissie, in *Temple*, “the first witches to die at the stake were the daughters of the Moors [who had migrated with their “Black Madonna” into Spain]...They burned us so thoroughly... we did not even leave a trace of smoke. The connection between black women and white women was broken utterly; the blood sisterhood that African women shared with European women was gone as if it had never been” (Walker, *TF* 197). According to Starhawk, “The Burning Times [the witch hunts] were a war driving many women out of the profession of healing and midwifery and strengthening male supremacy... [and coincided with] the opening of the slave trade in Africa, the invasion of the Americas, and the devastation of native peoples” (Teish xvi). These colonial systems of domination, eradication and enclosure served to re-map many countries around the world in their own image.

34 In the “Preface” to *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour* published in 1981, Cherrie Moraga writes. “Most of the women appearing in this book are first-generation writers” (xxiv). Walker, Lorde and their contemporaries were forging new ground for Black women in print.
35 For the Yoruba, Iya Moopo not only is the goddess of spinning, weaving and indigo (All Fibres) and "the goddess of women's craft and trade who brought the knowledge of batik, tie and dye and the production of palm oil" (Trekkare 3), but also the goddess who creates all life—the "matrix of the Universe" (Ifa 2). According to Susanne Wenger, an Austrian artist who spent many years in the late twentieth century rebuilding Yoruba shrines in Nigeria, "Iya Moopo represents the ancient supreme trinity of 'The Female.' She bears totemic features that give her Iyemowo, Iya Loode, and Nana Buukun dimensions" (Ifa 2). In other words, Iya Moopo is the Triple Goddess—the Maiden, Mother & Crone—who spins, weaves and severs the threads of life, and who appears in cosmologies and mythologies the world round.
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion: Spider Woman and Textile Imagery – Important Motifs for Healing, Empowerment and Transformation Throughout the Second Wave of Feminism

After reading several works of fiction penned during the feminist second wave that drew on Spider Woman and textile imagery, questions sparked in my mind: Why are Spider Woman and textile motifs frequently found in women’s writing of this era; what do they represent; and why at this time of history is Spider Woman imagery important? Is it true, as Mary Daly asserts in Gyn/Ecology, that Spider Woman is a cosmic force that generates women’s creative power to “spook, spark and spin” new mythologies, thus new realities, through power of words?

The three novels chosen for this study—Margaret Atwood’s Lady Oracle, Paula Gunn Allen’s The Woman Who Owned the Shadows, and Alice Walker’s The Temple of My Familiar—were published at various points of the second wave era and are rich with Spider Woman and textile motifs. Daly’s template for gynocentric writing—the process of spooking, sparking and spinning—was chosen to lend a solid framework for an analysis of Spider Woman imagery as a motif for transformation and empowerment.

The “Introduction” traces the increasing importance of Spider Woman figures and textile motifs, not only in women’s writing, but also in women’s visual and performance art - a phenomenon that reflects a re-emergence of the sacred feminine suppressed by machismo-driven colonizing forces whose disastrous
policies generate harm on a global level. Replacing images of male power with images of female power has been, for many women, an important part of the healing process. It is only part of the process, however, and it is important to note that the categories of masculine and feminine—with their associations and attributes—are human constructs, as are images of gods and goddesses. Spider Woman is one such goddess figure known by many names and in many places for the healing power of her stories; for her power to guide human beings' deeper understandings of personal integrity, as well as the deep connection between all species on earth, and with the earth herself. Some of these stories, as told by Atwood, Allen and Walker, spook, spark and spin acrostic visions that highlight alternate points of view, and seed the potential to weave connections between binaries, diffuse dualities and negotiate relationships through the magic of words, each author spooking, sparking and spinning in her own unique way.

In the earliest of the three novels, *Lady Oracle* (1978), Spider Woman, who appears as the Lady of Shalott and Ariadne/Lady Oracle, is repositioned into a place of power within white eurocentric western culture. These figures serve as vehicles through which Atwood filters second wave politics concerned with establishing equality between the sexes and release from confining gender codes—such as the role of woman/goddess as muse or helpmate for men/male artists, and the foreboding message that a woman artist is doomed—spooking these harmful and outmoded myths as ridiculous designs to perpetuate the subordination and servitude of women. As well, through the example of *The Red Shoes* as a twentieth century film, *Lady Oracle* brings to light the persuasive power of popular
culture, and the symbiosis between myth, life and art. Atwood's subversive, and often comical, narrative sparks with familiar myths and imagery—such as the Lady of Shalott and Ariadne's Labyrinth—then spins alternate mythologies. In *Lady Oracle*, the Labyrinth not only becomes the design of Atwood's uniquely woven narrative, but also a powerful portal to healing and transformation for Joan's fragmented self.

*The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983) highlights Spider Woman within the culture of the Laguna Pueblo of the American Southwest. She—whom they also call "Grandmother Spider"—was dethroned as part of the colonial conquest of America. Paula Gunn Allen draws on this ancient power to further the journey of Ephanie, Allen's protagonist, who like Joan seeks healing, integration and transformation. The complex forces of oppression seen in Ephanie's life, which include racism, classism and homophobia as well as sexism, portray a markedly different realm of life experience than seen in the world of Atwood's Joan.

Resonating with the concerns of many Native women, women of colour and women of mixed heritage, Allen's novel embraces the movement towards a *mestiza* consciousness—blending, rather than severing of racial identities—and points out that imperial constructs such as hierarchies, binaries, boundaries and margins are integral components of cultural genocide. In *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* Ephanie must "spook" away the harmful and insidious myth "Good Indian Dead Indian" as well as the either/or concept of her identity—i.e. Is she Indian or is she white? Is she heterosexual, is she lesbian?—to claim her right to life. Female friendships spark Ephanie's passion, and Grandmother Spider brings Ephanie
teachings from the web of life. Ephanie begins to honour and respect her own sacred creative power, and recognized the intricate connections across time, place and space - that all are connected. Allen’s novel spins a multi-dimensional story-web of wounding and healing that reaches into shadow corners of life that had—at that time—rarely seen print, offering her story as a medicine bundle to help defend colonial enclosures around mind, body and spirit and open her reader to a view to beyond the pale.

_The Temple of My Familiar_ (1989), the latest book of this study, shifts perspective yet again, and weaves stories back to the beginning of human existence in Mother Africa—with deep reverence to the voices of the ancient ones and the ancestors—reveals the systems of enclosure, oppression and erasure utilized with ongoing measures such as the Black Diaspora, as templates for the global occupation of imperialist forces. A primary tactic of assimilation is suppression of the women’s spirituality, Goddess divinity, and compulsory reverence to a male/warrior God and supporting dogma. Walker’s novel illustrates that not only was there successful resistance to these oppressive forces, that both women’s spirituality and Goddess divinity survived, but also ways in which many of the creative arts have served as tools for personal and cultural survival – including textiles and texts. M’Sukta's colourful weavings, for example, along with diaries, journals, paintings and photographs of three white British Spinsters cast lifelines between each other and into the future where stories of M’Sukta and the matriarchal Ababa take root in a new generation, and a new continent, as do those of the Elly, Eleanora and Mary Jane.
Walker’s narrative is not, as is the case in Atwood and Allen’s novels, a solitary heroine’s quest, but is instead that of a collective of individuals who influence each other’s lives - sometimes known to each other, sometimes within invisible ties. The individual can be seen as part of a collective action that spooks away untrue histories and mythologies, and sparks new and renewed connections – with people, with countries, with other species and other lifetimes. Spider Woman iconography and imagery spin throughout the novel appearing in numerous guises—mortal and divine, male and female – heralding various cultures, spinning and weaving stories with shuttles and looms, needles and threads, feathers and fabric, sensation and sound, photographs and paintings creating beautiful story strips sewn together with curious seams. Walker’s “womanist” perspective weaves her own unique celebration of the global family; every story, every voice is important in Walker’s collective story blanket.

Spider Woman and textile imagery were increasingly important during the second wave era, not only in literature, but also in other art forms both in academic and popular culture, and often utilized as a symbol of healing, empowerment and transformation. Mary Daly’s call to women to invoke/evoke Spider Woman as a source of creative power was, in some ways prophetic. *Gyn/Ecology* is, as many critics point out, dated in some ways: political views have changed; language use has changed; concepts of divinity have changed. Daly’s work did, however, re-energize a long latent force—that of the sacred feminine—and her timing was impeccable. As well, *Gyn/Ecology* is so radically different than anything else in its time that readers were and still are, compelled to respond. The appeal of the text
became interdisciplinary, and many of Daly's ideologies became woven into the discourse of, not only women's studies, but also philosophy, theology, sociology and literature. Jane Caputi's most recent collection of essays *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and Popular Culture* (2003), is an excellent example of a work in which *Gyn/Ecology* is cited respectfully, paying credence to some of Daly's enduring concepts. Caputi, having worked with Daly on *Wickedary* (1987) is familiar with the language of individuation that marks some of the earlier second wave feminist writings, and Daly's concepts of language, in particular. *Goddesses and Monsters*, while strongly feminist in content is, however, written with inclusive language that invites readers from many and varied walks life to join in dialogue. Caputi's work demonstrates the ongoing importance of *Gyn/Ecology* both in academia and in popular culture – there is still spooking, sparking and spinning to be done.

The question of gynocentric writing and the notion of a distinct and essentially female voice was a subject of wide debate throughout the second wave era. Questions regarding sex and gender compound the issue and point towards a common denominator: forces of colonization that imposed separations, categories and degrees. The question may not be whether or not there is an essence of woman that transcends gender, or, whether or not there is a woman's way of writing, but rather, whether categories of sex and gender are useful distinctions to evaluate writing. These realms of inquiry are each far beyond the scope of this study; instead the focus of this work is to honour the foremothers of women's writing, to highlight three significant works of fiction that were published during the second
wave of feminism; and to acknowledge the far-reaching influence of Mary Daly’s work in *Gyn/Ecolgy*.

Daly’s conceptual process of spooking, sparking and spinning can be a path to develop an authentic voice which transcends categories of sex, gender, race, class and the other myriad “isms” that continue to permeate western culture.³ Daly’s process is useful both for creating and analysing literature and has been a useful tool for analyzing *Lady Oracle, The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* and *The Temple of My Familiar*. Through this lens of discovery, Margaret Atwood, Paula Gunn Allen and Alice Walker can be viewed among those writers who wish to look beyond the veils and shrouds of society, kindle the latent kundalini spark, spin visions and dreams and weave a new world with the powerful magic of words – the powerful magic a Spider Woman weaves on the loom of her own.
End Notes

1 See Appendix Two – "Gathering Threads - A Spider Woman Story" for a personal account of these early days of my research.


3 *Godresses and Monsters* (2003) by Jane Caputi shows how modern technology has taken the exploitation of women to new extremes despite over thirty years of strident feminist action focused on elevating women from secondary to equal status, across the globe.

Another useful text that points out the continuance of colonial forces in western culture is *In Our Own Voices: Learning and Teaching Towards Decolonization* (2006) edited by Proma Tagore.
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APPENDIX ONE

Walker's Web of Relationships:  
Temple's Tapestry of Voices

Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* is filled with numerous characters whose lives influence each other in ways both known and unknown to themselves and each other. This intricate multi-yarned web of relationships, a key element in Walker's text, interweaves the lives of the PRIMARY characters with the Secondary and Incidental characters into a colourful and textured narrative — shot throughout with the gleaming gold thread of gynergetic creativity of a mystical weaver woman in the centre of Walker's *Temple*. These relationships shift and change, constantly throughout the novel, challenging our notions of "family" as well as other ideological constructs of Western society. The following summary attempts a brief look at the majority of *Temple's* characters — as much as possible in the order of their appearance — and their connections and intersections with each other in Walker's complex textual transcendence of time, place, species and space, utilizing font changes as set forth above to distinguish the leading characters from the supporting cast. As in theatre — all the parts are vital to the story and the smallest voice may well hold the key to the temple; as in weaving — every thread is not only part of, but also integral to the wholeness of the cloth.

The South American **Zede the Elder**, born/lives in South America is the mother of **Zede** (or Little Zede) and the grandmother of **Carlotta**. She is a visionary artist, bell chimer and creator of ceremonial clothing who escapes the counter revolutionaries and in her later years, becomes a shaman.

**Zede** Spanish speaking, born in South America, as a child helps her mother, **Zede the Elder**, by gathering feathers to construct the ceremonial garments; later, is university educated and becomes a teacher. During the upheaval in her country, Zede is arrested and while in prison become lovers with South American aboriginal **Jesus** and conceives **Carlotta**.

**Carlotta** and **Zede** escape to America with the help of **Mary Anne Haverstock**. In America, Zede sews in a sweat shop during the day and in her off hours creates feathered capes (as her mother did) which are ordered and purchased as costumes by rock stars, (of the 1960s). One such cape, ordered by **Arveyda**, is delivered by the grown up Carlotta with whom he becomes lovers and then marries, having two children — Cedrico and **Angelita**. Zede (Carlotta's mother) and Arveyda become lovers, travelling to South and Central America together, leaving Carlotta home with the children. Carlotta, a single parent, becomes an instructor in the Women's' Studies
Department. At a faculty meeting she meets **SUWELO**, with whom she has an affair. **FANNY**, who is Suwelo’s wife, is Carlotta’s massage therapist. Arveyda returns from his travels. Zede stays on in South America, locates her mother (Zede the Elder) and marries a shaman. He and Carlotta remain married but live separately, visiting each other frequently. Fanny and Suwelo, Carlotta and Arveyda become friends. Fanny and Carlotta have a close friendship; Carlotta and Suwelo have an intimate friendship as do Fanny and Arveyda; they all take care of the children. Carlotta lives in her own little house close to where Arveyda and the children live. She becomes a bell chimist in the tradition of her grandmother, Zede the Elder, and creates music with husband, Arveyda.

**ARVEYDA**, named after a bar of soap imported from India, is American born of an African/Scots/Blackfoot mother and Mexican/Filipino/Chinese father. His mother, **Katharine Degos**, creates her own church; he never sees his father but adopts Jewish musician/grocer **Simon Isaac** as his surrogate father, embraces music and becomes a rock star. He meets and marries **CARLOTTA** and they have two children. Arveyda becomes lovers with mother-in-law **Zede** and they travel together to South and Central America. On his return, Arveyda tells Carlotta many stories of Zede’s life, and Carlotta childhood that Zede could not tell Carlotta herself. Carlotta and Arveyda stay married, have an intimate relationship, but live separately. They become collaborators in the creation of music and befriend **FANNY** and **SUWELO**. Arveyda and Fanny become lovers and through their sexual union experience a common spiritual vision.

**SUWELO**, an owlish looking man, born of Black Americans **Maria** and **Louis**, who die in a car crash during Suwelo’s childhood, a memory Suwelo has repressed. “Suwelo”, whose name means “wholeness”, named after the rune, falls in love with and marries **FANNY**, and is an instructor of American History. When Fanny goes travelling with her mother Suwelo has an affair with **CARLOTTA**. When his Great Uncle **Rafe** dies, Suwelo travels to Baltimore to handle Rafe’s affairs, having inherited the house. There he meets **Hal** and **LISSIE**, contemporaries and life-time friends of Rafe, who tell him stories about his family. Suwelo and Fanny re-unite, stay unmarried, and build a house for the two of them to share based on a design by **M’SUKTA’S** tribe, the Ababa – in the shape of a bird with a “wing” for each of Fanny and Suwelo and a common “body” to share. Suwelo seeks out Carlotta to make amends for his mistreatment of her. Not only does Suwelo find Carlotta, but as well meets **ARVEYDA**, with whom he becomes a close friend. Suwelo re-kindles intimacy with Carlotta, Carlotta and Fanny also become close friends; meanwhile, while Fanny and Arveyda become lovers.

**Rafe**, recently deceased great uncle of **SUWELO**, long-time friends to **Hal** and long-time lover to **LISSIE**. For over fifty years Rafe serves white people as a porter – a big brown bear of a man who loves food, dance, clothes and costumes,
loves to laugh, to make love, and to be a bit of a rogue. He and Lissie have a son, 
**Cornelius**, who dies while serving in the navy.  

**Hal**, a painter, is a life-long friend of **Rafe** and life-long love of **Lissie**.  
Also knew **Suweło’s** father, **Louis**. Early in life, Hal and Lissie marry; he delivers their child, **Lulu**, after which he never has sex with Lissie again, being so traumatized by the birthing process. They stay together as companions, with Rafe becoming Lissie’s lover and the three of them close friends until the end. Hal’s father, extremely homophobic after a gay encounter, tries to stop Hal from painting, but with Lissie’s encouragement, she also being an artist, he pursues his love of art throughout his lifetime. After Lissie’s death, Hal marries **Miss Rose**, a friend of Hal, Rafe and Lissie for nearly 60 years—so they can live together in an old folks’ home.  

**Lissie**, also a painter, with eyes like a hawk, is a contemporary of **Hal**, **Rafe** (Suweło’s Great Uncle), **Rose**, **Louis** and **Maria**, and true to the meaning of her name is “the one who remembers everything”, including numerous previous incarnations which she shares through her storytelling. Lissie’s father dies when she is two and she is raised by her mother **Eula Mae** and her Grandmother — **Granny Dorcy** — who were off having a row when Lissie was in labour, so husband Hal had to deliver baby **Lulu**. Lissie has four more children, but not by Hal, who never has sex with her again due to his trauma from facilitating a childbirth. Lissie has two children with a photographer/lover and two with Rafe, a close friend of Hal with whom she is life-long lovers. Lulu lives, but runs away. Of the other children, only one survives, **Cornelius**, who later in life is killed while serving in the navy.  

In terms of narrative space, Lissie is the primary story weaver of the novel — she tells the story of the temple and the familiar, plus layer upon layer of stories throughout time and place. She is a lover of life/lives, flamboyant, shape-shifter lover of costume, magical story-weaver who listens to Suweło’s story of his relationship with Fanny, and shares with Suweło the story of his father, Louis.  

**Fanny Nzingha** (called **Fanny** for most of the novel) conceived in Africa, fathered by **Dahvid/Ola**, is the daughter of **Olivia**, granddaughter of **Celie** and raised by Celie, **Shug** and Olivia in America. Fanny, who frequently falls in love with “spirits,” falls in love with the spirit of **Arveyda’s** music (without having met him). In the “real” world, she falls in love with and marries **Suweło** — but although she loves him, finds that she does not want to be married. For part of their marriage Suweło and Fanny live on five acres in a yurt. A Women’s Studies instructor, turned administration, Fanny leaves academia and becomes a massage therapist. **Carlotta**, one of Suweło’s many lovers, is one of Fanny’s clients. Fanny travels with Olivia to Africa to meet her father, during which time she also meets her half-sister **Nzingha Anne**, whose mother, a guerilla fighter married and assisted Ola in his politics. Ola has a second wife, an American woman named **Mary Jane Briden (aka Mary Anne Haverstock, aka Miss B.)** who founded and runs the M’SUKTA Art
School for Children. Mary Jane and Ola marry for their mutual benefit - she, to avoid deportation and keep the school running; he, to use the school as a space to develop his plays - right up until his death. When Fanny stays with Nzingha Anne, husband Metunda, and their children she is told many stories about her father. Fanny plans to return to Africa to help her sister write and produce a play about their father’s life. Fanny returns from her travels and reconciles with Suwelo, to the degree that they will co-habitate in a special bird-shaped dwelling place designed by the Ababa tribe, (M'Suka's tribe) a sister tribe to Fanny’s people, the Olinka. Fanny sees a therapist named Robin, of Mexican origin, who - through hypnosis - helps Fanny to remember her childhood friend Tanya (of blond Russian ancestry) whose grandmother had beaten little girl Fanny across the face for kissing little girl Tanya - a repressed memory and a personal core issue of Fanny’s rage at White people. Fanny looks up Tanya - who had married a Black man named Joe, to her family’s horror, had two children with him, divorced him, and finds her presently living in a lesbian relationship with Marie, a Japanese American. Fanny and Tanya talk about their friendship and then go their separate ways. Soon after, Fanny and Carlotta become friends, Fanny and Arveyda become friends, then Fanny and Arveyda become lovers and embrace their deep spiritual connection.

Olivia, along with her brother Adam are the result of the rape of Celie by her stepfather (by this time both of Celie’s parents are dead - her father having been lynched and her mother going mad from grief) who gives them to missionaries Samuel and Corrine to adopt. With their adoptive parents Olivia and Adam go to Africa and are raised there in an Olinka village. When Corrine dies of fever, Samuel marries Celie’s sister Nettie (who had also been sent away with missionaries to Africa) and the children’s biological Aunt, as fate would have it, then becomes their adoptive stepmother. Olivia befriends Tashi, who later becomes Adam’s wife. Olivia has a sexual liaison with Dahvid/Ola that results in a pregnancy. Olivia, while pregnant, travels back to America with Adam and Tashi, who is also pregnant, accompanied by Nettie, and all go to live with Celie and her lover/companion, Shug - who had at one time been the lover of Celie’s husband, Albert. Olivia gives birth to a daughter, FANNY NZINGHA, and Tashi gives birth to a son, Benny. Olivia meets and marries Lance. Years later, Olivia travels to Africa with Fanny Nzingha to introduce her to her father Ola, where they both meet Fanny’s half-sister Nzingha Anne for the first time.

Nzingha Anne is the child of Dahvid/Ola and an unnamed woman who was an African guerilla fighter, who assists Ola in his political plights and who he marries, impregnates, then exiles (for her protection) taking Nzingha Anne to be raise and educated by nuns. Her mother goes mad and dies when Nzingha Anne is sixteen. Ola sends Nzingha Anne to Paris to be educated, where she hates everything and returns to Africa, marries Metundi, raises their children and becomes a collaborator with her playwright father. Nzingha Anne is the vehicle through which FANNY NZINGHA, her namesake and older half-sister, learns of Ola’s life and ancestry. After Ola’s death, Nzingha Anne takes on the task of
mounting his plays and, with the help of Fanny, writing and producing a politically risky play about his life.

MARY ANNE HAVERSTOCK (aka MARY JANE BRIDEN; aka MISS B.) is sent to La Escuela de Junga by her wealthy American parents to rehabilitate her from her life of drugs and revolutionary activities. At this facility not only is she not cured, but, instead, further drugged and incapacitated. ZEDE is living there with her young child CARLOTTA and working as a maid. However, more than just a maid, Zede, who is educated, takes pity on Mary Anne, and in an act of resistance, writes Mary Anne's parents of the abuse, on receipt of which news they come and take Mary Anne home. Later, Mary Anne returns to La Escuela de Junga and liberates Zede and Carlotta from this South American "prison," taking them by boat to San Francisco, then disappearing – to all accounts lost at sea and dead. After her "death," Mary Anne Haverstock changes her name to Mary Jane Briden and travels to London where she visits her Great Aunt Eleanor Burnham who is dying in a nursing home. Unlike her great aunt's conventional, homebody twin, Eleandra, Eleanor had been an writer and world traveller, and had bequeathed her estate to a nearby women's college, where a display in her name was set up. Mary Jane visits this exhibit and through it connects with journals written by Elly Peacock, born in 1823 – Great Aunt Eleanor's aunt and Mary Jane's great great aunt – who had adventures of her own. Through these journals, Mary Jane learns of Elly Peacock's friendship with her gay cousin Theodore who takes her to the nearby museum, among other places, and shows her the M'Sukta display. Elly's journal describes her encounters with the Olinka woman, M'SUKTA, who was transported from her African village (which was destroyed) and "allowed to live" in a museum display that was meant to be a recreation of her village. M'Sukta, according to the records of British Army Commander Sir Henley Rowanbotham, who brought her to London, is the "Africa Rosetta Stone" - the archives of her people. Through Elly's journal, Mary Jane is privy to detailed descriptions of M'Sukta's activities, including weaving, singing and preparing food, keeping the culture of her people alive. According to the journals, Elly Peacock eventually—omewh—liberates M'Sukta and takes her back to Africa, living there herself for a number of years. Great Aunt Eleanor, in her predecessor's footsteps also travels to and lives in Africa for many years. In league with her foremothers, Mary Jane buys some paints and brushes and travels to Africa, where she teaches herself to paint and, as MISS B., founds the M'Sukta Art School for Children in Olinka, where she houses seventy boys and girls who have been abandoned, harmed or displaced through warfare, using art as a means of communication and healing for them. Miss B. meets Ola, a famous, but politically unpopular playwright. Miss B. and Ola marry—a legal union that assists them both—she, to avoid deportation and to keep the school open, and he, to have a place and support for rehearsing and developing his plays. They become friends and allies, Miss B. being his caretaker during his illness and dying. Miss B. and FANNY meet after Ola's death, and from her, Fanny accesses both new stories of
her father's life, and stories of M'Sukta as written in the journals of Eleanora Burnham and Elly Peacock.

**M'SUKTA**, although a secondary character in the novel in terms of narrative space, is primary in terms of influential space. This ancient weaver woman can be seen as the Spider Woman deity in the center of Alice Walker's web of a novel. M'Sukta's influence transcends time and space. She is the golden thread of connection with the Great Mother Goddess of Africa and weaves the ways of the old world into the hearts and lives of many of _Temple's_ modern day characters – M'Sukta's very essence and presence is a catalyst for transformation and healing. Symbolically, M'Sukta resonates deeply with the life/death/life weaver goddess archetypes. She spins and weaves her stories for all that has been, all that is, and all that will be.
APPENDIX TWO

Gathering Threads: A Spider Woman Story

In the beginning there was thought and her name was woman
She is the OLD woman who tends the fires of life
She is the OLD woman spider who weaves us together.
She is the eldest God and the one who remembers and
RE-MEMBERS

(A Year By the Sea by Joan Anderson, 103)

My journey with Spider Woman—the Cosmic Weaver of the Universal Web of Life—began many years ago. This primordial divinity—also known as the Mother of All Life, Great Mother, First Woman, Old Woman, Isis, and given myriad more names throughout the world—made herself known to me in the early 1990s, during my undergraduate years in Women’s Studies at Malaspina College. During this time I was also introduced to Mary Daly’s Gyn/Ecology, a radical text which has been influential in my academic journey ever since. I admired then, as I admire now, Daly’s courage and tenacity in bringing the Goddess to visibility, and highlighting her role as the Sacred Spinner and Weaver of All Life. Daly’s position that Spider Woman and textile imagery are innate components of women’s creativity and spirituality has certainly met with debate; more important, however may be Daly’s work in bringing to light the way in which women’s “fibres of being” are damaged by systems of violence within many existing social constructs. Although, Daly’s text has subsequently been subject to criticism and scrutiny,
especially with charges of eurocentrism, she is among the first authors of the
"second wave of feminism" to detect ways in which seemingly disparate threads of
systems of oppression, when woven together, reveal patterns of a global dimension
to forces of violence utilized to oppress women, and ultimately, society at large.
Charting new territories in her cross-cultural analysis of women's oppression, Daly
detects growing social patterns which simultaneously exploit women and the earth,
as resources harnessed by oppressive nation-states for survival and expansion.
Within these constructs, the pre-existing divinity, the Goddess as Universal Life-
Weaver, was replaced with an Almighty Warrior God; concurrently, recognition of
women's own divine aspect was oppressed, along with sovereignty of her physical,
mental and emotional aspects. Women's place in society was, ultimately, reduced
to the virgin/whore binary, which not only served to further diminish women's
multifaceted nature, but also to reduce her worth to little more than a sexual
commodity.

Gerda Lerner traces this process in her 1986 text, *The Creation of Patriarchy.*
While her work focuses on the Judeo-Christian religion of the ancient world, her
analysis clearly focuses on the evolution of Mother Goddess centered society to
Warrior God dominated society and the resultant cultures thereby. The reformation
of the Western world, while gradual, both simultaneously and subsequently took
hold in other parts of the world; the process was violent - cultures were destroyed,
languages and other symbol systems were eradicated or instated with new
meanings. The Goddess, however, did not completely disappear overnight. She
was often re-assigned as submissive queen to the Warrior King God or diminished
through fragmentation into a pantheon of disempowered goddesses, each representing an aspect or malign aspect of the Great Goddess; for example, within many sects of Christianity there is, in the shadow of the background, Mary the Mother of Christ, the Handmaiden of God. While Mary, within these sects, occupies a submissive space in relationship to “God the Father,” other sects of Christianity revere Mary as the “Mother of God” and she, for many women in Western culture, is a thread of connection to the Great Goddess of ages past.

Is it any wonder that so many women are embracing what has been referred to as the “Return of the Goddess” of the late twentieth century with its associated possibilities for a wholeness of expression in women’s lives, and, in a number of ways following Mary Daly’s tactics of “Spooking,” “Sparkling,” and “Spinning” a gynocentric vision of our world? First, as Daly points out, women must recognize the lies and deceits, for what they are and see that within the dualistic construct of the English language lie roots of male domination over women. Further, social and religious dogma, and cultural myths have served to reinforce this paradigm, some say for at least 5,000 years. For the most part, pre-existing linguistic designs and symbols systems were destroyed and only through fragmented artifacts and threads of memory does evidence of pre-patriarchal culture exist at all.

The work of Marija Gimbutas in the early 1980s provides a key to reframing or redefining ancient Goddess amulets and other cultural remains by imagining a new mode—a feminist vision—of interpretation. What if? What if women once held a place of esteem and authority both in human and divine form? And what if a matricentred culture embraced the creative and procreative gifts of womanhood and
cherished the earth as a sacred home. How then would the remains of these ancient times speak to us?

While Gimbutas was revisioning Goddess symbol remains of pre-patriarchal cultures, other feminist scholars, including Merlin Stone, were rethinking Goddess mythology. What if the patriarchal descriptions of the various goddesses had been fabricated from socio-politico-religious propaganda? What would we see if we looked beyond the prevailing interpretations and re-fashioned Goddess figures as autonomous and powerful? How might the human societies be differently organized when the Creator of the Universe is imagined as a female divinity—a Great Mother—who encompasses all of these aspects and more? And further, what are the implications if mortal women are seen to embody and reflect this divine energy, as suggested by Jean Shinoda Bolen in her 1984 publication *Goddesses in Every Woman*?

Daly, too, acknowledges the divine spark within and prompts women to embrace the divine feminine as innate. For Daly, there is a process for reclaiming the lost Goddess energy, and she sets women forth “spooking,” “sparking,” and “spinning.” Spooking means looking deeply into the background—the shadows—of the myths women are taught, and seek truth. Sparking engages the gynergetic flame of female friendship; Daly observes that along with restricting women’s roles in society, patriarchal culture also restricts female friendships. Under patriarchal rule women most often are instead encouraged to be in competition with each other for the attention of men, and to focus our energy on fulfilling the needs of the male members of society. Women's circles and rituals to honour the Goddess and to
celebrate and mark the passing of the season and cycles were, for the most part, forbidden, and to all public appearance, discontinued.

Second wave feminist consciousness challenged this paradigm with the emergence of women's consciousness raising, Goddess worship circles and rituals, lesbian activism and, for some — separatism. What if the primary focus of women's lives was no longer exclusively around a male relationship, but rather on a bouquet of female relationships - mothers, sisters, daughters, friends and lovers? What if a focus could also be to embrace and celebrate each individual's own experience of being alive? What happens when women join creative energies together?

"Spinning" is what happens according to Mary Daly — spinning and whirling into new dimensions. When female energies connect, Spider Woman energy is activated. This divine gynergetic force is at work re-weaving our world. With the assistance of new technology, women not only can join threads of thought, experience and creativity with those close at hand, but with a global women's network. Spider Woman's web is this web of connection, and the emergence of a New World design for humanity. Extending Daly's theory, Donna Haraway's work in the early 1990s looks at the connections between myth and society, and the need to create new myths for this new era. In her current work, Haraway proposes that these energetics of connection are not only being activated and recognized on an inter-human basis, but also on an inter-species basis. What seems to be in process is integration, unity and restoration of the global web. What also seems to be emerging is a proliferation of Spider Woman imagery —the spider, the web, the weaver, the loom, thread, fibers and textiles —especially, in post -1970s women's
writing. What seems most clear are the healing modalities of Spider Woman imagery, and the movement towards these motifs in literature and other art forms as means to mend the fragmented consciousness of humanity and healing the global web.

The focus of my present research is woman-healing, and by extension, community and planetary healing, through Spider Woman motifs as evident in contemporary women's writing. My journey with Spider Woman has, so far, been a sojourn of nearly two decades, beginning with an essay in a Women and Fiction course where I applied Mary Daly's theory of women as spinners to Virginia Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which I viewed Clara as the Spider Woman in the center of her own personal and societal web, weaving the strands of her world together. Later, in another Women's Studies course I used Spider Woman energetics and a web modality to discuss the ways in which women integrate experience and potentials. But, it wasn't until April 2000 that Spider Woman truly spoke to me—as Grandmother Spider—at gathering of shamanic arts practitioners in the hills north of Tucson, Arizona.

There, I participated in a healing ritual in which Grandmother Spider was invoked to bring healing to each participant in turn as we chanted and danced for the restoration and healing of each personal web. Threads were revived, reinvigorated, renewed, restored; some needed to be replaced or reinvented, to resonate with each personal web design—mandala—life destiny. As well, we sang to the global net—the web that connects all life in the universe with itself and each other—to help repair the enormous damage has been done. During the ritual, I was
given an image—the image of Grandmother Spider mending the web, spinning the web, tending the web—and I knew that my research project, which at that time was forming around revisionary mythology in women’s writing would focus on the images and symbols of Spider Woman energetics as a healing modality in contemporary women’s writing.

Since beginning my research, the evidence of the importance of Spider Woman in contemporary women’s writing is overwhelming. It seems that wherever I go, I find more and more examples of the importance of weaving as a motif for women writers, both in and outside the academic canon. One day, while at home on one of the Gulf Islands of British Columbia, neighbour Karen McLaughlin, an artist and writer, showed me her original version of a project entitled *Choral*, subsequently published as a novel (1995). Karen unscrolled over the length of her studio, the beginning portion of what had years earlier been presented as an installation art project. About three feet in width, the continuous page was actually separate panels, each composed of three sections—above, middle and below—with each section presenting a different perspective to the narrative. The sections had been stitched together, as had each panel. The thread of Spider Woman gave form to Karen’s narrative art which when fully displayed circumnavigated an entire room. As a novel, *Choral* retains some of the narrative play, but the thread design, which interconnected the panel pages on each side, was replaced by the bookbinding, giving a markedly different presentation to the story.

Another “close-to-home” example of Spider Woman energetics in women’s writing was discovered in the office washroom of my Chemainus chiropractor. A
little booklet, just sitting there—small, hand-bound on recycled paper, self-published, entitled Threads (1999)—by Chemainus artist/writer Sylvia McIntosh Verity. Inside, on page 1, this poem greeted me:

To My Reader
From
my heart
to yours

May the
threads
of your life
weave a
pattern of
beauty
both dark
& light

A tapestry to
remember.

Another discovery was a novle, set in a Native community on Vancouver Island—Bone Bird (1989) by Darlene Barry Quaife—refers to the Spider Woman deity as First Woman, whose knowledge is carried by an old Native woman. In Bone Bird, a “living thread” (Quaife 119) of the teachings of First Woman keeps the circle of life in balance—or if, as in the case of this story's young heroine, Aislinn, the circle of life is out of balance, through the teachings of First Woman balance can be restored.

A final example of Spider Woman energetics in contemporary women's writing is I Remember Union (1992) by Flo Aevia Magdalena which, although promoted as a fiction, the author claims to be a channeled re-telling of the story of Mary
Magdalene. Rather than the preservation of cultural mythology from the oral tradition incorporated in Quaife's novel, Magdalena's story exemplifies re-visionary mythology. Drawing on oracular and visionary sources, she offers a new version of the story of Mary Magdalene and her role in the life of Christ. In her novel, Magdalena plays with language and form, drawing on the concept of concrete poetry and installation verse. Key to her imagery is the "fiber of being" and the healing of humans through realizing that there is no separation, that all is union and within that unity, each life has a unique and purposeful design (Magdalena 101).

Spider Woman imagery in contemporary women's writing is found, as these examples illustrate, both in and outside the spotlight; and there are numerous more selections. Theorists such as Miriam Peskowitz would hold true that women employ a weaving motif because society, historically, has situated women in the occupation of weaving, and that weaving has been culturally imposed on women along with other modes of stitchery and thread-based arts, and thereby provides a comfortable metaphor. Be that as it may, it appears that numerous women chose to employ Spider Woman as a literary motif as well as in other creative endeavours. As the Great Primordial Mother, First Mother, Great Goddess, She has been reinstated in contemporary women's consciousness. The web is a modality of our healing and concurrently, our personal healing is healing the web of life. This is a time on earth that the teachings Spider Woman—known by hundred of names around the world—is vitally important for the continuation of life on earth.
For my Master's thesis in English literature I have chosen three novels and novelists widely recognized within academia for my inquiry. My study looks at ways in which Margaret Atwood, Paula Gunn Allen and Alice Walker manifest the healing energies of Spider Woman not only to their fictional writing, but also in their personal and political lives. Each is, in her own unique way, an activist and catalyst for change, a role model for today's women, as well as a literary artist utilizing language, image, metaphor and form to bring healing to the wounded web of the world.

I come to this project with trepidation. I have restarted my writing again and again. I have fragments scattered around my office and scattered papers in my filing cabinet. This work is an integral part of my being – to be called by Spider Woman to bring her healing energies in contemporary literature to light; to show how both by writing and reading her words, there will be transformation, the vibration will be healing. It is a challenge to know where the personal and experiential ends and, the academic analysis begins. How do I integrate the spiritual with the literary-based inquiry within the tradition of academia? I suspect that there will be threads of thought from several diverse, yet connected, sources – contemporary literature and critical theory, ancient myth and revisionary myth as well as mysticism, theology and philosophy, with a healthy sprinkling of feminism over all.

The vision I have for my work is that it be a vibrant web and a reflection of unity and the movement, by all attentive human beings who are diligently gathering together threads of memory, threads of thought, threads of dreams and visions, and
weaving stories to create a peaceful world. I dedicate this web to Spider Woman, with whom I walk daily. To walk with Spider Woman is to walk with all beings of all time, all places and all space.

Blessings to All
SPIDER WOMAN

In the beginning
Is the thread of thought,
A strand of consciousness that spins out
Over the void, across galaxies,
Until it anchors itself on a far away star.

Between the beginning
Of the thread and the resting point
Of its journey lies the emptiness
Of all the universe, the whole potential
Waiting for the song of life to take form.

In the beginning
Spider Woman spins and sings
The song of life
The web of be-ing

Janice Young
May 2004