

Uses of Mythology in Aritha Van Herk's *No Fixed Address*

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In his *Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel*, John Moss writes the following concerning the plot in Aritha Van Herk's *No Fixed Address*: "... Suddenly, two thirds of the way through the novel, reality itself spins topsy-turvy, and the going gets rough, and reading is like careening over mountain roads, around precarious switchbacks, close to the edge, unsure of what lies ahead."¹ Indeed, the unexpected shift from realism to a narrative mode beyond linear perceptions of space and time is puzzling to any reader. It is a mode that seems to willfully/playfully transcend causal connections or the borderlines between life and death. While it may be misunderstood as a regrettable incoherence in plot, it may also be seen as an (un)necessary lapse/leap into postmodernism. In any case, the sudden shift in perception and the "surreal" quality of the last section of the novel have given rise to debate.

In classroom discussions about the way in which Aritha Van Herk tightly structures her novels around divergent layers of myth, students and teacher at the University of Osnabrück, West Germany, grew increasingly intrigued by this "turning point" in the novel.² While other aspects of the novel appear as perfectly understandable in the light of Van Herk's established narrative patterns,³ the sudden shift in the main character's consciousness from reality to dream (or hallucination, or death) remains a puzzle. But, as in all good writing, what may seem to be a spontaneous outburst of creative genius is in fact based on careful planning and intellectual precision. After carefully studying additional clues, including lexicological connections, we stumbled across the word "fugu." Asked about this, Aritha Van Herk replied in a letter: "I'd love to hear what your students have to say. Fugism is a good thing. We should all practice it."⁴ Her cryptic reply left us guessing, and our discussions and research continued, and led us ultimately to the following results.

On the level of ancient mythology, Van Herk follows the story of Arachne, as handed down to us in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (VI, 1-145). Arachne was a Lydian weaver who acquired such great skill in her craft that the goddess Athena grew jealous of her. But Arachne refused to be humble about her accomplishments. She challenged the goddess to compete with her. (Athena, we

¹ John Moss, *A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel* (2nd ed; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987) 359.

² Hartmut Lutz, "'Meat and Bones Don't Matter': Mythology in 'The Tent Peg.'" *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 20.2 (1989): 41-67; "An Interview with Aritha Van Herk," *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Kanada-Studien* 9.2 (1989): 109-15.

³ Reingard M. Nischik, "Narrative Technique in Aritha Van Herk's Novels." *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Kanada-Studien* 3.2 (1983): 25-34.

⁴ Aritha Van Herk, "Letter to Hartmut Lutz," July 21, 1989.

must remember, was Zeus's daughter, having sprung from her father's forehead in a unique act of parthenogenesis.) In the weaving contest between Athena and Arachne, the goddess wove into her tapestry scenes celebrating the achievements of the gods, whereas Arachne's weaving exposed the lechery of Zeus. Wanting to erase the blemishes on her father's reputation, the irate goddess struck her opponent with the shuttle. At this humiliation Arachne tried to hang herself, but Athena stopped her from putting an end to her life by changing her into a spider, condemning her to go on weaving forever.

Van Herk's heroine with "the improbable name of Arachne,"⁵ resembles her classical namesake in more than one way. The Arachne/Spider connection is established even before the actual birth of the protagonist. One day during her pregnancy, Arachne's mother Lanie watches a spider weaving its net. At that moment, Gabriel Greenberg, the rich owner of fancy cars, comes to Lanie for the first time to ask her to read his fortune from a teacup. While Lanie is preparing the tea for her little act of sorcery, Greenberg watches the spider and exclaims "Arachnid."⁶ After the birth of her child, Lanie is somewhat disappointed because she had hoped for a boy. She decides to call the newborn "Arachne," thinking of "Gabriel's five-dollar bill" (84). Years later, it is this Gabriel Greenberg who leaves Arachne his black vintage Mercedes. So, the first inception of the heroine's name is caused by the presence of a spider, and it happens within a context of magic ritual or "superstition" (reading tea leaves).

Just like the classical Lydian weaver, Arachne Manteia refuses to be humble. She is determined, from the outset, not to be humiliated in a "male-dominated society."⁷ At the age of fifteen she is the leader of a street gang named "Black Widows," after the spider with the lethal poisonous bite that eats its male mate after intercourse. The name is eponymous. Later, she behaves like other arachnids, being constantly on the move, usually in a back-and-forth, shuttling, weaving motion: as a newspaper girl, as a bus driver, and finally as a saleswoman. Concentrically, she gradually widens the scope of her movements, extending the rungs in her net, in which she catches males to have sex with them and then to cast them aside. In the author's words, "She's really bad. She kidnaps a man and she uses men like toilet paper."⁸

As a saleswoman, Arachne successfully challenges the male world and wins the highest prize at the annual "Ladies' Comfort" convention, despite the smallness of her rural district. She herself, however, never wears the products she sells. She understands clearly that hosiery is the material expression of male oppression (as is made clear in the prologue to the novel, 9-20). Panties, bras, stockings, and so forth, are textiles that package, restrict, and limit women, making them more readily consumable by men, just as a spider's prey is "packaged" and tied in strands of fiber before being consumed. Arachne vio-

⁵ Moss 359.

⁶ Aritha Van Herk, *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986) 83. All references are to this edition.

⁷ Gyrid Jerve, "Aritha Van Herk," *Kunapipi* 8 (1986): 68-79.

⁸ Jerve 70.

lently refutes this notion, and she turns the process around by spreading her light and colorful fabrics all over Western Canada, thus weaving a net to trap men in their "scarlet invitation," which never fades because "there is no end to the panties: there will be no end to this road," as the narrative voice concludes the novel.

The connection of the heroine with the classical Arachne thus works on various levels. Most obvious is that of name. Another connection is the reference to spiders, which is overcoded with references to weaving (textiles) and netting (maps), strengthened further by the continuous shuttling movement Arachne goes through in her various occupations.

Thena is Arachne's "Confidante" (153). They both meet in a garage—traditionally a "male" domain—where they are having their cars serviced. Besides her name, Thena shares additional characteristics with Athena, the "manly" fighting virgin. Like the goddess, she hates men, and she upholds the power of reason over passion. Unlike their mythical ancestors, Thena and Arachne are close friends. However, they argue about the same issue which caused Athena to punish the Lydian weaver: lust. Thena is appalled by Arachne's almost indiscriminate sexual encounters with numerous "road jockeys."

Besides drawing on mythology, Aritha Van Herk firmly roots her narrative in the North American continent and in American culture and literature. As an outstandingly successful traveling saleswoman, Arachne is the incarnated refutation of Arthur Miller's Willy Loman. *Death of a Salesman* debunks the American Dream of "from rags to riches" as a social illusion. The main character tries unsuccessfully to live up to it until the moment of his death. In the play, Loman's car and his erratic driving are important factors in the overall plot. The car, a symbol of the mobility of North American society, is also the instrument of Loman's destruction.

By contrast, Arachne's Mercedes allows her to move continually and to expand the geographical radius of her operations. Unlike Loman, she is both a competent driver and a successful saleswoman. Thus, the novel is a double refutation of Miller's male version of debunking the American Dream, and the result of this double negation is left ambiguously open. Here, there is a female character outdoing all men in their own field (selling, driving), so the story may be read as the gender-specific refutation of the male dream.

The car is more than an American success symbol. On the mythological level, it is part of Arachne's body, enabling her to crisscross Western Canada like a spider weaving its threads. Throughout the novel, there are numerous references to cartography. Roads are perceived on maps as strands of fiber stretched across the surface of the earth: ". . . fine black lines on cream-colored paper webbing their way through the mountains . . . All the rises and dips were colored . . . ; those colors had lifted the tracery of roads above map. Under the metallic light they glowed orange and pale blue" (94). Sitting in her car and looking at the map of the territory she covers, Arachne can perceive the land as if it were by a spider's web. Instead of a weaver's shuttle, she handles her shiny black car. Arachne, the former leader of the Black Widow street gang, has a

markedly libidinous relationship with her Mercedes. Whoever has seen a black widow spider will never forget the black metallic luster of its round hard body, and the strength and thickness of its legs. The black hull of Arachne's car resembles the body of that spider.

Thinking about the car's origin, Arachne feels that "the car's past resides somewhere in its bones, a quiet knowledge of speed and drift and wind resistance . . ." (48) These are the forces a spider has to cope with when weaving its net. When the text refers to the Mercedes as a "black plunger of secret elation," "an oak and leather incubator," (47) the equation "Spider-Black Widow-black Mercedes-Arachne" is established. Black widows plunge on their prey from above. Their round bellies incubate their young. Sitting in the hull of her car, Arachne is the spider, a black widow in its hard shell, waiting for prey, ever ready to plunge, ever ready to recede by its thread.

After the "shift" in the plot, Arachne finds herself on a ferry crossing the Strait of Georgia. Here, a stranger tries to rape her, and she stabs him with a big hatpin, the knob of it as red as the hour glass emblem on the belly of a black widow. The scene is described in terms closely resembling the love/death act of that species: ". . . his lips still mumbling the skin of her neck. She jabs the hatpin into his chest, deep into his heart, her thrust stopped only by the red jewel at the end. The man coughs and tumbles to the deck, his relentless arms pulling her down. She disentangles herself and straightens her clothes, steps over his body" (286f.), then Arachne "walks straight to the black hump of her Mercedes"—the black widow settling down in her hull.

Van Herk's mythical references to North America include references to Native cultures. There is the encounter at Crowfoot's grave on the Siksika (Blackfoot) Reserve east of Calgary. From the graveyard one can overlook the Battle River and the coulees and ravines leading down to it from the high plain. About a mile away there is the monument, commemorating the signing of Treaty No 7 in the year 1977 at Blackfoot Crossing. This setting is described realistically in the novel. It ties the story in with the local history of Western Canada, respecting the Native presence in that region. But Native mythology is drawn upon just as much as the European classical mythology, and the reference is established via a Native woman's mythological figure: Spider Woman/Thought Woman.

Native American novelist Leslie Silko from Laguna Pueblo begins her novel *Ceremony* with a poem about Spider Woman: "Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought Woman/is sitting in her room/and whatever she thinks about/appears."⁹ Silko's fellow Laguna writer and critic, Paula Gunn Allen, deals extensively with Spider Old Woman, the powerful creatrix in Keres mythology. Both in her poetry¹⁰ and in her critical study *The Sacred Hoop*,¹¹ Allen points out that at the

⁹ Leslie Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking Press, 1988) 1.

¹⁰ Paula Gunn Allen, "Grandmother" (poem) in *That's What She Said: Contemporary Poetry and Fiction by Native American Women*. ed. Rayna Green (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 15.

¹¹ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986). Subsequent references are to this edition, and will appear in the text after the abbreviation "SH."

heart of many Native creation myths there are female figures, who bring all beings into life. Among the Keres, and to a lesser extent among their Navaho neighbors, Spider Woman, Spider Old Woman, or Grandmother Spider is also seen as the deity thinking creation into existence. "It is understood that the primary creative force is Thought" (SH 255), because "Spider Woman's Keres name is translated as Thought Woman (it can be better understood if translated as Creating-through-Thinking Woman)" (SH 98). This quality of Spider Woman finds its expression in Native oral traditions, where language is perceived as sacred, empowered to actually make happen what it expresses in words. Words are powerful. They may heal and make whole, but they can also destroy, unbalance, and kill (Silko's novel *Ceremony* is about this process). The reality created by thoughts or words, however, is different from our Aristotelian notions of it, because: "The seamless web [*sic!*, H.L.] of human and nonhuman life, which is simultaneously the oral tradition and the thought of Old Spider Woman, is neither causal nor sequential. It is achronological and ahistorical, and it is simultaneously general and highly specific" (SH 100).

Arachne shares in the magic and creative power of Grandmother Spider. She rebels against the confines of a reality around herself which she finds unable to accept as a woman. Instead, she begins to live in terms of her own reality. And in the end, she recreates a reality beyond history, space, and logic, a reality that is as magical as the future divined by her mother in the leftovers of teacups, and just as real as the last part of the novel, where it turns "topsy-turvy" and the "going gets rough."¹² In the chapter "All's fair" (280-284), Arachne eats a fugu in a Japanese restaurant, and after eating she can neither speak nor move. The last word in the chapter is "fugu."

In the next chapter, "Ferryman," she is aboard a ferry in the Strait of Georgia and "does not know how she got here, she has no memory past the infinite languor that engulfed her at the sushi bar, her arms and legs going gradually numb while her thoughts crystalized" (285).

Her explanation for her strange condition is that she has died: "I'm dead. I was eating fugu. It can kill you" (285). In fact, fugu is a dangerous fish because its guts contain the nerve poison tetrodotoxin. Prepared improperly it can cause death to the consumer. Returning to her Mercedes after having stabbed the "ferryman," who in Greek mythology stands for "Death," Arachne realizes that she is alive. The fugu did not kill her, yet it caused a metamorphosis: by consuming the fugu, Arachne/Spider becomes venomous herself, turning into the black widow she metaphorically is.

Again, there is the connection with a spider's web, and the crucial passage uses the same color symbolism as the scene in which Arachne ponders over the map in her car: blue, orange/pink, light transparency, and black (282f.). The fugu assumes the appearance of a spider, and the fish is described in a terminology fitting Arachne's obsession with traveling and her unwillingness or inability to "stay": "It tastes of distant water, a faint wistfulness in its texture al-

¹² Moss 359.

most like coriander, an emanation that melts away as quickly as the honey she has sucked from the buffalo beans blooming in prairie ditches" (283).

After some hesitation Arachne finally eats the fugu/spider, thus, in one reading of the act, committing suicide, like the classical Arachne. Later, she tries "consciously" (?) to commit suicide by jumping overboard the ferry. At that moment, however, she—or "reality" around her—already is transformed by magic. It is the scene in which the strange "ferryman"/Death tries to possess her. But Arachne does not cross the water, at least not in terms of the classical crossing of the River Styx. Instead, she fights Death in terms of a black widow spider.

Arachne's increased restless disorientation may be understood in a mythological reading as the result of her having become a spider. However, another reading, which is both "realist" and "magic," works on the lexicological level, demonstrating the creative power of words.

The word "fugu" is pronounced twice, first by the Japanese cook, then repeated at the end of the chapter, like a ritual incantation. When finding herself on board the ferry in the next chapter, Arachne has lost her memory: she is suffering from "fugue," defined as "a major dissociative activity characterized by loss of memory and by flight from one's usual environment. The fugue [. . .] may represent a drastic and involuntary neurotic escape from intolerable conflict. The victim may wander about, perhaps in a strange city or in other unfamiliar surroundings, sometimes in an aimless or confused fashion for days, weeks, or longer."¹³ Arachne suffers from these symptoms. She runs away in a state of total amnesia.

The transition from eating the fugu to suffering from fugue may be interpreted clinically as a psychological reaction formation by a woman who can no longer take the strain of her existence. As such, the novel stands in the tradition of books about women and madness. But Arachne will not simply withdraw and suffer. She fights back. In this case, there is a magical change from one reality into another, using the inherent power of the word "fugu(e)", the magic of word-thought: "The thought for which Grandmother Spider is known is the kind that results in physical manifestations of phenomena: mountains, lakes, creatures, or philosophical-sociological systems" (SH 122).

But caution: in some Native cultures Spider is not only a Creator, but also a Trickster!

¹³ *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 1985 ed.