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# "Go Back to Your Loom Dad": Weaving Nostos in the Twenty-First Century

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## Chapter 2

# "Go Back to Your Loom Dad"

## Weaving *Nostos* in the Twenty-First Century

CORINNE PACHE

For centuries writers and artists have adapted and transformed Homer's *Odyssey* in endlessly inventive and surprising ways. Yet the disposition of genders in the poem is seldom altered from its ancient pattern: a man leaves, a woman stays at home and waits until he returns.<sup>1</sup> In her 2007 play, *Current Nobody*, Melissa Gibson departs from this conventional fidelity to the ancient narrative by rewriting the *Odyssey* as a twenty-first century family story with a wandering wife and a husband who is left behind.<sup>2</sup> In Gibson's playful tragicomedy, Pen, a female war photographer, leaves her husband, Od, and daughter Tel in order to report on a distant war. Because the story of Odysseus and Penelope is so familiar, Gibson's reversal stresses the ways in which gender interacts with plot. Like the *Odyssey*, *Current Nobody* explores the notions of memory and identity that are central to homecoming (or *nostos* in ancient Greek), but Gibson's gender

1. For a wide-ranging study of the reception of the *Odyssey*, see Hall (2008). On the reception of Homer in the twentieth century, see Graziosi and Greenwood (2007). Margaret Atwood's recent *Penelopiad* (2005) gives a central role to Penelope's perspective, but the protagonists keep their traditional roles. Walsh's *Penelope* (2010), in an interesting twist, focuses on the suitors' perspective, but again, the *nostos* narrative remains unchanged. For a fully female *Odyssey* in the film *Volver*, directed by Pedro Almodóvar, see Pache (2010 and 2013).

2. *Current Nobody* premiered at the Woolly Mammoth Theater Company, Washington, DC, October 29–November 25, 2007. In this essay, all quotations are from a 2007 draft provided by Gibson's agent at Creative Artists Agency.

reversals have the effect of unweaving gendered expectations conditioned by the Homeric source text and its receptions.

In the following pages, I analyze different aspects of homecoming explored in the play and the connection between the source poem and Gibson's twenty-first century rewriting, focusing more particularly on the relationship between identity and *nostos*, the power of memory and stories—ancient and modern—to shape human lives, and the link between homecoming and home. Gibson's Od and Pen find themselves "off the map," to use Pen's words, with respect to the unconventionality of the roles they play, and both husband and wife face the threat of losing their gender identities and becoming "Nobody." Like their ancient counterparts, Od and Pen fulfill their homecoming, but homecoming and home are rewritten as a locus of ambivalence and anxiety.

Before examining the ways in which the gender reversal affects the *nostos* theme, I will summarize the main episodes of the play. The first half of the play focuses on what happens during the twenty years of Pen's absence. Od tries to raise his daughter, but is never completely present, obsessed as he is with what he hopes will be his wife's imminent return. After ten years, Od and Tel learn—through a phone call from Pen—that she is finally coming home, but as Od puts it, "the cellular reception in Troy is abominable," and the conversation is cut short. A group of three female documentary film makers, Jo, Joe, and Sue, arrive at Od's home to document the reunion between husband and wife; they also proceed to woo Od during the wait, which lasts another ten years. Just after she turns twenty, Tel is convinced by Bill the Doorman to leave Ithaca and go in search of her mother. In the second half of the play, the focus shifts to Pen, who arrives on Skheria and holds a press conference (with accompanying slide show) in which she attempts to explain—"Epic story short," as she says—what happened to her between her departure from Troy and her recent arrival among the Phaiakians. Pen describes her stays with Kirk, who transformed some of her colleagues into pigs, and the "half man half god" Cal. Pen's account of her relationships with Kirk and Cal is challenged by journalists who have heard of her adventures from other sources. Moments after the end of the press conference and Pen's departure, Tel arrives on Skheria. The scene switches back to Ithaca, where Pen is reunited with Bill the Doorman who tells her where she is. Bill disguises Pen as a "down-on-his-luck-old-man from Crete." A little later Tel returns, also in disguise. There follows a reunion scene between mother and daughter. Od sets up a contest for his suitors, who are subsequently slaughtered by Pen. Husband and wife are reunited after Pen describes the olive tree bed,

and the play ends with a conversation between Od and Tel, who is herself about to leave for an extended journey.

While the character names of Gibson’s play are comically abbreviated versions of the names of the principal characters in the *Odyssey*, *Current Nobody* also evokes the Homeric poem by echoing its language, themes, imagery, and plot: absence and adventure; a focus on food, which is developed once the suitors ensconce themselves in Od’s house, devouring countless cupcakes; disguise, recognition and reunion; the contest of the bow; the trick of the bed; reunion between husband and wife; and the slaughter of the suitors. Missing are the other heroes and heroines of the ancient poem: Menelaos and Helen, Alkinoos and Nausikaa (though Nestor and Diomedes are briefly mentioned as having made it back); and also missing are the gods (with the exception of Bill’s occasional Athene-like interventions). As opposed to the Odysseus-centric *Odyssey*, Gibson devotes equal time to husband and wife. The tone of *Current Nobody* is comic and witty, though the questions it explores remain as earnest and profound as in the source poem.

How does the shift in gender roles affect the *nostos* narrative? In the *Odyssey*, the hero’s *nostos* is a narrative of identity regained through *mêtis* (“cunning”) leading to recognition and reunion with his like-minded wife. Both Odysseus and Penelope can be understood as undergoing different forms of *nostos*: for Odysseus, the journey is both physical and psychological, as he makes his way home from war, while Penelope’s *nostos* is stationary and psychological as she waits for her husband, denying the suitors’ advances and maintaining control over the house. Odysseus’ own narrative of his wanderings in *Odyssey* 9–12 plays a crucial role in articulating the main concerns of the poem—heroism, hospitality, and civilization—and each adventure provides Odysseus with opportunities to practice skills necessary to his physical and psychological homecoming. Penelope at home faces different challenges that require similar skills: caution, cleverness, endurance, and the ability to hide her feelings. Husband and wife share the same goal, reunion, and exhibit the like-mindedness that Odysseus describes as the basis of a good marriage (*homophroneonte*, 6.183). Both Odysseus and Penelope thus become the agents of their own narrative: Odysseus, by telling his own story, and Penelope by using weaving (and unweaving) as a way of delaying resolution.<sup>3</sup>

In her essay, “What Was Penelope Unweaving?” the literary scholar Carolyn Heilbrun argues that Penelope is the first woman who must “live

her life without a story to guide her: no woman before has been in this position.”<sup>4</sup> For Heilbrun, there is one quintessential male narrative, the quest, which allows for all kinds of stories, while women are usually confined to the marriage or erotic plot. In the marriage plot, women “only wait to be desired, to be wed, to be forgotten.”<sup>5</sup> Odysseus’ adventures are typical of the quest plot, but Penelope’s story does not quite fit either the quest or marriage plot, and she attempts to resolve the narrative impasse she faces by weaving and unweaving, both as a way of delaying and controlling the narrative. Through the trick of unraveling her work at night, Penelope thus creates a new kind of story, which centers on her choice to remain faithful, her long wait, and her clever manipulation of the suitors. Yet *Odyssey* 23 can also be read as a reenactment of Odysseus and Penelope’s marriage.<sup>6</sup> After separation, a long-delayed reunion, and a magically lengthened second wedding night, Penelope, once again, disappears from the narrative, as if to prove Heilbrun’s point, even against her own argument, that women never escape the marriage plot.

While *Current Nobody*—with a few omissions—follows the plot of the *Odyssey* in a straightforward way, the gender reversal of the main characters takes the narrative to strange places. Pen and Od, a career woman and a stay-at-home dad, are familiar twenty-first century archetypes, but mapping their characters onto the plot of the *Odyssey* exposes the limitations of their own gendered expectations. Od and Pen in effect exchange plots, and subsequently both characters find themselves “off the map,” to use Pen’s metaphor about her journey:

You have No idea what it’s like

Off the map

Off the map is literally that

...

Off the map it’s impossible to retain one’s identity

There is no Me off the map there is only the map and Me not on it

The confusion and loss of identity incurred “off the map” are painful to both protagonists, but also offer an enticing path to Pen, who is keen, as

4. See Heilbrun (1990, 107). Many scholars have focused on the role of Penelope in the *Odyssey*; see, e.g., Murnaghan (1987a, esp. 118–47), Katz (1991), F. I. Zeitlin (1996b), Felson-Rubin (1997), and Clayton (2004). For Penelope’s “myth-making” in the *Odyssey*, see Levaniouk (2011).

5. See Heilbrun (1990, 108).

6. Some scholars, starting with the Alexandrians, have argued that the poem should end with the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope at *Odyssey* 23.296. See Russo, Fernandez-Galiano and Heubeck (1992) ad 23.297 for a good summary of the question and bibliography.

3. For more on the “double return” in the *Odyssey*, see Murnaghan (1987a, 45–46).

Od says, “to see things first-hand.” In addition, Pen’s description evokes her adventures in terms of the tradition of Odysseus’ wanderings, which also take place “off the map” and threaten the identity of the hero.

Pen’s identity, like that of Odysseus, is threatened during her long journey, and reformed in the process of telling her own story. In the tenth year of her absence, Pen makes her way to Skheria, where, like Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, she tells her past adventures. The journalists attending her press conference compliment her, echoing the Homeric poem:

Has anyone ever told you  
 “You have a grace upon your words, and there is sound sense within them,  
 and expertly, as a singer would do, you have told the story of the dismal  
 sorrows befallen yourself and all of the Argives.”<sup>7</sup>

In the *Odyssey* (11.366–69), these words are spoken by Alkinoos to praise Odysseus’ skill at telling a story that is as entertaining as it is convincing. Pen’s account of her adventures, in contrast, is filled with an ambivalence that makes us doubt the truth of her words even before her version is challenged by the journalists:

Okay  
 where to um  
 start Epic story  
 short I was stuck with this man this  
 half man half god Cal It was  
 complicated because first Cal rescued me from the ocean as blue as cold  
 lips and then Cal  
 held me prisoner for seven years straight  
 I mean he cared for me Cal cared for me and I cared for Cal  
 in my way but as I said  
 caring for one’s captor is complex  
 I was miserable but well-fed  
 Utterly pampered and unspeakably glum  
 I’m not saying there weren’t pockets of fun  
 We had some laughs but mostly I sat on the beach and cried  
 . . .  
 but Do Not  
 read too much into any of this

7. Here and throughout I use Richmond Lattimore’s translation of the *Odyssey* (1967), the same translation used by Gibson when she quotes from the poem.

Cal and I were just friends  
 We read the constellations together  
 We played a lot of chess  
 His ratatouille was amazing but  
 We were Just Friends  
 and That’s  
 What I’ve Been Up To

Pen is fond of the paradoxical formulation “Epic story short.” But epic is by definition long, and while Pen tells the story succinctly, she omits crucial details and calls attention to the missing parts of her narrative by stressing the complexity of her relationship with her captor. The ambivalence displayed by Pen towards Cal finds its source in the *Odyssey*, where a half-line points to Odysseus’ own ambivalence towards his captor: the poet tells us that “the nymph was no longer pleasing to him,” thereby hinting at a prior state of affection between Calypso and her captive (5.153).<sup>8</sup> Yet when the poet shifts his focus to Odysseus on Calypso’s island, the hero yearns for his home and family, and later to his Phaiakian hosts, Odysseus identifies himself as a man who was held captive by a goddess for seven years and refused both her offer of marriage and her gift of immortality.

By telling the story of his own adventures, Odysseus shapes the narrative of his *nostos*. Each adventure threatens Odysseus’ homecoming in different ways, but the hero, in his own telling, never entirely forgets his goal to find his wife and home. Odysseus is delayed by seductive goddesses, but both the narrator’s and Odysseus’ accounts agree in depicting Odysseus’ longing for home and Penelope. What provides Odysseus with a strong sense of his identity as a hero who chooses his mortal wife and home over divine partners and immortality becomes, in Gibson’s play, a tale of confusion and ambivalence. The journalists at Pen’s press conference challenge her account by claiming that they have heard of her adventures from other sources and producing photographs of her stay with Cal and a memoir written by Kirk that contradict her story. While Odysseus was praised by Alkinoos for his skill at story-telling, Pen is immediately confronted—ironically, as we shall see, through the very medium she claims to be superior to all others, photography—by evidence of the contradictions in her story. In the *Odyssey*, Alkinoos uses a criterion for story-telling that fuses aesthetics and truth: Odysseus’ story is beautiful and therefore convincing. In *Current Nobody*, the journalists are not interested in Pen’s skills as a story-teller.

8. Gibson is perhaps also alluding to Robert Lowell’s nickname, a shortened form of Caliban and Caligula (Hamilton 1982, 20).

Rather they want to uncover the truth, and they challenge Pen's words with both words and images produced by others.

Whereas the *Odyssey* is self-conscious about the power of words and presents the narrative of Odysseus as authoritative, *Current Nobody* highlights the power of images and a multiplicity of perspectives. Throughout the play, Od is surrounded with visual reminders of Pen and of the past. In the eleventh year of his wife's absence, Od watches an old TV interview Pen gave just before leaving, in which she talks about capturing war on film. During the interview, Pen concedes that she can "frame the truth," but that she does not, despite the pun on her name, "write the landscape." Pen makes repeated claims for the superiority of images over words and for her own dedication to truth:

I am a person who longs to get to the truth of the matter  
And the truth is  
as the cliché accurately goes  
the truth is The Camera Doesn't Lie

The truth offered by the camera indeed adds another perspective on Pen's character. In an old home movie played by Od, Pen reveals herself as an impatient mother who tries to teach her infant daughter how to swim by dropping her in a deeper part of the pool "expecting her to swim back to her." In the next scene, a water-drenched Tel plays in the shallow part of the pool while Pen sunbathes nearby. Later still, Tel and Od play in the pool together, and then take a nap, while a hand—presumably Pen's—comes in the frame with a sprig of fern, tickling the neck of sleeping Od. While Od and Tel laugh and nap together, Pen is either alone or impatient with her daughter. We see Tel either with her father or her mother, but husband and wife are never depicted together. On the one hand, either Od or Pen must be doing the filming, but their lack of togetherness also points to the separateness of their experiences. Unlike Odysseus and Penelope whose like-mindedness allows for reunion and reconnection, Od and Pen—"The Camera Doesn't Lie"—are never quite in synch.

After the three documentary filmmakers who vie for Od's attention move into his apartment, the focus shifts from the contemplation of images to their production. Sue, Jo and Joe install big brother-style cameras throughout the apartment so that for the last ten years of Pen's absence, Od and Tel's lives are lived on camera. Some of the events of the play take place backstage and are seen only on a screen. At a particularly emotional

moment when Od and Tel realize that Pen will not actually be coming back home in the eleventh year, Tel becomes extremely upset and begs her father not to leave her. The scene is emotionally wrenching, but the filmmakers are not satisfied with reality and ask Tel to go out and walk into the room again for the camera.

The production of multiple visual versions of the same event makes an overmastering narrative impossible. Similarly, because Od and Pen lack a strong sense of self, and because they find themselves in situations for which they are not prepared, at many crucial turning points of the play, husband and wife also face the threat of losing their identities and becoming "Nobody." Towards the beginning of the play, Od turns on the TV to hear a disembodied voice say "Nobody is my name. My father and mother call me Nobody, as do all the others who are my companions" (9.366–67). This famous line from the Cyclops episode, which defines Odysseus in the *Odyssey* in terms of his cunning, becomes the basis for the sense of non-identity shared by all the main characters of the modern play.

In *Odyssey 9*, Odysseus tells the Cyclops Polyphemos that his name is Nobody. This act of deception later allows for his escape when Polyphemos in distress shouts to the other Cyclopes that "Nobody" is killing him, which leads them to conclude that he needs no help. In Greek, one phrase for "nobody" (*mē tis*) sounds exactly like the word for "cunning" (*mētis*), and the encounter with the Cyclops defines Odysseus as a guileful hero. In *Current Nobody*, Pen tells of her own encounter with the Cyclops, to whom she also introduces herself as Nobody, but her declaration is made not in a moment of brilliant forethought as in the *Odyssey*, but during a time of drunken grief and self-indulgent shame. Pen starts considering her past actions: "all the things that had seemed imperative in the moment and immoral in retrospect." For Pen, *nostos* is a journey towards a re-evaluation of her actions, a journey that inescapably leads to regret. There is no cunning here, only Pen's remorse. There is no craftiness in the blinding of the Cyclops either: he drunkenly falls "face first into [Pen's] wine glass and [stabs] himself in his greeny-bluey-browny-orangy eye." Pen collapses and curls up inside a blanket, which, the next morning, she discovers is actually one of the Cyclops' sheep, so that she can make an impromptu escape from the cave. When the Cyclops realizes Pen has gotten away:

He screamed out to his Cyclopes neighbors  
I'VE BEEN SCREWED OVER BY NOBODY  
and they paid little attention because who among us

after looking into our hearts  
 who among us can argue with the fact that we are  
 responsible for our own particular fates I mean  
 We've All Been Screwed Over By Nobody you know

Pen understands the Cyclops' complaint as a universal axiom, a sentiment echoed by Od, who waits and waits for "Nobody" to come home. Gibson also plays on the theme of Pen as Nobody, as the wife and mother whose absence becomes the core of her husband and daughter's lives. Throughout the play, Od is all too aware that "Nobody's out there" and that if he were to commit adultery with one of his suitors, "nobody would know" and "NOBODY ALWAYS WINS."

Od and Pen are both conscious of the ancient plot in the background of their lives, which gives both of them a sense that they will find each other again. When she is reproached for having barely mentioned her husband during her press conference after a twenty-year absence, Pen responds: "My husband and I share one of the greatest loves of all time / Look it up." But Pen's observation makes the contrast between the ancient and modern couple all the more palpable. Penelope's role is circumscribed in the *Odyssey* by her gender, but the like-mindedness between husband and wife makes her role central to Odysseus' successful *nostos*. Pen and Od will find each other again, but the connection between the two spouses is tenuous and their minds are never entirely in harmony.

In the *Odyssey*, a key component of a successful *nostos* is the restoration of the protagonists' identities as husband and wife in the context of their home. Gibson's play offers a meditation on the relationship between gender and domestic space that draws upon and departs from the *Odyssey*. Like the *Odyssey*, *Current Nobody* starts at home, and most of the play takes place inside the apartment of Od and Pen, a modern version of Odysseus' Ithacan palace described in the opening stage directions:

(The bedroom of a large Tribeca-esque apartment. The design is modern, the amount of stuff minimal. The room is dominated by a large bed whose up left post consists of a live olive tree [as filtered through a modern aesthetic]. A similarly modern crib is situated nearby. A man cradles a baby, rocking it to sleep. The man is called Od, the baby, Tel. Od places Tel in the crib.)

Od lives in an idealized New York apartment, large and mostly empty. In ancient Greek, the word *oikos* refers to both the physical house and the

notional home. Odysseus' house thus embodies the hero's wealth and status, but it is also a home for husband and wife, a place of memories and a symbol of the stability and endurance of their marriage. Penelope's status as wife of Odysseus is thus directly linked to her presence inside the house.<sup>9</sup> Like Odysseus' palace at the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Od's house is defined by absence. The only permanent additions made to the décor during the play are the marks inscribed on the wall by Od to tally the days of Pen's absence. Gibson plays upon the notion of the "homemade" by having father and daughter attempting to transform their living space into a home for Pen's return. In the tenth year, hoping for Pen's imminent return, they hang "a very homemade 'Welcome Home' sign" and bake "a plate of very home-made looking cupcakes." But when the doorbell rings and Od and Tel run to the door, they find not Pen, but three unknown women equipped with cameras who will transform the apartment into a film set. The "Welcome Home" sign and homemade cupcakes thus highlight Pen's absence and the instability of the notion of "home" and the "homemade." In *Current Nobody*, house and home remain distinct, and, despite Od's and Tel's efforts, their Tribecaesque apartment never becomes a home.

When we first encounter him, Od looks like the ideal modern dad, ready to nurture his baby daughter and take over the domestic space. Yet his name alerts us to the oddity of his circumstances and his first words, as positive as they are, soon alert us to his discomfort with the situation:

Okay  
 This is good This is good I'm doing  
 good I feel good  
 . . .  
 She's Never Not Come Back and  
 it's just for one or two weeks  
 tops  
 This is good

Pen has only been gone for a few hours, but already Od vacillates between hope and fear. From the beginning, Od is ambivalent about being left behind. He insists on how "good" and "great" everything is, but evidently more to reassure himself than to describe the reality of his situation. He also insists on how proud he is to have a wife who has "places to go people to

9. On the relationship between Penelope's marriage and her "remembering" the house of Odysseus, see Mueller (2007, 345–51).

shoot in thirty-five millimeter / wars to cover wars to capture and no one captures atrocity like Pen,” but he would clearly have preferred her not to have left.

Od is uncomfortable with his role as main nurturer. He is full of uncertainties about all the “daddy daughter stuff” he promises baby Tel he will do with her. Od is also a profoundly distracted father; thinking constantly about Pen’s absence, his memories of their marriage before her departure, and what he hopes will be her imminent return: his focus is always on the past or the future. He counts days, weeks, and years, yet he keeps forgetting the present. While he carefully keeps track of the time, marking Pen’s absence very precisely by marking each day she’s gone with a permanent marker, he regularly forgets his daughter’s birthdays.

One scene depicts the passing of ten years, with Od becoming increasingly distressed over Pen’s absence. Tel grows up offstage, where she plays the piano, “her playing evolving, eventually, into a recognizable and ultimately accomplished version of the tune Chopsticks”:

What is that adagio  
Forte  
Crescendo  
Whatever it is it sounds  
Good

While Od had promised Pen he would teach her how to play the piano, she seems to acquire mastery of the instrument on her own and her father is taken by surprise at the evolution of her playing, just as he is by the passing of time. Od expresses his disbelief at the impending ten-year mark of Pen’s absence by counting in increasingly small increments:

It’s Just For Nine and Fifteen Sixteenth Years Tops Thanks Bill It’s Just  
for Nine and Thirty-One Thirty-Second Years Tops Thanks Bill It’s just  
for Nine and Sixty-Three Sixty-Fourth Years Tops Thanks Bill It’s just for  
Nine and One Hundred and Twenty-Seven One Hundred and Twenty-  
Eighth Years Tops Thanks Bill IT’S JUST FOR TEN YEARS TOPS

Fixated on the passing of time, Od himself is stuck in place. He never leaves the apartment, and depends on the doorman of his building, Bill, for everyday needs. When he runs out of frozen breast milk for his daughter Tel, he asks Bill to go buy baby formula. Od takes care of his daughter’s immediate

needs, such as food and shelter, but otherwise lets Tel fend for herself. Bill also starts to spontaneously deliver “hot rocks” early in Pen’s absence, which Od puts in his bed to warm the spot where his wife should be sleeping. Od has no job and no interest other than waiting for his wife.

When Tel turns sixteen—another birthday forgotten by Od—she gives him a gift of a toy loom kit. Od’s loom is a small object described in the stage notes as “one of those cross things kids craft at camp out of two sticks and colored yarn wrapped around them in a diamond shape—the finished product could have vampire-fighting connotations.” The diamond-shaped object is in fact what is known as “god’s eye,” or *Ojo de Dios*, an object originally associated with the Huichol Indians from Mexico. Traditionally, a god’s eye is cherished as a talisman of health and longevity started at the birth of a child and added to as the child grows to maturity. In the United States, the creation of such “god’s eyes” has been adopted as an easy craft project for children, sometimes interpreted within a Christian framework, where the object becomes associated with the intercessory power of prayer. Od waits another four years before he assembles the toy loom, which he does in the middle of the night while watching the old home movie of Pen and the infant Tel.

In the twentieth year of Pen’s absence, when Tel skillfully plays a “bluesy” version of “Chopsticks” to perfection, instead of congratulating her, Od asks her to stop:

I’m begging you Tel  
stop playing that tune  
It was your mother’s and my song and  
it’s breaking my heart

The scene is modeled on the famous episode in *Odyssey* 1 when Penelope comes down from her bedroom to ask the singer Phemios not to sing of the mournful returns (*lugroi nostoi*) of the Achaeans, a topic too painful for her because it reminds her of Odysseus. Telemachos defends the singer, and abruptly sends his mother away:

Go therefore back in the house, and take up your own work,  
the loom and the distaff, and see to it that your handmaidens  
ply their work also; but the men must see to discussion,  
all men, but I most of all. For mine is the power in this household.  
(Hom. *Od.* 1.356–59)

While weaving is one way for women in ancient epic to tell their stories (or control the narrative), it is also women's work that keeps them physically isolated from the masculine realm. Telemachos contrasts weaving to speech (*muthos*), and in this particular context, also to the song just sung by Phemios about the mournful returns of the Achaeans. Later in the narrative, in Book 21, Telemachos makes the same demand, with one alteration. Here, he contrasts women's work with the violence of battle symbolized by the bow (*toxon*). In both cases, speaking and the bow have quite a lot to do with Penelope's own circumstances, yet men prevent her from participating in the discussions that define her present or from witnessing the contest that will determine her future. Telemachos' rebuke of his mother in *Odyssey* 1 is also a clear sign of his having reached adulthood. He now claims to have the power (*kratos*) in the household, implicitly leaving his own mother powerless.

In Gibson's version, Phemios' sorrowful tales of homecoming have been transformed into a gimmicky nineteenth-century waltz. Yet "Chopsticks," in its maddeningly repetitive melody, also evokes the *nostos* pattern: the piece starts with the pianist's hands playing two neighboring notes (usually with the index fingers from both hands), then separating to play notes that are farther and farther apart, and eventually returning to the starting point. When Od asks her daughter to stop playing his and Pen's song, Tel reacts in a newly assertive manner that echoes Telemachos' words in the *Odyssey*:

TEL: Go Back To Your Loom Dad  
 OD: I should go back to my room  
 TEL: Your loom your Lloom  
 OD: The threads keep getting tangled  
 TEL: I have faith in you dad you'll  
 work it out

If we interpret the exchange between Tel and Od by the light of the *Odyssey*, when Tel gives him a toy loom, Od the stay-at-home dad becomes a weaver. Yet the loom no longer stands in as a symbol of gender roles. As Tel understands very well, Od's "loom" is not to be equated with his room, and Od's weaving is not meant to limit his independence. Tel herself has become a singer of sorts—she is the one who plays the painful song—and her reaction clearly signals her coming of age, but, although she admonishes her father to go back to his loom, she does not explicitly claim the power of the household for herself.

Tel has no interest in ruling the house or making decisions for Od, but rather she wants her father to take charge of his life. The toy loom thus becomes a path to independence. It distracts Od from his sufferings and gives him the means to regain control over his narrative, to integrate his memories with the present, and to begin to map his future beyond the constraints of the ancient plot that has so far guided his life. The god's eye is often associated with the welfare of children, and its use in *Current Nobody* points to another reversal. Pen and Od are childlike in the pursuit of their desires, while Tel, the actual child, turns out to be the nurturer, literally feeding her father while he pines for his wife. Pen and Od are both absent and removed parents, but their remoteness and ambivalence towards the roles they find themselves playing contribute to Tel's independence. Abandoned by her mother and neglected by her father, Tel finds her own way in the world, and when she tells Od that she has faith he will figure out how to disentangle the threads, Tel signals her newly found self-sufficiency. Now that his daughter has reached adulthood, it's time for Od to grow up.

Another way in which Gibson radically changes the *nostos* narrative is in her handling of the reunion scenes between Pen, her daughter, and her husband. Like Odysseus, Pen delays her homecoming by making herself known first to a faithful servant (in this case, Bill the Doorman) and putting on a disguise before interacting with her daughter and husband. When Pen first meets Tel, they are both wearing the disguises given to them by Bill, and it is Bill too who brings about recognition by ordering them both to take their disguises off "on the count of three." Gibson highlights the connection between mother and daughter by having them simultaneously react in the same way to Bill's request and asking in unison: "What disguise?" "But Bill how do we know he can be trusted?" After they remove their disguises, both women are silent for a moment, until Tel recognizes her mother:

Oh it's  
 You  
 Daughter of Laertes  
 Wife of Od  
 Pen  
 Mom

The reunion is difficult—both mother and daughter are all too aware that they do not know one another and that Pen's long absence has created a

void in her daughter's life, yet the two women also exhibit the kind of like-mindedness that is missing from Pen's and Od's relationship.<sup>10</sup> Another departure from the Homeric poem is Pen's insistence on her guilt and her resulting quest for the forgiveness she craves and asks for from her daughter, husband, and even Bill the Doorman.

Pen tries to explain herself:

I'm one of those people who longs for adventure when I'm at home and  
who longs for home when I'm away I  
was born under that star  
That never-happy-where-you-are star

Tel's reaction is telling:

This isn't a reunion  
It's a meeting and it's nice to meet you but  
you're a stranger to me mom

By contrast with Odysseus' and Telemachos' joyfully tearful reunion in the *Odyssey*, Tel's and Pen's meeting is awkward, and both mother and daughter find it hard to connect with one another.

The final reunion between Pen and Od, as in the *Odyssey*, centers on the trick of the bed. And again, as in the *Odyssey*, the returning heroine at first hides her identity from her stay-at-home spouse. Pen is disguised as a man when Od first sees her in the apartment, but he seems unaware of her cross-dressing and asks her if she is Jo, Joe, or Susie. So Od sees, at least partly, through her disguise and realizes that she is a woman. Pen's failed cross-dressing thus mirrors her failed attempt to lead a life going against traditional gender expectations.

In a scene that closely follows *Odyssey* 19, Pen lies to Od, telling him (as she had told Tel before they recognized each other) that she is a Cretan who has recently seen Pen alive. Od is skeptical, but at once decides to have a contest with the bow:

Whoever can perform that dying art is the one I'll leave home for

During the contest, the filmmaker-suitors are puzzled by Pen's identity: "Who is the down-on-his-luck-old-man from Crete?" they wonder when

Pen asks to string the bow. They object to Pen's attempt to take part in the contest, but Od counters, "Fuck yes / be our guest," just before he goes to take a nap. After Pen successfully strings the bow, Bill the Doorman proleptically describes the "systematic slaughter of all the indie-docu filmmakers." Pen at first reacts with horror and gives a long speech rejecting Bill's "barbaric prescription," but suddenly changes her mind and coldly shoots the three documentary filmmakers. The slaughter of the suitors, already shocking in the *Odyssey* for its one-sidedness and brutality, is made even more shocking because of Pen's inexplicable transformation from professional observer of violence to killer. Like the suitors of the *Odyssey*, the filmmakers were warned early on by Bill, when he quoted through the intercom the words of Halitherses about the imminent return of Odysseus and the ensuing death and destruction.<sup>11</sup> And like the suitors in the *Odyssey*, the women misunderstand the warning: "Oh it's not important / It's a portent." The women's crimes include trying to seduce the lonely Od and eating the cupcakes meant for Pen's return. Unlike their ancient counterparts, however, they do not transgress against either the gods or the laws of modern hospitality. Perhaps their greatest crime is to trust too much in the kind of truth offered by images over that offered by words, a misguided faith that aligns perfectly with Pen's insistence upon the truthful nature of photography.

Od's and Pen's reunion also follows the outline of the Homeric narrative, but husband and wife never achieve the like-mindedness of their Homeric precursors. Just before Od tricks Pen into talking about the bed she made out of a living tree, Gibson borrows a line from the *Odyssey*, "you are so strange," Lattimore's rendition of the Greek vocative form of the word *daimonios* ("heavenly sent," "divine") used once each by Odysseus and Penelope (23.166 and 174). In Greek, the word *daimon* can be used to address a god whose identity is uncertain, and its use by Odysseus and Penelope emphasizes the epiphanic nature of their reunion. Od and Pen, by contrast, keep repeating this line to each other five times each, highlighting the strangeness of their situation, and their status as strangers to each other.

In their last exchange, Pen and Od consider the past and its consequences:

PEN: So what have you been up to while I've been gone

(After a moment, Od produces the loom and yarn camp creation.)

(PAUSE.)

10. A similarly awkward reunion between a mother and daughter can be found in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*; see Rando (2014) on the parallels with the *Odyssey*.

11. Gibson uses the passage from *Odyssey* 2.161–67, substituting "Pen" for "Odysseus."

OD: Was it fun  
 PEN: Parts of it were fun  
 Do you forgive me  
 OD: Part of me forgives you

While husband and wife also recognize each other through the secret sign of the marriage bed, the fixity of the bed no longer symbolizes the stability of marriage as it does in the *Odyssey*. The reunion is awkward and the connection between Od and Tel is tenuous. To Pen's question about what he did while she was gone, Od could answer in many different ways. The truth is that he raised a daughter and stayed loyal to his wife despite the temptation offered by his suitors. But instead of telling Pen the story of the past twenty years, he holds up the toy loom, a symbol of his attempt to find meaning in his fractured existence.

Pen's reunion with her husband centers on her sense of remorse and guilt and longing for forgiveness. While the reversal of gender roles is just as radical for Od, he seems better able to adapt to his changed position. Unaware of the traditional form and function of the Ojo de Dios, Od's fashioning of the talisman demonstrates his and his family's need for protection and for a new kind of *nostos* narrative that will form a road map for the uncharted territory explored within the play. With the tiny toy loom given to him by his daughter, Od creates a new tradition that finds its source in Penelope's incomplete tapestry in the *Odyssey*. Gibson's radical reversal of the homecoming narrative thus highlights the ways in which *nostos* must always remain an incomplete tapestry woven and unwoven by both the absent one and the waiting partner.

The threads of Od's tiny tapestry find their sources in Homeric epic. In the *Iliad*, Helen weaves the events of the Trojan war on a tapestry, while in the *Odyssey*, Penelope cannot bear to finish her tapestry because it also symbolizes a funeral shroud for her husband, and its completion would mean his death and her agreement to marry one of her suitors. Although weaving is women's work that keeps women physically isolated from the realm of men, it is also one way for women to tell their story (or control the narrative of their lives, as in Penelope's case). The Homeric poem thus already plays upon the reversal of gender roles that occurs when a wife is left in charge of the household and kingdom. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and Penelope are often compared to members of the opposite sex in a series of similes that both distinguishes them from one another and draws out their shared qualities. One such "reverse simile" equates Penelope with a good king; another compares the joy she feels at embracing her husband with

that of a shipwrecked sailor finally seeing land; elsewhere Odysseus weeps like a woman, an enslaved captive, whose city has been seized and her husband killed. These comparisons, as Foley has described them, "suggest both a sense of identity between people in different social and sexual roles and a loss of stability, an inversion of the normal."<sup>12</sup> While these reverse similes underline the tension between traditional gender roles and those enforced by the unusual situations in which Odysseus and Penelope find themselves, Foley shows how these inversions of the normative order ultimately help recreate and reinforce the traditional roles and spheres of activity assigned to husband and wife in the narrative.

*Current Nobody* makes the gender reversal literal and uses it to challenge traditional gender roles, but in the end it leaves us with more questions than answers. The protagonists are not confined by gender roles in the same way as their Homeric precursors were, but they are, in a way that is perhaps unique to modernity, unable to see beyond their most immediate desires, and, as Pen herself confesses to Tel, she does not know what she wants. Both Od and Pen are always adrift, unsure, and passive. Instead of expanding the horizon of possibility, their relative freedom seems to limit them. They are also not as free from assumptions about gender as they think themselves to be. In the notionally egalitarian twenty-first century, Od and Pen see themselves as liberated, but both remain limited by their own and societal assumptions about gender roles. Although Pen goes off to war and leaves the weaving to her husband, she never fully escapes the confines of the expectations placed upon her gender. Her narrative authority is questioned by the journalists, and her *nostos* is a story of remorse and longing.

Pen's confusion is particularly striking when she attempts to explain her departure to her daughter:

I mean I'm not one of those children  
 I mean I'm not one of those people who wanted to have children but  
 didn't want to have to raise them Well  
 I am a little bit like that I guess or I was until I met you

Pen concludes that "Parenting is a complicated mathematical equation / to which there is no known solution," but when she wrongly describes herself as "one of those children," she draws attention to the fact that she has in fact done very little parenting. Both the home movies watched by Od showing her as a detached mother and her decision to leave her infant daughter

12. See Foley ([1978] 2009, 190).

behind to pursue her career attest to her lack of enthusiasm for traditional motherhood.

On the surface, Pen makes bold choices, but upon closer look, hero and heroine simply exchange roles. The spouse who goes on a long journey is unfaithful, while the one who stays at home nurtures their child and holds himself to higher standards of fidelity. The double standard that permits, albeit with disapprobation, to one partner what is strictly forbidden the other, may no longer hinge upon gender *per se*, but upon the circumstances in which men and women find themselves. While still on Skheria, Pen defends herself against the journalists' accusations of unfaithfulness:

Look I mean I'm no different from the next guy okay

It is as if life's choices, rather than sex, determine gender roles.

In the *Odyssey*, by contrast, both spouses are confined by gendered expectations. Odysseus makes a decision to return to his wife and home, while Penelope chooses to wait and be faithful to her husband. The outcome of Odysseus and Penelope's choices are as conservative as can be, but compared to Od and Pen, they seem radical in their resolve, and the plot of the *Odyssey* is the culmination of their like-mindedness and desire for homecoming.<sup>13</sup> Gibson attempts to create a new story by switching the genders of the ancient epic, but the switch only stresses the difficulty of enacting truly new narratives. Pen may have more choices available to her than to Penelope, but she is torn between different stereotypes that lead her to live a splintered life. The old marriage and quest plots still dominate the lives of Od and Pen, and homecoming, instead of the realization of their desire, becomes a locus of ambivalence and regret.

Beneath Gibson's witty take on the *Odyssey* thus lies a very modern variety of despair. Yet, while Pen's absence and ambivalent attitude toward motherhood make her a problematic role model as a parent, she has something else to offer to her daughter, and by extension, to us:

TEL: I wish that just once you'd been able to read me a story

(SLIGHT PAUSE.)

PEN: I've got a story for you

13. Heilbrun (1990, 107) observes how easy it is, in the face of Penelope's apparently conservative choice to get married and remain faithful, to lose sight of how radical a character she is. On Penelope's fidelity, see also F. I. Zeitlin (1996b).

Gibson suggests here the process through which the quest and marriage plots are in fact being rewritten. Pen's own homecoming is a disappointment, but her failure is the first and necessary step toward upending the expectations that hindered her on her journey and creating the possibility for new stories.

The last scene, which shows Tel emerging from her room carrying a "giant backpack," offers a glimmer of hope:

OD: Where are you going

TEL: I'm not sure

OD: When will you be back

TEL: I'm not sure

OD: Will you be back

TEL: Eventually

I think

OD: Well

I'm not going to let you go  
on an empty stomach Tel  
Stay here while I fix you a  
sandwich

Od's last words in the play are caring and he finally seems comfortable in his role of nurturer. The stage directions describe him going into the kitchen and returning with a wrapped sandwich. The play ends with Tel walking out of the apartment "onto the streets of Ithaka." Like Pen before her, Tel yearns to leave; yet Tel is free from her mother's well-defined sense of mission, and this lack of certainty about her own future is, for Tel, liberating. Tel, whose very name encapsulates the notion of an end (*telos*) and of speaking ("tell"), thus represents a new beginning and perhaps a new kind of story. She becomes the most current Nobody, a contemporary Odysseus who, having escaped the traps that ensnared both Pen and Od, will—so we are given to hope—finally weave a newer, better *nostos*.<sup>14</sup>

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