

2012

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Recommended Citation

Collett, Anne, Kite and quilt: Olive Senior's exploration of her poetic inheritance, *Kunapipi*, 34(2), 2012.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol34/iss2/14>

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Abstract

In the poem 'Ode to Pablo Neruda', published in her most recent collection of poetry, over the roofs of the world (2005), Olive Senior finds herself 'drifting and wordless', so far from the sea she cannot strike the right chord. The poet narrator calls upon the spirit and word-craft of Pablo Neruda to help her re-discover the lost measure that will move others:

ANNE COLLETT

Kite and Quilt: Olive Senior's Exploration of Her Poetic Inheritance

In the poem 'Ode to Pablo Neruda', published in her most recent collection of poetry, *over the roofs of the world* (2005), Olive Senior finds herself 'drifting and wordless', so far from the sea she cannot strike the right chord. The poet narrator calls upon the spirit and word-craft of Pablo Neruda to help her re-discover the lost measure that will move others:

So I turn to find again something you said
about grasping poetry like a thread?
Here it is:

*You must spin it
fly a thread
and climb it...*

*This isn't a matter
for deliberation
it's an order.*

('Ode to Pablo Neruda' 92)

It might be an order, but Senior does not 'jump to', responding rather with a series of questions that voice her anxieties about thread — thread that might be a lifeline, but as easily a noose: thread in the hands of sweaty fingers might become dirty, knotted, tangled, bloody and broken. 'I worry,' writes Senior,

...about clinging
too tightly to this thread. For what happens if it becomes
too knotted to decipher, too clotted with blood, with mud
from the traveller, too broken to tie again, too ravelled,
too threadbare?

What if you use it all up — for a clothesline that breaks,
for a leash the dog runs off with? (93)

and worst of all,

What if you confidently go to bed leaving a spindle of new
thoughts to be processed. Next morning you reach for the
thread and it's gone like smoke — it's the cobweb you're left with. (93)

But Neruda is not the kind of poet to indulge weakness or accept excuses. In his 'Ode to the Thread' he rails:

We need blankets
 to keep warm through the winter.
 Here come people
 from the farms,
 they are bringing
 a hen
 for the poet, one
 small hen.
 And what will you give them,
 you, what will you give? (63)

Taken out of context, Pablo Neruda's question to and of the poet might sound like a very poor apology for poetry: the people are in need of the most basic rudiments of life — a blanket to keep them warm. They offer something precious from the little they have to give — a hen. 'And what will you give them, *you*, what will you give?' asks the poet of himself and of others of his ilk. The question seems accusatory, asked of one who, it might be presumed from the tone of the question, cannot give even the barest of covers to keep his people warm. Perhaps the poet, although he might think himself big, is of less value even than the smallest hen. ('There are some poets so big/they don't fit in doorways/ and some merchants so sharp/they don't remember being poor,' writes Neruda in a poem entitled, 'Not Quite so Tall'.) But the hen has been given, and the poet must rise to the occasion — he must give something worthy in return. 'Now!/ now, the thread': the poet calls urgently for thread — not the thread of cotton, linen, silk or wool — but the thread of magical property, the thread of poetry:

the thread
 that will become cloth
 for those who have
 only rags,
 nets
 for fishermen,
 brilliant
 scarlet
 shirts
 for stokers,
 and a flag
 for each and every one. (63)

Neruda's 'Ode to the Thread' is an ode to what is so often relegated to the category of 'woman's work', but here it becomes the word-work of the poet — a male poet it would seem (whose beard grows long with the time taken to bend the vast mountain of material to his word-will) — and the recipients of that word/thread work would also appear to be male — farmers, fishermen and stokers. So when Olive Senior sets out to interrogate and ultimately answer Neruda's call to the poet to take up the thread in the cause of the people, she does so from

her womanly position, reminding him of the heritage of thread that has been a burden as much as a blessing borne primarily by women. Senior claims to be seeking ‘that old woman, the wizard of the cords/who used to tie up the wind with three knots in a bundle/ and sell to sailors’ and she apologises for letting loose a hurricane (on Neruda and on the world) because she ‘forgot which knot was which’! (101). But this is a woman who knows her craft well. She declares that in fact her heart feels much better for the roaring — ‘it’s a strong wind that cleanses, that/unburdens and purifies’, and that, although the thread is broken, she will ‘mend it and restring with fresh beads’ (101). Yet after demonstrating the skill with which she wields the needle like a sword, Senior moves on to claim, somewhat unexpectedly for one so assured in her art, that:

I wanted more than woman’s knotted portion so I refused
to learn the way of thread: sewing, embroidery, darning,
weaving, tapestry, knitting or crochet do not appear on my CV.
(‘Ode to Pablo Neruda’ 101)

Refusing to learn the craft of woman’s knotted portion (whilst reminding her readers of the cultural power invested in that portion) and choosing rather to embroider, weave, knit and darn with the thread of poetry, Olive Senior both extends and embraces woman’s position within the domestic and the literary spheres. Like the poetry of Neruda, to whom she pays homage (despite her disclaimer) in an ode that completes her third of four volumes of poetry, Senior writes ‘impure poetry/that bears witness to the raw and the natural’ (‘Ode to Pablo Neruda’, 92) — hers too, like Neruda’s is a ‘voice from the bottom of the well’ (92); but unlike the poetry of her male predecessor who speaks predominantly with and through the voice of male experience, Senior’s poetry is earthed in woman’s work and woman’s talk. As she remarks in ‘Hen’:

Some find you loud mouth and simple,
for every egg laid a big announcement
 a cackle, some find you
the broody hen, not knowing all
is meant to throw spies off the scent
of your blood’s secret: you know
the sky isn’t falling, geese don’t lay
golden eggs, superior knowledge
resides in the feet. (23)

Superior knowledge might reside in the feet, but the poet must know earth and sky. Poetry, declares Neruda,

comes from many sources,
...
it is strong because
it was made from ores;
it is fragile because it was
traced by trembling smoke;

the thread of poetry
 is like that.
 ('Ode to the Thread' 61)

So in this third volume, whose title, *over the roofs of the world*, is taken from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Senior takes wing with birds of many a different feather to explore what might be understood to be her womanly craft in relation to a masculine art. The woman-weed gossip on which Senior has built her poetic voice over three decades is tested against or put into play with another inheritance represented by imposing male poets of the Americas like Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens and Pablo Neruda. However, unlike the fledgling woman poet of Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own*, Senior does not find her vision of the sky blocked by an imposing male forebear, rather she is sufficiently confident to spar with him:

So Pablo Neruda, although I absolutely agree with many
 things you have said this thing with the thread I find a bit
 slippery as if you'd reeled it off without thinking and simply
 disappeared leaving in the blue this monstrous kite
 and me
 the one
 holding
 the string.

(‘Ode to Pablo Neruda’)

This is ‘classic Senior’, claiming to give ground, where in fact she shifts the ground from under your (or in this case, his) feet. *Over the roofs of the world* might be understood to be, at least in part, Olive Senior's alternative ‘Ode to the Thread’: the book of poetry begins with a reminder that the demonised Christopher Columbus was the son and grand-son of weavers who kept the craft alive in the writing of two books (see ‘The Pull of Birds’, 9); it includes the poems ‘Embroidery’ (78), ‘Penny Reel’ (80), ‘Lacemaker’ (86) and ‘Basketmaker’ — the last being a celebration of the South American basket makers of the Warao, for whom ‘warp becomes worth’: ‘In twill and twist of reeds’ the basket makers ‘entwine the divine, the labyrinth unwind’(90); and the volume ends in conversation with Neruda's ‘Ode to the Thread’ — lines from his poem interwoven through her own, as weft to her warp, or warp to her weft — I'm not sure which — but of him she asks:

This thread of poetry: Where does it come from?
 Are you born with it? Is it handed to you like a sweet
 or a rattle to a child, who takes it without thinking?
 As I took your kite string? (94)

Senior not only asks the question of her eminent predecessor, she has the temerity to provide her own answer:

Here's how I see it: This thread is one that crosses your path
 like the spider's web. You walk through unaware
 The Great Spider still clings to it. So now Spider clings
 to you, my friend. This is not an accident. You have been
 chosen Spider's apprentice. To master language. As
 Trickster, to spin and weave tales. To prophesy and heal.
 The go-between serving earth and sky. Sometimes the
 messenger left dangling. (94)

In his introduction to a bilingual selection of Neruda's poems, Alastair Reid remarks of *The Heights of Macchu Pichu*, the volume that 'remains Neruda's most celebrated work, the testament to his spirit', that here the Chilean poet realised his poetic calling: 'to become a voice, a voice for the dead past, for the stones themselves, for the inanimate world of objects, for the natural world, for the continent in its myriad forms, and above all, for those in the present who lack a voice' (5). Neruda himself observes of this work, 'I thought about Ancient American man. I saw his ancient struggles linked with present struggles' (qtd in Reid, 5). There is much here that could also be said of Olive Senior's commission, for she too gives voice to the voiceless — those of the African diaspora for whom the past is a bitter legacy. So when she speaks with regret for calling up a hurricane (101), it is not just the hurricane of her attack on Neruda, but the hurricane that throws up the flesh and bones of the Middle Passage:

The ones bound in chains
 Dragged across the Atlantic
 In vessels, full-rigged.
 Their vocal chords ripped
 With their names
 On the tips of their tongues.
 Washed away in salt water
 The cartography of home. (99)

In her ode to Neruda Senior explains:

I've had to weave a cloth to wrap it all up in, a bundle for
 carrying for I'm travelling too. But not flying — too much salt
 in my veins.

I've been seeking a thread to tie up the bundle which has been
 growing unwieldy with the cries and the whispers of the ones
 I can't name: The lost ones, the limboed, the un-cared for,
 the un-loved. The mortified, the discarded, the 'disappeared'.
 All resting uneasy on my conscience. (100)

Sometimes the burden is overwhelming: 'Yes, we each have our measure, our burden to carry,' Senior acknowledges, 'but sometimes the cries are so piercing, we are silenced' (100), and sometimes the poet feels the need 'to feel/free/to fly/kites/if I wish/or just/dangle/from a thread/like/the spider' (101) But Neruda will not let her sleep easy, or dangle carefree, and it is to him that she feels obliged to

defend herself and her art. This defence is at times an argument about poetry and sometimes an argument about what it is to be a woman and a poet — an Afro-Caribbean woman poet:

After you have taken the thread — the thread you cannot refuse
— you must choose how to handle it. You might cut off bits
to skip rope with or play cat's cradle. That's fine for joy
needs to unwind. But there comes a time when you might be
forced to confess: I don't know what I did with the rest of it. (94)

When Senior looks up with some surprise to see it is she, holding the string of the kite,

But look at this:

In the sky
a kite
still aloft
and the one
holding
the thread
is me (102),

she is somewhat disingenuous, for she has not arrived at this position without hard graft and in full knowledge, having eaten well of the fruit (the bitter and the sweet) of that tree.

Here's the real trick (and no one ever tells you this):
the thread of poetry to safely travel, the knot of yourself
you must first unravel.

...
Stripped
and skeletal
you first
navigate
the crawl-space
that allows you
to enter
the labyrinth

of self, where monsters lurk at the heart of darkness; but it is also a woman's own thread that allows her to find a way out into the light of day:

If you find yourself
back here
you have mastered
the first trick.

You
can make your way
through the needle's eye
pulled up
by the thread
of our poem

dragged down
by the weight
of words
waiting
to be strung.

The real apprenticeship
has begun. (97–98)

Although Senior speaks of poetry as a kind of calling for which you are chosen by The Great Spider, ‘To master language. As/ Trickster, to spin and weave tales. To prophesy and heal’ (94), poets are made not born, and Senior here acknowledges the debt she owes Neruda, whilst also asking for acknowledgement of the commitment made and the suffering endured by she who would be poet (a woman no less than a man). So when Senior proffers her gift of an ode to Neruda, it is a poem, made ‘like a quilt from thread/ and strips’ in exchange for a kite (103). It is not only the poor who require comfort; poets too require the support of one another, and Senior’s offering to Neruda is apt. For the quilt might be understood to be the blanket for which Neruda called, yet with typical Senior craft, the warmth and comfort it offers is thereby allied with a (black) woman’s craft (recalling Alice Walker’s story of ‘Everyday Use’), and with an art of not just ‘making do’ — the art of survival, but of making beautiful: quilt is that which combines earth and sky, providing solace for body and soul (Walker’s claim for the beauty, the art, of her mother’s gardens, might here be remembered¹):

With strips and remnants left over (and with bits and pieces
of this kite I’m reeling in) I can make a costume for the
dancing fools the masqueraders who dress in rags and tatters. (102)

Senior ‘shreds’ Neruda’s proffered kite in order to craft a thing of her own making — ‘a poem like a quilt’ (103) — that acknowledges but does not bow to that inheritance. Recalling her desire for ‘more than woman’s knotted portion’ (101), and remarking with some surprise her kite held aloft in the sky by the thread of her own spinning, Senior considers accepting her apprenticeship to the great Akan creator god and Caribbean trickster, Anancy spider-wo/man (Anancy here undergoes a sex-change/gender transformation, perhaps acknowledging not only a debt to the twinned Akan god, but also a literary debt to Ariadne):

Maybe I’ll accept my commission as apprentice Spider
who spins from her gut the threads for flying,
for tying up words that spilled, hanging out tales long
unspoken, reeling in songs, casting off dances.
And perhaps for binding up wounds? (102)

The inheritance and the commission that Senior takes on as her ‘joy and her obligation’ (Neruda, ‘Ode to the Thread’) is not only gendered, but historically and genealogically specific — it is, like Neruda’s, a commission derived from ‘the people’, her people:

Egungun
 Jonkonnu
 Pitchy-Patchy
 Pierrot and Gombay

the ones who dance the ancestors. (102)

And it would seem here that poetry is a joint or shared craft — an art that is both individual and communal, for Senior goes on to surmise that,

Perhaps when they dance they'll let the wind spin their strips
 and their tatters into thread flying ready to be climbed.

Or feather them into birds on the ascendant, their wings
 lightly stirring up the ocean below the Middle Passage. (102)

Ultimately, Senior acknowledges the debt she owes Neruda, needing 'this kite-string to jerk me back to the/source of creation, to that mantra of obligation' (98), but she also acknowledges a 'creole spider-work of many hands' (98) — the work of ancestors poetic and unpoetic.

And so, my trickster powers evolving, I'm learning like you,
 Pablo Neruda veteran tightrope walker, to swing more easily
between joy and obligation.

Here it is: this poem I've made for you like a quilt from thread
 and strips as a way of thanking you — not for all your other gifts
 (for that would require a book) — but simply
 in exchange for your kite which — as you have seen — I've
 turned to good use. ('Ode to Pablo Neruda', *over the roofs*, 103)

NOTES

- ¹ See Alice Walker's essay, 'In Search of Our Mother's Gardens'.

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