

## **A Spider Woman story**

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## A Spider Woman Story

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### Abstract

*Spider Woman, the Cosmic Weaver, as healing symbol and image of empowerment, found a prominent place in the linguistic landscape of second-wave feminist discourse. Although not synonymous with feminism, feminist spirituality emerged as a strong current within the movement, a current which continues today. In Gyn/Ecology, a highly influential text of this era, Mary Daly shows the link between language, myth, and oppression and sets women to the task of recognizing ways in which our words and stories betray us. Further, she sets us to design words and stories through the power of Spider Woman imagery and textile metaphors. Using Daly's work as a springboard, the following essay traces the emerging role of Spider Woman in developing a "gynocentric language" and a new linguistic landscape, evidenced in women's writing as it continues into the new millennium.*

### Prologue

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 resign 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

### 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<sup>1</sup>

My journey with Spider Woman—the Great Goddess as Weaver of the Universal Web of Life—began a long time ago, probably more than I am consciously aware of. This primordial divinity, also known as the Mother of All Life, Great Mother, First Woman, Old Woman, Isis, and myriad other names throughout the world, made herself known to me during my undergraduate years in the Women's Studies program at Malaspina College. During this time (1994) I was also introduced to Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*, a radical text which has been influential in my academic analysis ever since. I admired then, as now, Daly's courage and tenacity in bringing the Goddess to visibility, highlighting her role as the Sacred Spinner and Weaver of All Life. Whether weaving is actually an innate component of women's spirituality, or whether spinning and weaving are applied as metaphors for the energetics of women's perceptions and process of creations, is less important than the role of Daly's work in bringing to light the way women's "fibres of being" have been damaged through the process of colonization. Although Daly's 1978 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, when woven together into an interconnection of design, show the patterns of destruction imposed on women—and by association, children, men, and ultimately all societal relations, through the process of colonization and its warrior culture. Achieved through legislated domination of women's lives, the restriction of women's activities, and diminishment of female divinity, the patriarchal society offers, at most, a fragmented existence for women.

Daly's work is also groundbreaking for connecting the processes of women's oppression

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Anderson, *A Year by the Sea: Thoughts of an Unmarried Woman* (New York: Random House, 1999), 103.

through violence in Western civilization with the global domination of women, global violence, and the domination of the earth and violence towards all living there, with this politico-religious warrior culture known as patriarchy. Within this newly established social construct, the Goddess as Universal Life-Weaver/Creatrix and Sustainer of All was replaced with an Almighty Warrior God/Ruler of All. Concurrently, recognition of women's own divine aspect was repressed, 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 her multifaceted nature, but also to reduce her worth to that of a sexual commodity.

Gerda Lerner traces this process in her 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-centred society to Warrior God-dominated society, and their resultant cultures. The reformation of the Western world, while gradual, simultaneously took hold in other parts of the world as well. The process was violent—cultures were destroyed and languages and other symbol systems eradicated or reinstated with new meanings. The Goddess, for example, did not completely disappear overnight. She was first reassigned as submissive queen to the Warrior King God and later further diminished through fragmentation into a pantheon of disempowered goddesses, each representing an aspect or thwarted aspect of the Great Goddess. For example, within many sects of Christianity we find in the background Mary the Mother of Christ, or Handmaiden of God. While she occupies in some of these sects a submissive space in relationship to “God the Father,” in others she is revered as “Mother of God,” and represents, for many women in Western culture, 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, and in a number of ways following Mary Daly's tactics of “spooking,” “sparking,” and “spinning”<sup>2</sup> anew a gyno-centred cosmos? First, as Daly points out, we must recognize the lies and deceits for what they are. We must see that within the dualistic construct of the

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* [with a “New Intergalactic Introduction” by the author] (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990). OC.

English language lie the roots of male domination over women. Further, our social and religious dogma and cultural myths have served to reinforce this paradigm, some say for at least 5000 years of Western civilization. For the most part, pre-existing linguistic designs and symbol 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 (1982) provides a key to reframing or redefining ancient goddess amulets and other cultural remains by imagining a new mode—a feminist vision—of interpretation.<sup>3</sup> What if? What if women once held a place of esteem and authority both in human and divine form? And what if a matri-centred culture embraced the creative and procreative gifts of womanhood and cherished the earth as our 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—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: A New Psychology of Women*?<sup>4</sup>

Daly, too, acknowledges the divine spark within women and prompts us to embrace our divine nature. For Daly, there is a process for reclaiming the lost Goddess energy, and she sets us forth “spooking,” “sparking,” and “spinning.”<sup>5</sup> Spooking means looking deeply into the background or the shadows of the myths within

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<sup>3</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses of Old Europe, 6,500-3,500 BC*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Everywoman: A New Psychology of Women* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Daly, op. cit.

which we are taught to seek truth. Sparking engages the gynesergetic spark of female friendship, another strand of healing energetics worth pursuing, because as Daly observes, along with restricting women's roles in society, patriarchal culture also restricts female friendships. Under patriarchal rule women are instead encouraged to be in competition with each other for the attention of men, and to focus their 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 of life have become part of the past (at least to all public appearances) with women's energy being re-routed to serve a Warrior God and mortal men.

Second-wave feminist discourse 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 on men, but rather first on ourselves and our mothers, sisters, daughters, friends, and lovers? What if our focus was not solely to support the experiences of men, but also to embrace and celebrate our 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 gynesergetic energy 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 (1991) looks at the need to create new myths for this new era.<sup>6</sup> She proposes that these energetics of connections are not only being activated and recognized on an inter-human basis, but are also activated on an inter-species basis.<sup>7</sup> What appears to be in process is integration, unity and restoration of the global web. A proliferation of Spider Woman imagery is emerging—the spider, the web, the weaver, the loom, thread, fibre and textiles—especially in post-1970s women's writing, which can be seen as related to the second wave of feminism, and in

consciousness raising activities regarding violence towards women and the eradication of the earth. Eco-feminism also has roots in this era with the web becoming an often-used symbol of the interrelatedness of all beings on earth and beyond. Again, we see Spider Woman energetics at work. What seems most clear is the healing modalities of Spider Woman energies and the movement towards mending the fragmented consciousness of humanity and earth, with a focus on woman-healing, and rightly so, since these energetics resonate with the female divinity that has been oppressed in patriarchal societies.

As is evident here, the focus of my present research is woman-healing, and by extension, community and planetary healing, through Spider Woman energetics as evident in contemporary women's writing. To date, my journey with Spider Woman has been a ten-year sojourn, beginning in 1996 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*. Here, I portrayed Clara as the Spider Woman in the centre of her own personal and societal web, weaving the strands of her world together. In a subsequent 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 energy, at a gathering of shamanic arts practitioners in the hills north of Tucson, Arizona. 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 the restoration and healing of each personal web. Threads were revived, reinvigorated, renewed, and restored. Some needed to be replaced or reinvented, to resonate with each personal web design, mandala, or life destiny. We also sang to the global net—the web that connects all life in the universe with itself and others—to help repair the enormous damage that 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. Women today are spinning new

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<sup>6</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, LLC, 2003).

stories for a new time, birthing a new consciousness, conjoining with other healing and reintegration forces to shift our cultural paradigm away from the Warrior God construct.

Since beginning my research, the evidence of the importance of Spider Woman energetics in contemporary women's writing is overwhelming. It seems that wherever I go I find more examples of the importance of weaving as a motif for women writers. One day, while at home on one of the Gulf Islands of British Columbia, my neighbour Karen McLaughlin, an artist and writer, showed me her original version of a project entitled *Choral*, subsequently published as a novel.<sup>8</sup> Karen unscrolled over the length of her studio the beginning portion of what had once 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 in the form of a little booklet. I found it just sitting there, a small, hand-bound book made of recycled paper, self-published, entitled *Threads* (1999), written by Chemainus artist/writer Sylvia McIntosh Verity. Inside, on the first page, 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.<sup>9</sup>

Spider Woman energetics and imagery in contemporary women's writing are found, as these two examples illustrate, both inside and outside of the spotlight, but remain numerous nevertheless. Theorists such as Miriam Peskowitz would hold true that women employ a weaving motif because society, historically,

<sup>8</sup> Karen McLaughlin, *Choral* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Sylvia McIntosh Verity, *Threads and Things* (Chemainus, 1999; lettered by hand by the artist).

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, thereby providing us with a comfortable metaphor.<sup>10</sup>

This raises the “chicken and egg” question of which came first. What kind of weaving did women do before the patriarchal world took hold? Still keeping close to home, I would like to bring to light the novel *Daughters of Copper Woman* (1981) written by Anne Cameron, in which Cameron retells, with permission of a group of Vancouver Island Native women storytellers, myths and legends about First Woman, who was also called Copper Woman. Copper Woman gives birth to four couples— one white, one black, one yellow, one brown—who, after a flood, disperse to the four directions to create new worlds. All four couples are related to Copper Woman and all are related to each other, but separation has caused forgetfulness<sup>11</sup>. Copper Woman leaves her earthly realm, turning her bones into a broom and a loom, and, becoming Old Woman, with the loom weaves “the pattern of destiny.”<sup>12</sup>

A later book, also set in a Native community on Vancouver Island, is *Bone Bird* (1989) by Darlene Barry Quaiife. This book also refers to the Spider Woman deity in the form of First Woman, whose knowledge and energetics, as in *Daughter of Copperwoman*, are carried by an old Native woman. In *Bone Bird*, a “living thread”<sup>13</sup> of the teachings of First Woman keeps the circle of life in balance. 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 selection for this introduction to Spider Woman energetics in contemporary women's writing is *I Remember Union* by Flo Aevia Magdalena (1992) which, although promoted as fiction, is claimed by the author to be a channeled retelling of the story of Mary Magdalene. Rather than the oral preservation of cultural mythology incorporated in the novels by Quaiife and

<sup>10</sup> Mariam Peskowitz, “Unweaving,” in *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 13 (Spring 1997), 137–144.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Cameron, *Daughters of Copper Woman* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1981), 145.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Darlene Barry Quaiife, *Bone Bird* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1989), 119.

Cameron, Magdalena's story exemplifies revisionary 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 through the use of concrete poetry and installation verse. Central 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.<sup>14</sup>

I mention these texts (which I selected from an ever-growing list of Spider Woman stories) to illustrate the importance of weaving as a healing metaphor in women's writing. Spider Woman energetics is one theme that women chose to employ in our literary works as well as in other creative endeavors such as poetry, visual arts, and performance art. As the Great Primordial Mother/First Mother/Great Goddess, She has been reinstated in the consciousness of many contemporary women. The web is a modality of our healing and conversely our healing is the healing for the web of life. This is a time on earth that the teachings of the primordial Weaver of all Life, the Great Mother Goddess—known by hundreds of names around the world—is vitally important for the continuation of life on earth.

For the main body of my research for my master's thesis in English literature, I chose to study three novels and novelists widely recognized within academia. My study looks at ways in which Margaret Atwood, Alice Walker and Paula Gunn Allen bring the healing energies of Spider Woman to their fictional writing, as well as the ways in which Spider Woman energetics manifest in their personal and political lives. Each is, in her own unique way, an activist, catalyst for change, and 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 random 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, and to show how by both writing and reading Her words, there will be transformation. The vibration will be a healing one. It is a challenge to know where the personal and experiential ends and the academic analysis begins. How do I integrate the spiritual with a literary-based inquiry within the tradition of academia? I suspect that I will include 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.

My vision for this work is that it be a vibrant web and a reflection of unity. 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.

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<sup>14</sup> Flo Aeveia Magdalena, *I Remember Union: The Story of Mary Magdalena* (1992), 101.