

My Mother the Spider

Hunter Circe

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Recommended Citation

Circe, Hunter () "My Mother the Spider," *CouRaGeouS Cuentos: A Journal of Counternarratives*: Vol. 6, Article 55.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/courageouscuentos/vol6/iss1/55>



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My Mother the Spider

Hunter Circe

"Here is the earth that 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, the wisdom, and the love to bless all the beings you create. That is why you are here."

-The Spider Woman and the Twins, A Hopi Legend

It is not uncommon when concerning the Earth that one envisions a mother. A womb of bountiful life in an ever expanding sea of darkness, pocked with burning bulbs of white hot gas, where cataclysmic clasts of rock and ice loom and solar flares streak and hiss across everlasting night. Despite all that whirls around her, shrouded in darkness, there she sits as an orb of garden suspended in the ether, her children clinging to her. In the solace of her embrace, her children are permitted to create their own life. When I think of the Earth I think of my mother. I think of how her flesh and bones have broken to make mine. I think of how fiercely we have fought and how I have hurt her in lies and screaming fights. I grew up hunting, and upon reflection I draw connections to the sight of a white tail deer drawing its last breath as I do my mom's glassy eyed welled with tears. I think of the pain of survival, and the pain that comes in sustaining life. The pain of life is known no truer than to a mother.

In reflecting on nature and motherhood I am inspired by a creation story of the Hopi people who reside in what is now the American Southwest. The legend of the Spider Woman, also called Kokyangwuti and Grandmother Spider, recounts the creation of all things. In it, the Spider Woman's web connects all that she has created. She fashions animals and people from handfuls of mud and places them around the Earth, but she is not finished. She tasks her twin children to help her, saying:

“You are Pögánghoya. You are here to help keep this world in order when life is put upon it. Go now around all the world and put your hands upon the earth so that it will become solidified. This is your duty . . . You are Palöngawhoya. You are here to help keep this world in order when life is put upon it. This is your duty now: go about all the world and send out sound so that it may be heard throughout all of the land. When this is heard you will also be known as ‘Echor for all sound echoes the Creator.” (The Spider Woman and the Twins)

Without the help of her children the ground is too unstable of her creations to live and there are no “joyful sounds” in the air for them to hear. Spider Woman has created the perfect world, but it is up to her children to keep it that way.

From this I gather many things. It’s a story about the interconnectivity of all earthly fundamentals, of how the earth is divinely made up for our dwelling and needs not the manipulation and maiming of colonial thought form; but foremost, for me it is a story about two children helping their mother. I am a twin myself, and in many ways, I see my own mother in Spider Woman. My mother has created my world, but it is up to me to steward it. The same can be said for our earth, who provides for us all that we need, but it is up to us to understand the fragile web of interconnectivity we balance on and reside in it accordingly.

This theme of nature in correlation to motherhood is cemented in the film *Land of Friends* in which a woman of Huila, Colombia describes the sounds she heard when an energy company was drilling away rock to erect dams, saying, “[m]other earth cries . . . I realized she is a woman just like my mother and grandmother, as me and my daughter because the way she moaned when they were chopping her to do the diverse tunnels she roared in the same way one roars when giving birth” (*Land of Friends* 2014). The idea that the earth is a mother is a common thread amongst many ideologies of indigenous peoples; peoples who have not forgotten the importance of respecting their environments because these philosophies are intrinsic to their subsistence and longevity. The Huila, for example, fight tooth and nail to protect their land because it

is not just land to them; the land is their mother. In connecting the land to the female body, their fight for land is to retain the very humanity which binds them to their motherland. Under this perspective, the fight is not about simply water, or crops, or fish but a fight for their very life and the prospective life to be sown on their ancestral soil.

In regards to the female body, artist Laura Aguilar reflects on the impact of her own body and nature. With many of her works being self-portraits with natural settings, she highlights the relationship between them. Not only does she draw parallels between her body and nature, but similarly the way the brown, female body and the earth are maimed and discarded by the “patriarchal, gendered, colonial paradigms in which we all live in” (Venegas 2018). In placing herself amongst a rough, rocky, and conventionally unsightly setting, she highlights her experience in a society in which her own form is regarded as unworthy and unattractive.

In providing this critique of white patriarchal ideals of body, nature, and beauty she also centers not just her experience but that of, “her half Irish, light-skinned mother Juanita, free-spirited grandmother Mary, great-grandmother Nasaria and great-great grandmother Antonia and back towards the ancient female lineage that goes before them” (Venegas 2018). Using images of her own body to tell her story, she tells the story of the women before her. Additionally, she tells the story of the greater mother, the earth, whose fate has been woven in a similar fashion to the female bodies of her ancestors. I see a resemblance in Aguilar’s form laying across the earth akin the earth itself, who lays in solitude in the darkness of the cosmos. “As Aguilar bears witness to the untold stories and struggles of these women, unknown and invisible, as well as to her own story, they become us and we are all empowered in the process” (Venegas 2018).

Our earth, like a mother, serves as provider of anything one could ever need, but in an age of extraction this process is disrupted. What was once a delicate balance or interconnectivity, like a spider’s web, is now fractured by borders, industry, resource extraction. I connect this to the Simon’s Brick Company, which has supplemented this web for an artificial complex designed to suit all of its employees’ needs. It includes

housing, a school and a store, all necessities residents of the complex would typically have to leave for (Pérez 2022). Under the guise of convenience, Simon's Brick Company has created its own web architected in a fashion which urges employees to stay indentured to their work and to build up capital for an entity they will never see the fruit of. In disconnecting workers from place, they lose their ability to see value in moving elsewhere. Bound by the need to sustain their livelihood, residents are trapped within an artificial land which profits from their confinement. Denied access to natural spaces, Simon's Brick Company trapped employees in a new world, a moonscape of red earth, in efforts to separate them from the real thing.

So now, as I reflect on my own relationship with nature, I am brought back to the image of the Spider Woman. I imagine a web all around the earth, shrouding it like in Susan Boulet's painting *Spider Woman* (Figure 1). But unlike the painting, the web is no longer intact. It is tattered and overworked from decades of extraction and coloniality. Though designed perfectly, we have plucked bits of here and there and tried our best to make new worlds from the scraps, and now that our tactics prove faulty, what is there to do? I gather that we leave things as they are, use the web as intended instead of building false purposes and false worlds like we see in "Red Dust." I wonder, if we use what's around us as needed, and treat the rest as delicate as a spider's web will mother earth forgive us? Can she? This quandary is when I think of my own mother. In all the pain I have caused her, initially at my birth and the two decades that followed, I have always felt her embrace and undying devotion. I dream the same can be said for our world.



Spider Woman (Boulet)

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