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Spider Woman

Michelle Henrie

This paper is an exercise in thinking and in writing, both of which I model after Elie Wiesel's Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends. Wiesel states:

When I was a child, I read these Biblical tales with a wonder mixed with anguish. I imagined Isaac on the altar and I cried. I saw Joseph, prince of Egypt, and I laughed. Why dwell on them again? And why now? It falls to the storyteller to explain.

Disciple more than anything else, his aim is not to plunge into historical exegesis--which surely lies beyond his competence--but to reacquaint himself with the distant and haunting figures that molded him. He will try to reconstruct their portraits from Biblical and Midrashic texts, and eventually insert them into the present...

The legends he brings back are the very ones we are living today. (xi-xiv)

However, unlike Wiesel who has the advantage of heritage, I am not Hopi. Thus, I cannot, with the force of Wiesel, tell you what it means to be Hopi. Nevertheless, I attempt to emulate his understanding for the ancient ones, as well as his understanding of the living. He accomplishes this with human empathy; that is, empathy for humanity. They, as we, are understood precisely in and for their humanity, an even greater bond than heritage. Wiesel notes that Adam wasn't Jewish (7), and Lololomai, the Hopi chief, "prays that all the people may have health and long life and be happy and good in their hearts. And Hopis are not the only people he prays for. He prays for everybody in the whole world--everybody" (Curtis, 494).

I, too, use humanity as my base for understanding. I only hope that I have not done so sacrilegiously. Wiesel draws humanity from man, I impose it upon deity.

I offer the story of Spider Woman. She has been, as women often are (and I may say this only as a woman), somewhat incomprehensible to me. I have read of her, and read again, but still did not understand the complexity of her persona. Only now, when I consider her as human as you and I, do I feel I understand her. Only now does she mean something to me, for today I see her in my mother, my friends, myself; just as I found us in her.

Thus, I cannot feel guilty about knowing Spider Woman, who is not a human, in human terms. I cannot feel that I imposed humanity any more than I could impose logic: it must be elicited. Nevertheless, lest someone find my attitude toward the sacred to be offensive, I apologize in advance. Offense is not my intent; understanding is. Religion, like story, I believe to lie so deeply embedded in Man and his society that to study either separately leaves one withered and dry, the other devoid of life and purpose.

Hopi religion may appear a pantheon of Olympic-like deity. It is actually more akin to Spinozan monotheism. Sotuknang, Spider Woman, Masaw, and the many other non-human players in the Hopi tradition are often translated as "gods and goddesses." However, they, as well as the animal and natural spirits, can be more appropriately titled "angels." Like angels of Western

tradition, they exhibit super-human powers, have specific tasks and characteristics, and remain immortal. And while these spirits may influence man and provoke certain consequences into his world, they cannot initiate. They cannot create an idea, although they may execute the implementation of an idea creatively. The act of genesis, spontaneous creation, putting together otherwise unlike elements in an unique manner, is a prerogative of supreme wisdom manifest only in the Creator, Taiowa.

The often misunderstood Hopi monotheism is beautifully illustrated by Natalie Curtis in The Indian's Book: Authentic Native American Legends, Lore and Music:

"And where do the women plant the bahos [pahos, prayer sticks]?"

"Over there--east!" He pointed with his whip to the cliff above. "On the edge of the mesa they will plant the bahos when the yellow line [dawn] comes over the mountains."

"Why do they plant them at the coming of the yellow line?"

"Because they pray, and if they pray when the sun rises, the sun will carry the prayers up, up!" His whip moved, in illustration, from horizon to zenith.

"And to whom do the Hopis pray?"

There was a pause, then, slowly, "It is that which makes the rain--that makes all things. It is the Power, and it lives behind the sun."

"And the katzinas [kachinas]?"

"The katzinas only take the prayers. We do not pray to them."

"Does the Power that lives behind the sun look like a man, or like anything that the Hopis have ever seen?"

The Hopi looked at me in surprise. "No, it is not a man; we don't know how it looks. We only know that it is." (493-4)

In the course of this paper, Sotuknang, Spider Woman, and Masaw are called "deities" and "gods" or "goddesses," and Taiowa, the Creator, is addressed by the capitalized pronoun "He." Although these terms may not be technically and theologically accurate, I use them for consistency with my sources. All citations, unless otherwise noted, refer to Book of the Hopi by Frank Waters.

Spider ≈ Woman

Michelle Henrie

Spider Woman: archetypal female, vain goddess, or victim of Fate? She is named after one who creates invisible, life-giving, life-taking threads, and who weaves them into relationships: fragile webs and sticky nets of survival. An artist, the spider is skilled by instinct. A hunter, she is patient and clever. An unique creature, she is gracefully delicate and eerily terrifying. Not a mate but a mother: she dominates, germinates, then feeds on one to strengthen the other. And through the entire expanse of her female life, she is silent.

Who is this woman, the spider? And what message does she leave us?

Spider Woman joins the divine cast early, preceded only by Taiowa, the Creator, and Sotuknang, god of this universe. Yet while Taiowa already is, and Sotuknang just becomes, we watch Spider Woman's conception and birth. No wonder we feel closer to her, we witness her journey into life:

Sotuknang went to the universe wherein was that to be Tokpela, the First World, and out of it he created her who was to remain on that earth and be his helper. Her name was Kokyangwuti, Spider Woman. (4)

Immediately she has purpose, and she realizes it. Her first sound, first recognition of life? Not an easy question like "Who are you?" or "Where am I?" No, she is already aware that living implies more than merely existing:

When she awoke to life and received her name, she asked, "Why am I here?" (4)

Why am I here? The question we each must ask at our own point of cognition. What is my purpose, and what can I do about it? Am I destined to it or free to fight it? A pawn of Fate or ultimately responsible? And does it really matter?

The Hopi live with choice, but also with consequence. Sotuknang tells the people at their Place of Emergence:

The name of this Fourth World is Tuwaqachi, World Complete... It has height and depth, heat and cold, beauty and barrenness; it has everything for you to choose from. What you choose will determine if this time you can carry out the plan of Creation on it or whether it must in time be destroyed too. (21)

Thus, the Hopi have purpose: to carry out the plan of Creation. They have duty: to sing joyful praises to their Creator. Most importantly, they have the choice of how seriously they adhere to purpose and duty.

But how free is a choice so limited: life or destruction? What can we say for the Hopi who exercises his freedom and chooses the latter? Is this really any kind of freedom?

The only one we can ask is Sotuknang, but he is obviously not a philosopher. Spider Woman asks him a question: Why am I here? What is my purpose? Sotuknang answers by giving her a task, her duty:

Look about you... Here is the earth we have created. It has shape and substance, direction and time, a beginning and an end. But there is no life upon it. We see no joyful movement. We hear no joyful sound. What is life without sound and movement? So you have been given the power to help us create this

life. You have been given the knowledge, wisdom, and love to bless all the beings you create. That is why you are here. (4)

He misses the point. Spider Woman awakens to life. She opens her eyes and sees a god standing before her at exactly the same instant that she realizes she exists. What else would one say to a god? She has not lived long enough to know: she can't thank him for the joys of life, she can't apologize for wrongdoing, she can't ask for anything better. Instead, Spider Woman asks the logical question: Why do you, a god, need someone else, like me, in your world?

Sotuknang's answer raises another question. He needs her to do a job. Why? Can't he do it himself?

Is it part of the universal plan that Spider Woman exist? If so, we have no indication. Taiowa tells Sotuknang to finish the job, "Your work is not yet finished. Now you must create life and its movement to complete the four parts, Tuwagachi, of my universal plan" (4). You must, he said. You, Sotuknang.

And what does Sotuknang do? He creates Spider Woman to create life for him.

I feel a message in here somewhere, although I'm not sure what it is. It is either man's inherent laziness, or his natural skill at delegation. Perhaps it is woman's foremost responsibility to shoulder man's burden, or her natural supremacy at creative endeavors. Whatever the case, one message is indisputable: Sotuknang wants to have a woman around. Does he need her, or just want her?

Of course, biological sense states that a male needs a female to assist in the creation of life. Perhaps Sotuknang should answer Spider Woman's query with a lecture about the birds and the bees. However, this particular creation is not a joint effort. Sotuknang is nowhere near when Spider Woman dirties her hands with earth, offers saliva, carefully mixes, and sings the magic chant.

On the other hand, consider that we are dealing with deity, and let me ask again: Does he need her? Bishop Berkeley would have raised his bushy eyebrows at this thought. Efficiency does not allow a middle-woman. If Sotuknang has enough power to give it away, why bother? Why invite another cook to stir the chemical-stew of creation? Why split the profits with yet another shareholder? Most of all, why allow a woman into the Men's Club?

Sotuknang creates Spider Woman only as a helper, he says. He gives her power, instructions, a job. Yet when she thinks she has completed her task, she realizes she has been short-changed. She is told to give life: both movement and sound. She is given the power. She does as she is instructed. She sees the movement. Is it not reasonable to assume she is finished? Certainly sound accompanies movement, for it too is a part of life, part of her responsibility. Thus, at their initial movement, Spider Woman teaches the First People the Song of Creation as they face their Father, the Sun. But she does not receive His blessing, for the people are not complete: they have no sound.

Embarrassed certainly, perhaps angered, but realizing that

while she knows what the first people need, she cannot grant it, she turns to Sotuknang. She turns to the one who gave her the job but not enough power to do it. Where else can she go? What else can she do?

Spider Woman gently and tactfully reminds Sotuknang of the "proper" things the First People lack. As he commanded her, she did; as he allowed her, she completed. And then she must sit helplessly and watch as he grants the final touches of life to her work. Why this shortfall? Is it a mistake, or does Sotuknang withhold power for some reason?

Worse still, Sotuknang receives glory from the creation, while Spider Woman is forgotten. He demands respect for both the Creator and for himself:

But you must always remember the two things I am saying to you now. First, respect me and one another. And second, sing in harmony from the tops of the hills. When I do not hear you singing praises to your Creator I will know you have gone back to evil again. (16)

Taiowa, as initiator, planner, and authority, certainly deserves respect. Who else could have conceived such a project? He creates Sotuknang to make manifest His great plan. But Sotuknang? He doesn't even finish creating his universe. The Twins, the first life created by Spider Woman, are the ones to solidify and sound the First World.

The people praise the master architect, his chief supervisor, even the bricks and mortar, Mother Earth, from which their edifices are made, but neglect the laborer. Does this make sense? How must Spider Woman feel about it all? She is not the Creator, no, but she is a creator. Doesn't she deserve something?

Spider Woman creates her children, blesses them, cares for them, teaches them to respect their Father, shows them humility, rescues them, and leads them to safety. They don't trust her judgement at times, but grudgingly follow. And when she finally sends them alone into the Fourth World with a last reminder, they whimper and pledge to remember her, but immediately forget her advice until in desperate need. Still, she loves them.

She loves them enough to lead several of the clans on their northward migration. They follow their star until they reach the mountains of snow and sea of ice. Does the star stop here? Turn? Continue? We don't know. We do know that Spider Woman encourages her followers to continue North. "You have the magic powers given you," she says, "Use them. Melt this mountain of snow, this sea of ice" (39). Why?

Masaw has instructed them to go to the ends of the land, to the paso, the farthest point where the land meets the sea. Some clans never make their journey to the southernmost tip of South America, considering Central America, the Place of Emergence, to be their southern paso, or perhaps mistaking the narrow neck of present Panama to be that tip of land meeting sea. How can one know for certain no other continents lie beyond, no more decades of journeying lie in wait, unless he travels to that point believed to be the end and still searches for more? Perhaps this is why the clans turn to the right or to the left, continuing their journeys along the coasts, before retracing their steps and

starting a new paso.

The star first leads the group to a land of snow and ice. They continue in this frozen climate for some time, carrying with them both their water and seeds for food. Finally, we are told, they reach the Arctic Circle. "It is as far as we can go," they say to one another, "the way is blocked by a mountain of snow, a sea of ice. Clearly this is the Back Door of the Fourth World..." (39). Clearly? They have been travelling through snow and ice all this time. How can they know that an even greater and colder mountain of snow and sea of ice does not lie farther North? After all, this obstacle follows a land of snow and ice. And who can identify, without doubt, frozen sea from frozen land when it is covered with snow?

They must try to melt this obstacle, to bore through, or else risk an incomplete journey. Piety demands it. They are the first group to go north, no one else knows the paso, no one else can identify it for them. No human, anyway.

But Spider Woman, does she know? I believe she does.

Is she innocent, nevertheless? Perhaps Spider Woman does not know melting Back Doors is wrong. The text says:

For these migrations were themselves purification ceremonies, weeding out through generations all the latent evil brought from the previous Third World. Man could not succumb to the comfort and luxury given him by indulgent surroundings, for then he lost the need to rely upon the Creator. Nor should he be frightened even by the polar extremities of the earth, for there he learned that the power given to him by the Creator would still sustain him. (35-6)

Sotuknang doesn't, according to our records, directly tell the First People not to enter the Back Door. Masaw speaks of the Back Door only to state that "those who may come through this Back Door will enter without my consent" (22). Is this lack of information Sotuknang's oversight? A mistake? We have seen similar ambiguity already.

Only after the fourth attempt fails to melt this frozen wilderness does Sotuknang appear to chastise the group:

If my Uncle, the Creator, and I, his Nephew, had allowed you to open this Back Door, disaster would have come. The melted mountain of snow and sea of ice would have flooded this new Fourth World and forever changed its shape from the way we ordained it to be. You have done wrong. (40)

Why doesn't he stop them after the first try? Why allow them to believe they are not doing wrong? Why quadruple the punishment of consequences from bad choice?

On the other hand, does Spider Woman realize the destructive effects of a melted Back Door? Is she guilty? Does she not like this new landscape? Does she not cherish these Third World survivors? Is she finally sick of their grumbling and doubt? Even the most loving of mothers must look forward to indefinite solitude. She had the power to create life once, can she do it again? Can she do it better?

According to one myth, all people were created in pairs of male and female. During creation, however, Spider Woman forgot to make a mate for one man, and later forgot to make a mate for

one woman. She told the woman, "Somewhere there is a single man who went away. Find him and if he accepts you, live with him. If he doesn't, both of you will have to stay single. Do the best you can" (Erdoes and Ortiz, 115-7). The woman found the man, but she found something else as well: independence. The world's first feminist questioned her husband's usefulness, and the world's first ex-bachelor talked her into staying with him. And as long as she stayed they quarreled and fought. From them, other couples learned to argue. Perhaps this time Spider Woman would advise the single woman to stay single.

Innocent or guilty, Spider Woman is punished. Sotuknang says:

Because you helped to create these people and have aided them in all their Emergences, we have allowed you to remain young and beautiful. But now because you have disobeyed our wishes I am going to let your own thread run out. We are not going to cut it off. Just let it run out until you are an ugly old woman. Now something more. Because the Spider Clan named after you also encouraged the people to use their sacred powers wrongly, I ordain that the Spider Clan hereafter will breed wickedness and evil. (40)

What an odd punishment for transgression; not death, but age. Why this of all punishments? Is Sotuknang jealous of the attention given Spider Woman, and thus decides no one will love an ugly old woman? She who asks for no glory, who is given none by her elders, receives the admiration of her people. They name their clan after her, and grant her their leadership. They listen to her and obey her, even if her command contradicts Sotuknang's. Is this not cause for divine anger?

Is this why women lose their youth and beauty? A jealous curse from men who cannot accept the attention granted to and returned from a mother's children?

Or is Spider Woman becoming too vain in her successes at leadership? The people finally listen, and so she asks for more. Ugliness and age are a sure cure for female vanity, especially when they conquer with no comfort in the grace of time and no relief in eventual death.

And, as if Spider Woman's personal anguish is not enough, Sotuknang curses the clan named after her. He brings gene-regret to Man: sorrow for transgressions committed by forefathers. Does he offer any redemption? An escape? Is this the plan of the Creator?

Does Spider Woman object? Does she defend her self? Blame another? Plead for mercy? No. She is silent. A male would cry out, challenge, reject. Even Cain asks for a lesser sentence. A male would argue ad hominem: If I am capable of wrong, then you, too, O Sotuknang, who also are not the Creator, are capable of wrong. You who did not finish his job, who left it to me and took the credit, you who gave me an uncompletable task, how dare you rebuke me for going North, as you commanded? Can it be your passions causing this problem, not mine? Perhaps shouldn't I, the Spider, the ordained thread-watcher, manipulate your thread so cruelly? Snip it a bit? Tangle it? Dip it in urine? No, Spider Woman remains silent. Why?

Perhaps, finally, either through tragedy or through age,

Spider Woman realizes why she is created.

Sotuknang is relatively young when he creates Spider Woman. Young men, of course, idolize the older men in their lives. They want to be like them when they grow up, and they pattern their behavior after their elders at every opportunity. Sotuknang, however, has only one elder, Taiowa. In fact, Sotuknang has only one other in his life, Taiowa: parent, master, best friend. This elder, this lone example, creates another, a helper, to carry out His plan, and the plan is done well. It is not, perhaps, completed exactly as Taiowa would have done it, but it is done well. Meanwhile, Taiowa finds something He, even in His godliness, had never known before: a relationship. He now has someone to talk with, to teach, and to enjoy.

Thus, Sotuknang does as he learned to do; he creates another, a helper, to complete the plan. Probably it is not completed exactly as Sotuknang would have done it, but it is done.

Why does he choose to create a woman? The answer lies with another question: how does Sotuknang know about women? After all, he has only himself and Taiowa for models. But some say Taiowa is not necessarily male; Taiowa is genderless and gender-full at the same time. Thus, Sotuknang, in respect for the Creator, forms Spider Woman with all those characteristics evident in Taiowa but absent in himself.

Finally, we return to the question that led us to this point: What is Spider Woman's purpose? Why was she created? In her own words: Why am I here?

Sotuknang, before Spider Woman, is the helper for the Creator. He is but a boy, learning to become a man. He realizes quickly that deities require non-deity, as leaders require followers. Deities delegate work, not perform it. Most importantly, deities guard their status; Sotuknang proves how easily one may climb the ranks. Thus, through Spider Woman, Sotuknang obtains, affirms, and maintains his status. Quite simply and bluntly stated: Spider Woman's purpose is to make Sotuknang into a god.

Suddenly, Sotuknang's actions make sense. His intent is not honesty, clarity, or justice. Sotuknang intends to be a god. He intends to be glorified, at whatever cost. Spider Woman just happens to be the launching pad.

Spider Woman's actions, too, now make sense. By the Fourth World, she understands the process of obtaining godhood. She has already created others who did not possess her powers, and she convinces them to do as she commands. Melting the Back Door would be a visible symbol of her own status; if life and land become too destroyed, she knows she can fix them. The only thing she does not anticipate is the jealous guard, Sotuknang. He watches what she does and grows wary. He waits for her to confirm his suspicions. Then he strikes. And, as a faithful guard, or in jealous paranoia, he also seeks to strike any future godhood attempt by Spider Woman or another.

Thus the punishment. He will not kill Spider Woman, for she is more useful as a living reminder of his power. But he will not allow her youth and beauty, for people admire these qualities. He hopes to separate her from her followers, if not by her ugliness, by their evilness.

What becomes of Spider Woman? She is mentioned only once again in the Waters text, and it is to tell the story of the her wrongdoing. Another text attributes the creation of rough-mannered people to Spider Woman, while two other goddesses create the good people of the world (Erdoes and Ortiz, 115-7). Finally, one source describes her as the grandmother of the kachinas. In this story, The Revenge of Blue Corn Ear Maiden, Spider Woman helps restore a good maiden to her human form after a jealous friend has turns her into a coyote. Here, Spider Woman is sympathetic to those abused by injustice and wrongly punished, but merciless and skilled at revenge (Erdoes and Ortiz, 409-12).

What does Spider Woman teach us today? She reminds us of the human-like reality of the heavens. We cannot fight in a divine arena, and we cannot demand justice from divinity. On the other hand, we have our limited freedom to do with as we like, right or wrong, in this world; but we can never escape human nature. Thus, rather than striving for divinity, we should seek humanity.

Who is she? Female, goddess, and victim; she is a reminder of invisible thread, fragile webs and sticky nets.

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