

The Cordel Stories on a String

by Kurt Wootton

place ~~out~~ and
behind smiles.

Honey, I'm Home and I've
Had A Bad Day!

to make
scally
solution!

Cordel Stories on a String

Introduction by Kurt Wootton



Daniel Soares, Brazilian Educator

In Daniel's school in Inhumas, the teachers and students have a permanent cordel hanging in the hall. Daniel explains, "I teach three different classes, and anything they produce, instead of handing it in for a grade, they hang it on the cordel in the hallway of the school. It has become a ritual in the school. It allows for conversation between classes."

Brazil has a long tradition of the *literatura de cordel* (Portuguese for "string literature"). Candace Slater in *Stories on a String: The Brazilian Literatura de Cordel* explains, "The term *literatura de cordel* was for centuries a Portuguese rather than a Brazilian expression. The name refers to the way booklets were often suspended from lines stretched between two posts." The cordels displayed a series of *folhetos*: small, inexpensive chapbooks or pamphlets often with a wood engraved image or photograph in the front. The *folheto* contained long narrative poems—love, adventure, and moral tales—sometimes illustrated by the author. The authors traveled from town to town, setting up their clotheslines, displaying their poems, and performing the poems from the *folhetos* in markets and town squares, hoping that the audience might purchase and take one of the stories home with them. Through the form of cordels, artists directly share their art with the community without having to negotiate publishing houses or reviewers. Many artists also work collaboratively on cordel editions or on exhibits.

Folheto editions may migrate from cordel to cordel, from community to community, from city to city, as authors share, sell, and perform one another's work.





Adapting the essential elements of the cordel,

Brazilian educator Daniel Soares found it an indispensable way for his students to share their writing in his school. The cordel requires only paper, pencil, clothesline and clothespins and offers students a way to make their work public thus motivating the author to provide inspiration to others. Engaging the other students in the classroom, students perform their writing in front of the cordel, just as the cordel authors do in the markets. Slater writes, "The poet also uses these opportunities to demand the public's wavering attention. He may summarize the story for those who have just

joined the group or make humorous comparison between the tale and an event from daily life." Students performed their stories and their poems in the hallways of the school, calling out to other students walking by. The student's writing became a vital part of the community. Additionally, the cordel is always a work-in-progress; writing is constantly added and taken down, revised, displayed, and performed.



Cordel: The process

Description: Students have the opportunity to publicly publish their original work on cordels.

Location: Teachers can use cordels daily. Daniel Soares keeps the cordels up in the main hallway of the school throughout the entire school-year. Every Wednesday the old work is taken down and given back to the students. Every Friday new work is published. Cordels also function beyond the walls of the school. In Central Falls, Rhode Island, students hung cordels around the entire high school when one of the students in the school was murdered. Students created poetry on strips of cloth that blew in the wind. A cellist played a solo on the school's front steps. Similarly, students in rural Brazil constructed a cordel

around the lake of their town with over 6000 pieces of work all on the theme of peace since there were many murders in their community that year.

Materials: Since a cordel may assume diverse forms, the materials for the specific project will vary. The only essential materials for the cordel are clotheslines and clothespins.



Procedure

1. Hanging the cordel. Before the workshop, class, or event, hang the cordel in the space. The clothesline's correct height and pull may be problematic. The clothesline needs to be hung at a height just above eye level so that students can comfortably read the work posted.

2. Creating the work. The cordel is a fluid medium. Students hang drafts of work several times before they publish their final work. The cordel then serves as an aid in the writing process, helping students to share their work and elicit feedback from other students. Practically any kind of work on light paper can be hung including stories, poems, photographs, drawings, designs, small murals, and mobiles.

3. Cordel Discussions. At times students and guests look at the displayed work in silence, reading the poems or carefully studying the photographs. In other circumstances, more carefully structuring the browsing proves useful, especially for students sharing early drafts of their work.

6000 Students Speak

Over twenty drug-related murders occurred in the small, rural Brazilian city of Inhumas in only a few months. Daniel Soares and his high school students decided to enlist the aid of all the public school students in the city to create a cordel around the city's lake to respond to the violence. Over 6000 pieces of student work—stories, paintings, photographs, and poems—were hung on clothes lines around the lake. Daniel described the event, "We invited the mayor, the vice mayor who was there, the judge who was there, the radio which was there, the newspaper which was there. All the schools they came, priests came, pastors came, everybody came. People prayed. We made a march around the lake for peace. And the cordel was there for two days so people could see it, and many people saw it, many people talked about it. Visually it was beautiful. The sun was setting. It reflected on the water, really something to see."



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