SPINNING A BIGENDERED IDENTITY IN SILKO'S *CEREMONY* AND PUIG'S *KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN*

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In a number of Native American traditions, Spider Woman is creator of the universe and an important source of cultural wisdom and social values. Also called Thought Woman and Grandmother Spider, this divine figure uses the power of her imagination, womb, abdominal spinneret glands, intellect, emotions, and voice to bring humans into existence and help them develop balanced identities and harmonious communities. Robert Boissiere calls her "a force, an energy," whose ability to spin webs of life and language derives from the "Woman Spirit" who provides "succor and peace," enabling the Spider Woman "to nurture and protect."[1] Paula Gunn Allen writes that Spider Woman's feminine energy inspires tribal storytellers of both sexes to "make pertinent points to some listener who is about to make a mistake or who has some difficulty to resolve."[2] According to Allen, contemporary Native storytellers help listeners and readers confront bigotry in mainstream society and "make communal, transcendent meaning out of human experience."[3] They teach the value of diversity and cooperation, interweaving various literary genres, levels of diction, and narrative techniques to unite people of different races, genders, and sexual preferences and with different social attitudes and spiritual beliefs.

Western culture's original Spider Woman was Arachne, master weaver of Greek mythology. Many consider her story a morality tale, the story of a woman who is punished for being conceited and not deferring to male authority by being transformed into a spider. However, feminist scholars argue that Arachne was unjustly punished for taking pride in her artistic talents and boldly challenging patriarchal domination, "the interwoven structures of power, gender, and identity."[4] In the myth, Arachne fearlessly

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engages the "male-identified divine weaver Athena" in a weaving competition and creates a masterpiece tapestry that denies male superiority and protests sexual violence against women.[5]

Two millennia later, Spider Woman is still "an enigmatic, archetypal version of the female," whose knowledge, confidence, and sexuality frighten the male establishment.[6] Western popular culture typically subjugates her to the role of archetypal whore. The noir tradition, for example, pits the male hero against an evil seductress and murderous "black widow," exploiting society's fear of strong women to justify male domination and destruction. Philippa Gates suggests that the burgeoning feminist movement's critique of gender roles intensified "the close association of *noir* with masculinity in crisis," a crisis in which the male hero summons the courage and strength to subdue the beautiful, duplicitous, and ruthless femme fatale, the noir Spider Woman, before she ensnares him in her web of lies and depravity.[7] Interestingly, Western culture also brands Spider Woman as the archetypal virgin. New Age spiritualism, for example, naturalizes her as an idealized earth mother.[8] The romantic tradition's appropriation of female power and wisdom is gentler than noir's demonization and annihilation, but it is no less oppressive since it relegates an active, complex figure to a passive, ornamental role. Nevertheless, the Woman Spirit resists neutralization; it subverts Western culture's restrictive patriarchal norms and promotes female agency and a bigendered male identity.

This essay analyzes two contemporary literary works that champion Spider Woman and her subversive and transformative energy: Leslie Marmon Silko's 1977 novel *Ceremony* and Manuel Puig's 1976 novel *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Although Silko and Puig did not share the same sex, ethnic background, nationality, language, sexual orientation, or artistic sensibility, both called on traditional storyteller and divine authority Spider Woman to heal a rift in the modern male psyche, a rift caused by the suppression of the feminine side of his humanity. Each author's own sense of self was ruptured by mainstream Western culture, Silko as a Native American female in the United States and Puig as a leftist homosexual in Argentina. They both responded to Western society's rigid social mores and conventional literary style with an Arachnean tapestry of words, a polyphonic mixture of oral and written storytelling that guides the reader to a more harmonious, integrated self. Their male protagonists, Tayo in *Ceremony* and Valentin in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, only escape patriarchal imprisonment by replacing their (self-)destructive male identity with a self that utilizes all of their "masculine" and "feminine" qualities. With Spider Woman's help,

the conflicted male hero must remake himself, become mother to his own emotional, spiritual, and cultural rebirth.

Spider Woman and Male Motherhood

Puig communes with the spirit of Spider Woman to write his novel, spinning a web of imagination and regenerative sexuality—intimacy of words and intimacy of bodies—in order to capture and devour the belief that men must dominate others and destroy the feminine within themselves. Patrick O'Connor praises *Kiss of the Spider Woman* for evoking phallic mother and grand storyteller Spider Woman to defend "certain kinds of perversions" against "the master discourses of normality."[9] Puig's male protagonist Valentin learns to embrace and express "deviant" emotions and acts, like love of and cooperation with another person (both a woman and another man). This political rebel discovers, according to Anne Callahan, that "falling in love is the ultimate revolutionary act," for it validates his femininity and defeats his homophobia.[10]

Kiss of the Spider Woman reconceives masculinity, undermining the Latin American *machismo* identity and destabilizing readerly expectation by blurring the border between stories told and stories lived. The novel disrupts conventional masculine narrative style and explores the complexity of identity by intertwining various storytelling methods: direct narrative, allegory, dreams told as stream-of-consciousness monologue, dialogue formatted as for a play, surveillance and arrest reports, grocery lists, and academic footnoting. The effect is confusion and an impulse to reevaluate; rather than propelling straightforward plot development, the stories within stories encourage psychological introspection as the male characters question established social norms and conceive of a new approach to masculinity.[11]

Silko frames *Ceremony* as a collaboration with Grandmother Spider, beginning the novel with "I'm telling you the story she is thinking"[12]. By giving the feminine creative-communal spirit center stage on the novel's unnumbered, almost extratextual first page, Silko subverts masculine control over cultural discourse, gender identity, and moral values. She rejects Western society's divisive, violent, patriarchal mindset, which literary scholar Mary Daly associates with the Christian holy trinity: a self-absorbed, death-oriented, all-male family that perpetrates a global "Reign of Terror, the reign of the fathers and sons."[13] To counter this attitude and eliminate

its power, Silko mixes spirituality and oral stories from her tribe (Laguna Pueblo) into her novelistic prose. She follows the Laguna tradition of celebrating a reciprocal relationship with the deities to make her novel "a culturally determined heteroglossia," a fabric of interwoven voices, experiences, and meanings.[14] Silko ensnares male readers in her narrative web in order to devour their Western aggression, selfishness, destructiveness, and despair.

Both novels respond to the aggressive masculine attitudes at the heart of Western society. *Ceremony* ties the violence young men were forced to witness and perform during World War II to postwar white male hegemony in America. Upon their return, the soldiers either embraced American society's renewed attack on the feminine or experienced such inner turmoil that they exploded with the emotional and cultural self-destructive force of the atomic bomb, developed near Silko's reservation before it was used on Japanese civilians. Minority voices were helpless against America's democratically elected authorities, who used legal means of race and gender repression, generally accepted by mainstream society as necessary for prosperity and stability during the 1950s. Any dissenters were ostracized, incarcerated, or institutionalized. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* addresses a different kind of war that had some similar consequences. Rather than a war against a foreign government and people, Argentina's "Dirty War" of the 1970s and early 1980s was period of government violence and repression against its own citizens. The military junta that took power in 1976 engaged in widespread counterinsurgency, and anyone who deviated, politically or sexually, from what the *machista* authorities deemed acceptable was "disappeared": imprisoned, tortured, and often killed without due process. Although there are many political and cultural differences between 1950s America and 1970s Argentina, both novels resist societies based on destruction, competition, anger, and hate.

Puig's protagonist Valentin and Silko's protagonist Tayo start out trapped in this patriarchal worldview. Its intellectual, emotional, and cultural restrictions are not merely academic; they take physical form: leftist revolutionary Valentin spends the novel in an Argentine prison, while Native American Tayo is confined alternately to a New Mexican Indian reservation, a World War II prisoner-of-war camp, and a U.S. Army psychiatric hospital. Each rejects the status quo, unable to stomach his assigned role in an oppressive, exploitative, masculinist society. Thus, patriarchy's attempt to reassert its authority over these social transgressors, in addition to their own rejection of their assigned male identity, propels them into an ungendered liminal space where they become nonselves. Valentin and Tayo's survival

and happiness depend on them escaping from this identity crisis and giving birth to a better manhood, a unified personhood, but they can achieve this only after they embrace Spider Woman, "the female soul"[15]

Initially, however, each is alienated from the feminine within himself, so in order for them to escape social prejudice and psychological chaos the spirit of Spider Woman must take physical form. In *Ceremony*, Night Swan, Josiah, Betonie, and Ts'eh each spins a web of feminine storytelling and love to ensnare Tayo and guide him away from a discriminatory and oppressive society. "Their evil is mighty," the narrator argues, "but it can't stand up to our stories" (2). These stories heal communal and psychological discord; they calm Tayo's troubled psyche, so he can discover and nurture a more complete self. The stage is set for strength, compassion, and wisdom to mature within Tayo's consciousness and for a feminist, Native worldview to mature within the reader's consciousness.

Valentin's flesh-and-blood Spider Woman is Molina, a character that scholar Mira Wiegmann likens to a Navajo Spider Woman.[16] A transgendered homosexual who loves romantic films, Molina uses storytelling and sexuality to help "her" troubled cellmate escape his hypermasculine identity, which Valentin subconsciously finds untenable, and rediscover his femininity. Shari Zimmerman explains that Molina helps Valentin escape the masculine "urge" to objectify and master others, particularly women.[17] David Bost writes that Valentin's "union with Molina is a symbolic crossover from typical Latin machismo to an acultural androgyny."[18] The novel challenges the binary opposition between "masculine"and "feminine."[19] It reveals the hypocrisy of the *machismo* identity, an identity that fractures and imprisons a man, mind, body, and soul.

The male protagonist in these novels must become the mother of his own spiritual rebirth. In *Ceremony*, after retelling the traditional story of Spider Woman's creation of the universe, Silko uses the same oral storytelling technique herself to present a nameless male character whose belly is full with narratives that will supply health and hope to himself and his community: "Here, put your hand on it/See, it is moving./There is life here/for the [Laguna] people" (2). Paula Gunn Allen writes in "The Psychological Landscape of *Ceremony*" that Tayo's cure requires being "initiated into motherhood," "planting [Grandmother Spider's] plants and nurturing them."[20] Valentin also experiences this initiation; he nurtures a deeper sense of love, sensuality, and hope, from which he develops greater mental and emotional strength and wisdom. At one point, Molina calls him Miss Valentina, denaturalizing his masculinist identity and mocking society's gender inequalities.[21]

Tayo and Valentin discover that achieving wholeness demands more from them than does the paternal act of conceiving a new self. They must bear and nurture a bigendered self; they must go through a process much like pregnancy. As the first step in this process, the characters share sexual intimacy with Spider Woman, who impregnates each with the seeds of doubt about Western male identity. Both protagonists experience morning sickness, a physical nausea caused by their revulsion of patriarchal values. Much as the ovum and sperm are united in fertilization, masculine and feminine traits unite and mature within Tayo and Valentin. Finally, each protagonist endures intense physical and psychic pain as he gives birth to a new self, creating and nurturing a new story.

Nurturing a Bigendered Self

Tayo and Valentin must conceive a new self-image before it can be realized. Human conception, pregnancy, is the inner development of a new life, and during pregnancy, the mother builds a biological, emotional, and conceptual bond with the fetus. She is linked to the idea of the fetus, and she cares about its needs, not just her own: "Far before birth, when an image of *baby* is formed, projections of identity begin, and the emotions are engaged in decisions about nurturing and protecting the growing fetal life."[22] Tayo and Valentin create an image of self and community; they nurture and protect the growth of their own bigendered fetal selfhood against the greed, arrogance, selfishness, and violence of a hypermasculine identity. Spider Woman helps them confront and overcome a confining Western patriarchal mindset.

Before meeting Spider Woman, Tayo and Valentin spend considerable time attempting to gain their peers' acceptance and achieve self-respect, but they struggle unsuccessfully to meet Western society's expectations of them as men. Their failed performance of mainstream masculinity causes them angst and alienation: Tayo withdraws and wallows in self-loathing, which deadens all positive emotions; Valentin overcompensates, masking his feelings and insecurities in Cartesian rationality and male bravado. Robb Willer's report "Overdoing Gender: Testing the Masculine Overcompensation Thesis" finds that men are strongly affected by what others think of their masculinity and that their insecurities cause them to support and participate in war and hatred of homosexuals.[23] Tayo and Valentin fall into the masculinity trap, but both have open hearts and fecund imaginations, which makes them capable of change.

While the patriarchal tradition looks to the male mind for humanity's salvation and cultural vitality, Tayo and Valentin achieve self-actualization through their belly and bowels. Andrew Purves writes in *The Search for Compassion* that the bowels have long been considered "the seat of sympathetic emotions," and that "compassion in the New Testament literally means to have one's bowels turned over."[24] Tayo and Valentin's psychological and emotional problems are not in their heads. Rather, Spider Woman uses physical, emotional, and spiritual nourishment (food, love, sex) to destabilize their conception of masculinity and fill the ensuing emptiness with deeper self-knowledge and the desire for an alternative identity.

Tayo feels physically and emotionally ill and empty after fighting the white man's war, becoming white smoke while being treated for battle fatigue by white doctors: "They saw his outline but they did not realize it was hollow inside" (14–15). This hollowness mirrors society's false promises, aggressive actions, prejudiced beliefs, and empty consumerism. Tayo's emptiness reflects the patriarchal attitude that fuels destruction of others and self, a murderous rage and a suicidal despair over modern "witchery" (253). This emptiness suggests a deficiency of personal will, a lack of respect for authority, an absence of good, trust, hope. However, it also suggests potential, an available space for the growth of what has been suppressed—the physical, the emotional, the communal.

The novel begins with Tayo emptied of joy and love and hope, but he does not fill this emptiness with hate: "The space to carry hate was located deep inside, below his lungs and behind his belly; but it was empty" (63). Tayo has the potential to grow and be redeemed; he wants to fill the void with a more harmonious self, unlike his antagonist, Emo, who fills his emptiness with selfish desire and sadistic hate, particularly a hate of the feminine. Emo is devoured by conflict, desiring but being denied permanent access to white culture, white privilege. Tayo, on the other hand, successfully empties himself of Western society's values and his own grief and guilt, which allows him to fill his belly with a new story, a new life.

In *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Valentin's emptiness reflects his hunger for intimacy: companionship, shared personal stories, affection, self-knowledge. At first, Valentin fills the void by reading political texts during the light of day and listening to (and ridiculing) Molina's stories at night. However, when food that has been poisoned by the warden upsets his stomach, Valentin puts away his books and relies on Molina's mothering: Molina cleans and diapers him, tells him stories, and prepares his food. Although Valentin returns to his books when he feels better, he remains close to Molina, who has helped fill "un vacío bestial en el estómago" (126) ["a gigantic hole in

the stomach" (123)] of Valentin by laughing, crying, eating, and sleeping with his cellmate.[25] (I use this euphemism purposefully because even before they have sex, Valentin and Molina fall asleep and wake side by side, engage in intimate pillow talk, and treat each other tenderly.) Moreover, when the prison authorities torture Valentin at the end of the novel, it is Molina's narrative, his communal and emotional approach to problem solving reborn in Valentin's selfhood, that sooths and perhaps saves the revolutionary.

Spider Woman provides the stories that redeem humanity because, as Paula Gunn Allen writes in *The Sacred Hoop*, "she is thought herself, from which all else is born."[26] One's identity is based, in large part, on how one thinks about one's selfhood and one's relation to others. Tayo and Valentin find success only after they adopt a more feminine approach to thinking about their humanity and dealing with problems, one that is "more contextual, more narrative, more personal, and more open-ended than a man's more formal, abstract, and goal-directed thought."[27] They consciously interweave this approach into what they see as their masculine strength and self-assurance, making connections through sexual intimacy and oral storytelling, both of which are discourses between people that value sharing one's stories, exploring truth, expressing feelings.

Tayo begins to find himself after visiting Night Swan, who ensnares him in her regenerative web of joyous sexuality, self-confidence, and cultural awareness. She seduces Tayo through dance, which for her is an expression of a joyous inner power that threatens some men, including her first lover, who leaves her "because his desire for her had uncovered something which had been hiding inside him, something with wings that could fly, escape the gravity of the Church, the town, his mother, his wife. So he wanted to kill it: to crush the skull into the feathers and snap the bones of the wings" (85). Tayo, however, does not crush or snap what's hiding inside of him. Night Swan's self-expression—a combination of physical, emotional, and cultural energies—begins to free Tayo's masculinity from selfishness, violence, and prejudice, which leads him to true maturity. Interestingly, his sexual encounter with her is also his "initiation into Motherhood," for Night Swan's ability to provide peace, unity, and balance to Tayo's conflicted soul begins him on a path of "continuously striving for equilibrium within Spider Woman's teleological doctrines."[28]

Another Spider Woman guide for Tayo is the mysterious and powerful medicine man Betonie. Not confined to traditional values or methods, Betonie is a collector of both Native and Western fetishes, such as gourd rattles and Coca-Cola calendars. His medical and cultural effectiveness depends on adapting and updating the old ceremonies and keeping track of

"everything": the flaws and wisdom of every culture. When Tayo laments that nothing can be done "against the sickness that comes from [the white men's] wars, their bombs, their lies," Betonie repeats his grandmother's teaching that the only cure is inclusivity: "It cannot be done alone. We must have power from everywhere. Even the power we can get from the whites" (132, 150). He challenges Tayo to take an active role in healing the divide within and among people, a divide that causes Tayo sharp stomach pains. He has trouble escaping the belief of white doctors, white educators, and white society "that he had to think only of himself, and not about the others, that he would never get well as long as he used words like 'we' and 'us'" (125), and the stomach pains denote the conflict within him, a learned resistance to his true inner desire to create and nurture new life, to embrace self-love and a cooperative, supportive community.

Tayo's uncle Josiah provides additional guidance. With compassion and wisdom learned in part from Tayo's Spider Woman grandmother, Josiah tells traditional stories that reorient Tayo's behavior and identity. The story of not killing green-bottle flies because they helped humans long ago not only arrests Tayo's thoughtless violent impulse to kill them but also ingrains a respect for life and difference that keeps him from killing Japanese prisoners during the war and stops him from murdering Emo with a screwdriver at the novel's climatic moment. It unites Tayo with the mountain lion and the mountain spirit woman Ts'eh, both of whom Tayo meets while liberating Josiah's hybrid cattle, and his own anger and self-doubt, from behind a white man's fence. These cattle, for Josiah and Tayo, represent the past and the future, a traditional Laguna legend and a new beginning: "We'll have to do things our own way. Maybe we'll even write our own book, *Cattle Raising on Indian Land*" (75). Tayo's love and admiration for Josiah cause him to pattern his Native consciousness and his humanity after his uncle.

Finally, Ts'eh uses traditional knowledge, storytelling, and sexuality to help Tayo harmonize his masculine and feminine sides. She empowers him to overcome the split in his selfhood, to change: "In loving Tayo she leads him to a recognition of female power or the power-to-transform."[29] He returned home from World War II entangled: the cultural chaos of competing cultures and discordant languages, the personal feelings of guilt, grief, loss, and the social demand that survival and success require individualism, aggression, traps him. He fears his dreams, that which exists deep within himself, until he encounters Ts'eh: "The terror of dreaming he had done on the bed was gone, *uprooted from his belly*; and the woman had *filled the hollow spaces with new dreams*" (229; my emphasis). Tayo is transformed; he fills his emptiness not with hate but with love and cooperation. He builds

a new self and a new community; he releases the fear and pain from his own belly and consciousness and shares physical tenderness and cultural wisdom. Through sexuality, Ts'eh teaches him peace and hope, and through storytelling and plant husbandry, she teaches him self-assuredness and respect for life.

In *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Molina embodies the spirit of the Spider Woman. He rejects brute masculinity and patriarchal authority, guiding "the integration of the feminine in Valentin's psyche" so they can build a loving community in their cell. His tenderness and wisdom transform Valentin, who states as he agrees to kiss Molina that "vos sos la mujar araña, que atrapa a los hombres en su tela" (265) ["you, you're the spider woman, that traps men in her web" (260)].[30] However, rather than being trapped, Valentin finds himself embraced and empowered by a friendship that reintegrates the two halves of his selfhood: reason and emotion/sensuality. Molina is also wrestling with these two halves; he has adopted a stereotypically submissive and domestic feminine identity and needs some of Valentin's masculine rebelliousness and self-respect to be whole. Puig, as the novel's ultimate Spider Woman, hopes to "[undermine] traditional gender patterns by identifying as arbitrary and oppressive the binary oppositions which motivate both Valentin and Molina."[31]

The web of femininity seduces Valentin only because he, like Tayo, is ready to be transformed. The more he shares with Molina, the more Valentin recognizes the limitations of intellectual rationalism and male bravado. After he implies that a man is meant to be aggressive politically and sexually, Molina asks him directly "Qué es la hombría?" (70) ["What makes a man?" (63)]. Valentin's answer begins with the individualistic "no dejarme basurear" ["his not taking any crap"], but moves to the more compassionate and communal "es no rebajar a nadie[,] . . . no permitir que nadie al lado tuyo se sienta menos, que nadie al lado tuyo se sienta mal" (70) ["not humiliating someone else[;] . . . not letting the person next to you feel degraded, feel bad" (63)]. Later he admits to studying architecture before becoming a revolutionary, stating "el arte no es cosa de mujer" (83) ["art's not just something for women" (76)], which prompts Molina's good-natured teasing: "Un día de estos se va a descubrir que sos más loca que yo" (76) ["One of these days they'll realize who's the fag around here" (83)]. Valentin does not become a homosexual, but his sexual intimacy with Molina teaches him to challenge his assumptions about gender and causes him to face his emotions, particularly his love for Marta, rather than run away from them. He tells Molina that reality "no es solamente esta celda" (85) ["isn't restricted by this cell we live in" (78)] and that they can transcend the cell through self-education. By the

end of the novel, Valentin escapes the limitations of his *machismo* identity to express tenderness, admit weakness, consider someone else's needs, and see things from someone else's perspective.

Storytelling and friendship enable Valentin to transcend his cell. He reveals his most intimate emotional secrets, breaking down in tears over the memory of changing the diapers of a dead comrade's baby boy. It's not just sorrow over a child who will never know his father that pains him so deeply: "Vos no sabés lo peor, y es que a nadie de ellos les puedo escribir, porque cualquier cosa sería comprometerlos, o qué . . . peor todavía, señalarlos" (146) ["The worst of it is I can't write to anyone about it, because the slightest move on my part would compromise them . . . or even worse, identify them" (143)]. Before meeting Molina, he was could not admit or express his love, fear, doubt, need, desire. Molina helps him expose himself body and soul, which inspires him to compose an intimate letter to his lover Marta. The letter is a combination of Valentin's words and Molina's handwriting, the masculine and feminine sides of Valentin. The letter must be destroyed to protect the revolutionaries from the wrath of patriarchal society, but the fact that Valentin can publicly express and analyze his feelings, just as he does his political views, demonstrates the level of respect he now has for them.

At the beginning of the novels, Valentin and Tayo have already subconsciously rejected patriarchal indoctrination. In their hearts, they do not consider the feminine to be trivial, at best, or evil, at worst; they do not accept their society's violent disconnection of an individual man from his community through the denial of emotion, cooperation, sensuality, and traditional storytelling. They are physically and mentally imprisoned for resisting a society that sublimates a major part of the male identity and isolates people with the "wrong" ethnicity, class, gender, or sexual orientation. As a result, they find themselves in a genderless liminality until Spider Woman reawakens their feminine side, allowing them to take a major step in recomposing an integrated identity.

Vomiting Out the Patriarchal Self

The process of self-reconstruction is not easy. After Spider Woman implants the seeds of doubt that cause Tayo and Valentin to nurture a new sense of self, the men experience nausea, depression, and uncontrolled vomiting, often in the morning. Physical and psychosocial factors contribute to depression during pregnancy, which can have adverse effects on the fetus

and/or the mother.[32] However, nausea and vomiting are indicators of a healthy pregnancy. Evolutionary biologist Margie Profet writes that morning sickness is the body's attempt to adapt to significant physiological changes.[33] Dr. Rachel Huxley writes that "morning sickness has been reported to have a positive effect on pregnancy outcome and is associated with a decreased risk of miscarriage, preterm birth, low birth weight (LBW), and perinatal death."[34]

Caught between two worlds, Tayo's and Valentin's struggle with competing value systems cause them to become depressed. They vomit because they cannot digest a patriarchal outlook, choosing instead to nurture an unfamiliar "organism" (a bigendered selfhood) that is developing in their "belly" (consciousness, soul, craw). Their physical and psychological feelings accompany the embryonic development of an integrated identity, an identity that they protect by expelling of a lifetime of social prejudice, gender stereotyping, and self-hatred. Silko argues that each man's new, better self can only flourish after "every evil/which entangled him/was cut/ to pieces" (258).

Prejudice is an epidemic that sickens Tayo and the tribal community. It causes Tayo to be doubly rejected: by his father's white community and by his mother's Laguna community. His consciousness fights this illness of social isolation, intimidation, and violence. During World War II, he disobeys a command to kill Japanese prisoners whom he literally sees as part of his family. Empathy and respect for other cultures cause Tayo to see his uncle Josiah in the face of one prisoner: "Tayo stood there, stiff with nausea, while they fired at the soldiers, and he watched his uncle fall, and he *knew* it was Josiah" (8). As a child on the reservation, he had also felt nauseous, rejected by his parents and Emo. Auntie frequently reminded people that Tayo and her son Rocky weren't brothers, and she made sure she and Rocky always "kept a distance between themselves and [Tayo]. But she would not let Tayo go outside or play in another room alone. She wanted him close enough to feel excluded, to be aware of the distance between them" (67).

Valentin's imprisonment reflects his rejection by an oppressive Argentine society as well as by his comrades in the revolution, who have no use for captured foot soldiers. He has rejected the tremendously flawed society that denies and destroys his humanity, as evidenced by the fact of the poisoned food the warden feeds him in an attempt to force him to betray his rebel brothers and sisters. He, too, has become disenchanted with the masculine identity demanded for members of the revolution. "Tengo un lío en la cabeza" (43) ["My head's a mess" (37)], and his stomach is upset because he and other rebels "no podemos estar pensando en que alguien nos

quiere" (139) ["can't get caught up in subjective feelings for one another" (136)]. Valentin has swallowed the ideology that he must consider his lover secondary to the cause, if at all; however, Molina helps him recognize the importance of nurturing one's nonpublic, sensual, emotive self. Valentin realizes the prison cell is a supportive community in which they are safe from all "nuestros opresores" (206) ["our oppressors" (202)]. By the end of the novel, Valentin's intense self-reflection leads him to regret having denied love and compassion to others. He, like Tayo, has become ill from the nauseating reality of prejudice and violence embedded in mainstream Western culture and the bitterness and exclusivity of counterculture. Scott Miller's analysis of Argentina's "Dirty War" shows the brutal, masculinist approach adopted by both the military government and the counterculture: "This counterculture was inspired in large part by Argentine native and legendary leftist guerrilla leader Che Guevara, who argued that only violence would ever bring social equality to Latin America, and young men (like Valentin) even began to dress and grow beards like Guevara."[35]

Each of these cultures encourages men to be competitive, violent, selfish, and insensitive. A prime example is Emo in *Ceremony*. He tells misogynist stories of his sexual conquests; he proudly displays teeth he knocked out of a Japanese officer he killed; he belittles anyone who appreciates Native culture; and he brutally tortures weaker men who disobey his commands. Emo is a self-hating Native American and a sadist, and his willingness to reject compassion and generosity so as to be accepted into white society makes Tayo nauseous. Tayo feels "the knot" in his belly pulled tighter when Emo objectifies women ("Yes, sir, this In'di'n was grabbin' white pussy all night!" [59]), when he gleefully retells his war stories ("We were the best. U.S. Army. We butchered every Jap we found" [61]), and when he viciously rejects all Native traditions ('Look what is here for us. Look. Here's the Indians' mother earth! Old dried-up thing!" [25]). At first Emo's stories of cruelty and destruction cause Tayo to seek refuge in alcohol, which he uses to disconnect himself from all feelings, particularly anger and hopelessness, but the stories eventually push Tayo to violence, when he stabs Emo in the belly with a broken beer bottle: "[Tayo] felt that we would get well if he killed [Emo]. But they wouldn't let him do it; they grabbed his arms and pulled his hands out of Emo's belly" (63). It's the stories in Emo's belly, the annihilation of life and culture they represent, that Tayo wants to abort. Although Tayo rejects Emo's values and beliefs, he acts as Emo does, giving in to the destructive, male, Western impulse in his attempt to murder him. However, Tayo ultimately learns to counter this impulse through his intimate relationship with Spider Woman. His

self-transformation helps him stop himself from attacking Emo in the novel's climactic scene.

Tayo's beloved cousin Rocky is a more complex example of this machismo. Unlike the jealous outsider Emo, Rocky is on his way to acceptance within the white male world; he adopts white education and values and becomes a football star, a war hero, a linear storyteller, and a rational, scientific thinker. Unlike Tayo, Rocky doesn't see uncle Josiah in the face of the murdered Japanese soldier; moreover, he justifies the killing on the grounds that it's what he and Tayo are "supposed" to do. Rocky's "logic" causes Tayo to shiver "because all the facts, all the reasons made no difference any more; . . . he could not feel anything except a swelling in his belly, a great swollen grief that was pushing into his throat" (8–9). After the war, survivor's guilt and despair intensifies Tayo's grief; he couldn't protect Rocky from killing and dying for a country that considered them racially inferior. Thus, Tayo must overcome feeling sick at the disappearance of Laguna culture and the destruction of human compassion and cooperation.

Tayo's sickness reflects a conflict within him between his respect for life, nature, and tradition and his violent desire to attack those who lack that respect. To protect life he stabs Emo and sullenly drinks himself out of consciousness. The white doctors cannot help because they treat his spiritual illness "by convincing him that he must adjust to the sick society."[36] His spiritual and cultural survival necessitates his vomiting out this value system. Recognizing a comradeship with the Japanese against American aggression and alienation, Tayo turns his back on a society that supports land theft, cultural oppression, and mass murder with atomic weapons. Only if he regains a connection with family, community, culture, and self can his belly swell with joy and optimism, the stories of a better future.

Valentin initially identifies with the more selfish, misogynistic characters in Molina's film recreations. During Molina's retelling of *Cat People*, Valentin identifies with the hotshot psychologist, who attempts to seduce and tame the panther woman, and he also desires the submissive female supporting character. He objectifies and sexualizes the women in the film, referring to them either as "lo más rico que hay" (11) ["a real piece" (5)] or "un loro" (12) ["a dog" (6)]. As Molina retells a Nazi propaganda film, Valentin chastises his cellmate for lingering on descriptions of fashion while lingering himself on the question of whether the female protagonist is blond and shapely. Nevertheless, Molina sees through Valentin's false bravado and his claims that he prefers intellectual and ideological comradeship to love, stating sarcastically that "si así te podés conformar, fenómeno" (48) ["if you

can swallow something like that, great" (42)]. Soon after, Valentin swallows the poisoned food, which gives him stomach pains, and he doesn't feel well again until after he has consumed what Molina has to offer: food, stories, and a new self-conception.[37]

Although it is the tainted food that makes him ill, metaphorically it is his denial of his femininity and acceptance of patriarchal values that gives Valentin an upset stomach. He overcompensates for his own feelings by criticizing Molina's desire to be a woman and his crying at "nothing." Carolyn Pinet writes that Valentin is afraid of expressing his own emotions, of losing control, of acting "like a woman": "Psychologically he has suppressed his female side because women are soft, sensitive, and self-indulgent . . . and therefore weak."[38] He attempts to maintain a rational, confident, heroic identity, but little by little he reveals his so-called weakness, demonstrating self-doubt, kindness toward Molina, and affection for the women in his life. As he begins to relax his hypermasculine façade and integrate the feminine into his identity, he starts to have morning sickness. This loss of self-control over his emotions and bowels makes him feel ashamed and embarrassed, seemingly less like a man. However, vomiting out his arrogance and pride allows Valentin to accept help and love from Molina as well as to recognize that it was a mistake to choose martyrdom. Valentin faces and defeats "el torturador que tengo adentro me" (184) ["the torturer that I have inside of me" (179)], expelling his fear of being alone and gaining hope in human compassion and companionship.

Revolutionary Rebirth

For centuries, an entrenched patriarchal mindset has given birth to the worst weapons of physical destruction and cultural domination. The plot of Ridley Scott's film *Alien* (1979), a contemporary of the novels, demonstrates patriarchy alienating people from their own humanity: employees of Earth's major corporate-governmental entity are used as hosts for the "perfect weapon," a creature that lays its egg inside a man, after which an indestructible baby alien bursts out of the man's stomach with the singular goal of vicious and indiscriminate murder.[39] Rejecting this attitude, Spider Woman spins a narrative web that subverts socially imposed silence and inspires harmony, community. Two of these webs, *Ceremony* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, replace society's untenable male identity with a viable alternative: the integrated self. Both suggest the peaceful overthrow a flawed

belief system, a feminist revolution of healing and unification that displaces violence and divisiveness. In Hopi tradition, "The Song of Creation" states that although humanity's different races will fight, "someday they shall unite. Then they will remember . . . that Spider Woman is the web which unites them all."[40] As Paula Gunn Allen writes in *The Sacred Hoop*, it is "the Old Woman Spider who weaves us together in a fabric of interconnection."[41]

In *Ceremony*, mixed-bloods Betonie and Night Swan teach Tayo, himself half white and half Native, that personal and global salvation require reconciliation and cooperation across race, class, and gender divides. Edith Swan states she has seen this cooperation firsthand on the Laguna reservation, which is "a proverbial melting pot, uniting diverse groups and their varying cultures."[42] Early in the novel, Tayo refuses to fire on the Japanese prisoners of war and sees his cousin Rocky in the face of a Japanese American child recently released from an internment camp. Many of these camps were located on Indian reservations, such as the Granada internment camp in Colorado, called "Amache" after the daughter of a Cheyenne chief whose tribe lived in the region.[43] Later, Tayo learns "his sense of sympathy and identification with the Japanese is not the result of psychotic hallucinations but the consequence of a higher order of perception."[44] Betonie explains to him that the two groups have common ancestors and that they killed each other during World War II only because of white witchery, greed, and aggression: "Thirty thousand years ago [the Japanese] were not strangers [to Native Americans]. You saw what the evil had done" (124). Silko thus suggests that Native Americans and Japanese Americans unite against a common foe: white bigotry resulting in physical imprisonment and cultural attack.

However, these groups must also overcome the bigotry within their own communities. Elizabeth Evasdaughter writes that Silko's novel teaches that "although half-breeds are the solution to our problems as a nation, they are not an easy solution."[45] Night Swan notes that the majority of Natives hate hybrids like Tayo and herself, stating, "They are fools. They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don't have to think about what has happened inside themselves" (100). She encourages Tayo to embrace all sides of his identity, Native and white, masculine and feminine, which he can do only if he "assume[s] the tongue and cosmography of Spider Woman" and reconnects "to the enduring feminine principle inherent to Laguna cosmogony."[46] In the novel's climatic scene, Tayo's refusal to attack Emo, who is baiting him, demonstrates the rebirth of Tayo's sense of peace, brotherhood, cultural awareness, and self-respect. It is a peaceful revolution, after which Tayo returns to the Laguna community and teaches the male

elders the magic learned from Ts'eh, Betonie, Nigh Swan, and Josiah. The novel ends with Tayo being welcomed into the community, while Emo's selfish and violent masculinity results in his exile to what Silko implies is a haven of white excess and self-righteousness: California.

Puig's two main characters build a cooperative and supportive community where there's no abuse or even dismissive labeling of people from a "lower" class, of a "weaker" gender, or of a "deviant" sexual orientation. Valentin and Molina then bring their ideas to the outside world, resisting a sociopolitical system of restrictive binaries and hierarchies. Carolyn Pinet writes that the films Molina chooses and the ways he reconceives their storylines allow him to pervert mainstream "patriarchal propaganda" and draw "strength from a series of powerful archetypal women who, although victimized, rise above the victimization" and "are even capable of destroying the existing oppressive structure."[47] Molina may not realize his storytelling engages in feminist activism; nevertheless, he provokes Valentin to argue aloud that women must not accept submission as their natural fate because "el hombre de la casa y la mujer de la casa tienen que estar a la par" (246) ["the man of the house and the woman of the house have to be equal with one another" (244)]. Not only does Valentin realize he must not martyr himself to society's conception of manhood; he also tells Molina that women (and homosexuals like Molina) must not willingly martyr themselves to society's conception of true womanhood.

Throughout the novel, Valentin and Molina analyze human nature, society's failings, and their own lives and feelings, which provides each, by the end of the novel, with "poder empezar de nuevo" (258) ["the chance to start all over again" (254)]. Each cleans the slate by teaching the other to recognize the absurdity of gender dualism. According to Pinet, their emotional and sexual intimacy "helps each [man] on the journey back to the self as a whole person: Valentin . . . toward acknowledging the female within himself and integrating it with the male, and Molina [toward] . . . acknowledging the male self and reintegrating it with the female."[48] Valentin shares his self-reliant, assertive, analytical nature, while Molina shares his cooperative, emotive, storytelling nature. Puig utilizes this creative feminine energy to provide "the impetus for a new feminist consciousness for . . . Valentin, and ultimately, and more importantly, for the readers."[49]

Ceremony and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* challenge traditional gender hierarchies and present a bigendered identity that provides protagonists and readers with a new way to see the world and themselves. Spider Woman helps Tayo and Valentin escape patriarchal confinement—the

(self-)destructive male role of aggressor, hyperrationalist, individualist, destroyer. Her narrative and maternal energy guides them through the difficult process of reimagining the self and adopting a more compassionate, cooperative stance in their relationships. The protagonists' inner growth requires they balance the various sides of their personhood, including self-assertion, empathy, independence, collaboration, rationalism, and sexuality. This process of creating a new and better self not only leads Tayo and Valentin to experience the physical and psychological aspects of pregnancy but also to weave important cultural stories, to become Spider Women storytellers. At the end of *Ceremony*, Tayo narrates his experiences to the tribal elders and explains the wisdom of love and multiculturalism; at the end of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Valentin narrates his dream of being saved from torture in the patriarchal prison by Spider Woman, a symbol of his love for Marta, Molina, and his own femininity. Silko and Puig invite readers to ignore what society tells them and create their own identities, their own stories.

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Notes

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3. Ibid., 3. See also Sarah E. Turner, "'Spider Woman's Granddaughter': Autobiographical Writings by Native American Women," *MELUS* 22.4 (1997): 109–32, and Laura E. Donaldson, "On Medicine Women and White Shame-Ans: New Age Native Americanism and Commodity Fetishism as Pop Culture Feminism," *Signs* 24.3 (1999): 677–96.
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6. Carolyn Pinet, "Who Is the Spider Woman?" *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 45.1–2 (1991): 20.
7. Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 99. See also Alain Silver and James Ursini, eds., *Film Noir Reader* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Limelight, 2006).
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10. Anne Callahan, *Writing the Voice of Pleasure: Heterosexuality Without Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 202.

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12. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 1. Hereafter cited by page number.

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14. Louis Owens, "'The Very Essence of Our Lives': Leslie Silko's Webs of Identity," in *Leslie Marmon Silko's "Ceremony,"* ed. Allan Chavkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 93.

15. Donaldson, "On Medicine Women and White Shame-Ans," 691.

16. Mira Wiegmann, "Re-visioning the Spider Woman Archetype in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 49 (2004): 401.

17. Shari A. Zimmerman, "*Kiss of the Spider Woman* and the Web of Gender," *Pacific Coast Philology* 23.1–2 (1988): 108.

18. Bost, "Telling Tales in Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*," 102.

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31. Zimmerman, "*Kiss of the Spider Woman* and the Web of Gender," 107.

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