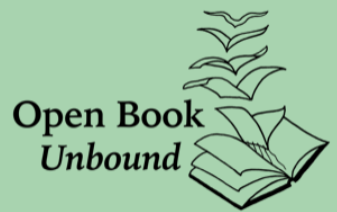


GATHERING THREADS

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Ravel and unravel are both synonyms and antonyms; rather like my two aunts. Separated by an ocean, one taught me to knit, the other to crochet, and both wove laughter, love and mystery into their creations. One with eyes of coolest blue that shied away from sunlight, the other warm amber flecked with mischief. The more I unravel their stories, the more I ravel. Or is it the other way around?

I'd learnt to knit at Portsmouth auntie's feet, enjoying the chattering of the clunky needles that made my first scarf and delighting in making something grow. She would applaud the growth of the proud rainbow snake that hung around my neck, a patchwork beauty of leftover yarn that added to my 'weirdo' status at school. On visits, we'd make tea together in the kitchen of her unassuming flat, with a kitchen of turquoise formica, frosted windows and neighbours with useful assumptions. Portsmouth auntie proffered purple tins of classic 'British' treasures; saving my favourites for me as we gossiped about my father dominating the teatime conversation. "My brother's rather bossy, isn't he?" she'd whisper in a Hampshire burr, secretly slipping me the nutty chocolates while I waited for her to cast on.

After one visit, I wrapped myself in a half-finished blanket to travel the fifty snowy miles home curled up in the back of my parents' car. It was my floral scented armour against my mother's indignation at my whistling, a skill eagerly learned from my second, bonus auntie during the visit. Life-long companions, both women wore walking shoes as tough as my trainers. Perhaps our matching footwear provoked my father to anxiously scour my teenage bedroom and examine the personal ads of the feminist magazines hidden in my drawers.

The knit is outward facing, the purl is inward facing.

I'd always heard purl as 'pearl', like the colour of Portsmouth auntie's hair. As she bent to show me the complexity of an unfamiliar pattern, it shone like no other hair I had ever seen. With Portsmouth under threat of Nazi bombs, she and her siblings were hoodwinked into sitting on a train, and fitted with gas masks, for a 'practice run'. Before the mass of high-pitched wailing reached the crowd of parents left on the platform, they were whisked away by train to live with a West Country man who stole their sugar rations. However, sweetness was

taken by one hand of fate and granted with another. She met my bonus auntie planting cabbages for the Land Army and they had remained side by side ever since. Although none of us ever heard the ‘purl’ side of the story, I could feel that even their exasperated chuckles were laced with a rare and beautiful kind of love.

Trinidad auntie had soft, comfortable arms that were made for hugs and tickles. They would embrace me after a wild ride along the dusty highway from Piarco airport, my uncle weaving away from reckless drivers and potential bandits. The view of Port of Spain would change from colonial mansions, to the wide Savannah famous for Carnival and cricket, to flat interlocking streets named after gems like agate, citrine and turquoise. The neighbourhood children would run from their verandahs to crowd around the car as we slowed past the painted concrete houses and came to a stop. My grandmother’s house was an Aladdin’s cave of treats for any child, oozing with piles of hot sada roti, crates of soda bottles in a dazzling array of colours, and trays of homemade sweets. Once I had been hugged, kissed and squeezed to death, my aunt would take out her crochet needles, bags of coloured thread and weave her magic creations before my eyes.

With my mother out of sight, we could indulge in pink and white coconut candies, impossibly sticky toolum made from local molasses and bags of tamarind balls whose white sugar coating would lure you to their sour insides. There was always a box of Cracker Jack waiting for me, that I loved more for its exotic American trinket than its crunchy clusters of peanuts and popcorn. The white sailor on the box a reminder of the American naval base immortalised in Rum and Coca Cola, from the time before Trinidad acquired a confident swagger from the Black Power movement and the oil boom of the seventies. “You real like sweet ting, eh?” she would laugh. “You just like me, chile!” Just before it was time to leave, I could finally inspect the long table I’d have been peeping at throughout the visit, struggling to obey Caribbean rules of handling objects only with express permission. Spread before me was a glorious collection of the latest fashions in bold, tropical colours. Halter neck tops, hot pants, and glittering evening gowns befitting Diana Ross. I slowly walked up and down, gasping at the exquisite handiwork of each unique piece and agonising over my single choice to take away. This was haute couture in miniature for Barbie dolls to live their best lives, with or without Ken.

A schooner had disappeared one day, just towards the end of the war, unravelling a pampered childhood of sugar cane and servants. Afterwards, quiet mutterings spread across Grenada about a German engine, a British mistake and classified government documents. Her father's white horse, named after Emperor Haile Selassie, was now absent from the cane fields, as was the group of ambitious men plotting a free and unified Caribbean from around the family dinner table. Forced to leave their Great House, her younger sister, my mother, pulled tightly on the strings suddenly dangled for pretty brown women in a 1950s colony; beauty queen, bank worker and air hostess. Who, with a smaller waist and a harder heart than my aunt, had melted the softening colour bar with a dazzling smile. According to dubious family lore, having unfortunate extra inches had narrowed my aunt's life choices. Half of Grenada, including my family, had followed the trail south in search of adventure and extra dollars. But I like to think that my aunt lived with her mother to be a loving comfort. A knowing companion in the moments when my grandmother's eyes flickered towards broad-shouldered strangers in the distance.

How easily those miniature nooses slipped onto the needle and fastened to another.

Circular crochet doilies decorated the house, a legacy of Christian missions to the Caribbean. The one covering the vanity table was overlaid with bottles of talcum powder, Vaseline and American perfume; the bedroom altar to hygiene common to every Caribbean woman. I was a willing acolyte, dutifully bearing my washcloths and soap to the shower, as I followed the rhythmic clapping of her rubber slippers. I wanted skin like my aunt's, skin that was soft, smooth and radiant. But her beautiful skin proved a little too thin for the lashings of a harsh and pitiless world. Perhaps these intricately woven doilies doubled as portals for concerned ancestors when life itself began to fray; transforming into Islamic mandalas and webs of wisdom from spider Anansi himself.

Lisa Williams is the founder of the Edinburgh Caribbean Association, an educator in Black History and runs the BAME Open Book group at the National Library of Scotland.