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# Gardening in the tropics: a horticultural guide to Carribbean politics and poetics, with special reference to the poetry of Olive Senior

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# Gardening in the tropics: a horticultural guide to Carribbean politics and poetics, with special reference to the poetry of Olive Senior

## **Abstract**

"Economic Botany" of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was an enormously effective colonizing force, whose power I would suggest, lay in the de-personalizing nature of its discourse and its nominative function. The botanical re-naming of plants indigenous to the new world had the effect of erasing all historical claim to ownership by disrupting the original relationship between nature and culture. A process of naming that laid claim to an objective and universalizing relationship between the "man of science" and his botanical specimen was an effective colonizing tool in which tropical plants were dispersed and displaced from their natural and cultural habitation to be reimagined and re-planted as commercial commodity. Olive Senior's collection of poetry, *Gardening in the Tropics*, attempts to destabilize this colonizing discourse through a counter-process of remembering and recounting original name and original function - re-personalizing and re-politicizing the complex storied relationship between plant, w/Word and community.

## **Disciplines**

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**Gardening in the Tropics:  
a Horticultural Guide to Caribbean Politics and Poetics,  
with Special Reference to the Poetry of Olive Senior**

“Economic Botany” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was an enormously effective colonizing force, whose power I would suggest, lay in the de-personalizing nature of its discourse and its nominative function. The botanical re-naming of plants indigenous to the new world had the effect of erasing all historical claim to ownership by disrupting the original relationship between nature and culture. A process of naming that laid claim to an objective and universalizing relationship between the “man of science” and his botanical specimen was an effective colonizing tool in which tropical plants were dispersed and displaced from their natural and cultural habitation to be re-imagined and re-planted as commercial commodity. Olive Senior’s collection of poetry, *Gardening in the Tropics*, attempts to destabilize this colonizing discourse through a counter-process of remembering and recounting original name and original function — re-personalizing and re-politicizing the complex storied relationship between plant, w/Word and community.

Gardening in the Tropics, you never know  
what you’ll turn up. Quite often, bones.  
In some places they say when volcanoes  
erupt, they spew out dense and monumental  
as stones the skulls of *desaparecidos*  
— the disappeared ones. Mine is only  
a kitchen garden so I unearth just  
occasional skeletons. (“Brief Lives,” *Gardening* 83)

Gardening in the Tropics you hear poetry  
in some unexpected places. (“Tropic Love,” *Gardening* 98)

Not only are unexpected things discovered in tropical gardens (like skeletons and poetry) but a tropical garden may take surprising forms, like the breadfruit on Captain Bligh’s ill-fated *Bounty* — native Tahitian plants indentured to West Indian plantation gardens. In 1789 Captain Bligh was commissioned by

the British government to "collect and convey commercial plant species" including the breadfruit of Tahiti, to the West Indies, under the direction of Joseph Banks (then director of Kew Gardens). The breadfruit was to provide a cheap source of food for the slaves. Banks had given David Nelson, an experienced Kew gardener, instructions to the effect that shoots and seeds were to be propagated and nurtured such that the plants should be grown sufficiently strong to weather the long voyage from Tahiti to the West Indies; but some historians put forward the theory that while the plants were growing stronger, discipline amongst the crew was growing weaker and "the mutiny on the Bounty" was the result. Many of the breadfruit were thrown overboard along with Nelson; but it was this expedition that brought back the thicker, stronger sugar canes that significantly improved sugar yield in the West Indies; indeed, the plantations themselves are a kind of tropical garden (gardens planted with profiteering crops of sugarcane, cocoa, tobacco); even the colonizing settlers might be seen to constitute a peculiar kind of tropical garden "planted" in the new world. In 1608 John Smith published a book entitled, *A True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of noate as hath hapned in Virginia since the first planting of that collony* — and P. Courtenay notes that, "As in Virginia, the settlement of the West Indian islands was financed by companies whose charters granted them monopolies within given geographical areas. Shares in the British West India Companies were issued at £12.10s., this apparently being the estimated cost of 'planting' one settler, the term 'plantation' then becoming synonymous with 'colony'." (15). Or the garden allotments of the plantation slaves might also be termed tropical gardens of subversion and dissent, for it was here, away from the eye of the plantation owner, that the seeds of old customs and new rebellions were planted and brought to fruition.

These "exotic" tropical gardens also take the form of numerous botanic gardens established by the British in the colonies in order to nurture and propagate a tyranny of foreign profitable seed, whose sites (as listed in the *Kew Bulletin* of 1889) include Bangalore, Barbados, Bombay, British Guiana, Calcutta, Dominica, Fiji, Gold Coast, Grenada, Hong Kong, Jamaica, Lagos, Madras, Malta, Mauritius, Natal, Niger Territories, Queensland, St. Lucia, Straits Settlements — Singapore, Penang, Malacca; and Trinidad; colonial sites for which Kew Gardens in England operated as a controlling centre. But

the tropical gardens upon which I would concentrate in this paper are the Burton Palm House as a representative image of Kew Gardens itself — centre of "economic botany," storehouse of plundered plant-life, and imperial distributor of colonizing seed; and Olive Senior's visual/verbal image of de-colonizing force — the gourd: "hollowed dried/calabash humble took-took" (*Gardening* 7).

Kew Gardens (situated in the wealthy south-east of London and initially the property of the Royal Family) officially came into being (that is, it won the battle to retain and be maintained by government funding) as a public pleasure garden and scientific laboratory and library in 1841. Entrance to Kew until very recently could be paid for either with a penny or a peppercorn — the peppercorn being evidence of a long-standing relationship between botany, monetary value, exploration, and plunder of the New World by the Old, dating back to the sixteenth century. But it is toward the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth that the science of botany became established and influential in its contribution to British "Commonwealth" (the appendage of "common" to "wealth" seems a little superfluous), and is most conveniently and appropriately represented in the image of The Palm House.

William Hooker supervised the construction of this enormous greenhouse from 1844 until its completion in 1848. Designed by the architect, Decimus Burton, it was built to house the garden's collection of palms — plunder of the tropical world. Because palms cannot be pruned back, and many specimens could not be grown to maturity in greenhouses of the usual specification, the central section of the Palm House was made sixty-six feet high, and constituted an engineering feat of glass and steel that preceded and was no doubt inspiration for the building of the Crystal Palace — an unequalled image of rampant Victorian market mania and the deification of "things." It is instructive and poetic to discover that Burton was assisted in the construction design by a marine engineer — the long curved iron ribs of the Palm House resembling the ribbing of the iron steamships (a recent technological advance over wooden hulls) — and an image that conveniently (for me) provides a structural link between botanical plunder and the human cargo of slave ships plying the middle passage.

Not only palms, but many other tropical species, like balsa, breadfruit, bananas and bamboos grow in luxurious abundance within the confines of their glass ship. As Lucy Brockway so cogently remarks,

In this building we feel the extent of the British maritime and colonial penetration of the entire world. All of these plants have had significant economic uses. Before the Western expansion, they supplied food and drink, material for shelter, for furniture, tools, containers, and ornaments to indigenous peoples in all the tropics ... With the advent of Europeans, many of these plants entered large-scale international commerce, on terms advantageous to Europeans. (Brockway 3-4)

Lucile Brockway's study of *The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens* is an informative and fascinating study of the relationship between science and British colonial expansion, and indeed, investigates the dangerous consequences of market-led/market-developed knowledge, that has much contemporary significance. But, inspired by Olive Senior's *Gardening in the Tropics*, I would move her thesis into a linguistic space, and note that each of the plant species in the Palm House is accompanied by its botanical name, its Latin tag: each plant has become representative of a species, and is separated and cut adrift from not only its indigenous geographical soil, but also from its cultural and linguistic soil.

The seeds of the calabash have also been transplanted in a new soil, but although cut adrift from its African soil of origin, the ancient calabash, "humble took took," retains its vernacular name and some remnant of original meaning given voice, rhythm and ritual in the Caribbean. The dried gourd still has the capacity to tell old and new stories — binding a people in a communal knowledge of past, present and future:

They say there are those  
who've been taught certain secrets: how to harness the  
power of your magical enclosure by the ordering of sound  
— a gift from orehu the spirit of water who brought the  
first calabash and the stones for the ritual, who taught  
how to fashion the heavenly rattle, the sacred Mbaraka,  
that can summon the spirits and resound cross the abyss.  
("gourd," *Gardening* 7)

The concrete poem "gourd" (which takes on the visual shape of a calabash — filled with the rattling seeds of w/Word) is the opening move in the latest

of Olive Senior's poetic acts of "creative rebellion" intended to "cross the abyss," or the chasm of silence into which a colonized people might too easily fall. *Gardening in the Tropics*, is both the title and the theme of a collection of poems of which the poem "gourd" is symbolic. The poetry book itself constitutes a gourd (or indeed, a miniature tropical garden) in which the individual poems are seeds of story — their rhythmic voices resounding and reverberating in an ancient vessel. This collection of seeds might well have been sub-titled, "Advice and Devices" (a title taken from one of the poems in the collection) — "advice" being directed in irony and anger to aspiring colonists and with wit and hope to aspiring decolonists. *Gardening in the Tropics* is a complex literary device — operating again on a number of levels — acting as an ironic guide to, and historic survey of, cultivation (i.e. pillage) of the colonies, as an acknowledgment and celebration of Caribbean life-force, and as a self-help guide to those who would nurture the seeds of what the Caribbean poet and historian, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, has termed "creative rebellion" — a rebellion of w/Word. Thus the last section of the poetic guide is a salutation and a naming of the African gods in the New World and the first section is prefaced with a carefully crafted image that ingeniously connects nature and culture, seed, word and Word in the body and spirit of the ancient calabash — instrument of ancient ritual, of rhythmic song and story — guardian and keeper of the tribe — acting in fact in much the same way as the African drum does in Kamau Brathwaite's poetry (see *Arrivants*). Like Brathwaite's "Shepherd" (*Arrivants* 189-90), Olive Senior's poetry-gourd summons the spirits to cross the abyss, a task that demands some faith, a faith that at times appears to be lacking. Faced with doubt, she asks:

... if  
all we manage is to rattle our stones, our  
beads or our bones in your dried-out container,  
in shak-shak or maracca, will our voices  
be heard? If we dance to your rhythm,  
knock-knock on your skin, will we  
hear from within, no matter  
how faintly, your  
wholeness  
resound? ("gourd" 7)

It is in a search for wholeness, for connectedness of story — disjointed and dispersed by the flailing whip-tongue of the colonizer — that Olive Senior re-tells story from the perspective of the colonized.

Poetry is nominative, that is, it signifies by naming, and naming is creative of reality. A rose by any other name would not smell as sweet. The naming function is a possessive function — one in which the word “possession” implies both ownership or proprietary right endowed by communal knowledge of the relationship between experience and signification of that experience, and spiritual possession, or possession of god in self (and community). In this duality of meaning there is no separation of material and spiritual realms, or indeed, of political and poetical realms — they are undivided. When science takes on this naming function, as the “natural” science of botany did in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it too assumes the function of reality making, and takes possession of new worlds through word/Word. (Through word/Word, “natural” science becomes “cultural” science.) But the difference between the language of poetry and the language of science is one of personal and supporting community reference.

Although botanists have long taken the guise of the wise-woman, witch, healer and herbalist, an integral part of community and necessary to that community’s survival, it was not until the mid to late eighteenth century, with the publication of Carl Linneaus’s *Systema Naturae* (1735), *Genera Plantarum* (1737), *Classes Plantarum* (1738), and *Species Plantarum* (1753), and the formation of the Linnean Society of 1788, that botany became a recognized science, distanced by language, class and gender from its “primitive” herbalist beginnings and a holistic approach to the healing of body and spirit. As necessary appendage to that scientific label, botany was acknowledged by and accredited with a specialized language for nomenclature — the Latin binomials with which the “men of science” replaced the popular, vernacular but therefore, place/people specific plant names. Botanical naming of plants in general de-personalizes and in fact erases all trace of specific human relationship. A naming that does not function upon a system of personal relatedness, generalizes and de-possesses the plant of any particular human claim.

In the fight (of 1872), primarily between Joseph Hooker (director of Kew) and Richard Owen (superintendent of Natural History Departments of British Museum), to preserve Kew as a scientific sight or to annex this aspect of the gardens to the British Museum and degrade Kew to the status of mere pleasure garden (and thereby also deprive the gardens of government funding), Owen accused Hooker of “self-aggrandizement, of overpaying staff, of neglect, and of keeping an expensive herbarium for ‘attaching barbarous binomials to dried foreign weeds’.” (qtd. in Brockway 99). In choosing to belittle the linguistic function of botanical science, and its importantly possessive relationship to that which was “barbarous” and “foreign,” but undoubtedly profitable, Owen in fact pinpointed exactly where the power and the danger of this developing science lay. The power that Owen so blatantly desired is obvious in its imperial and colonizing function, but the danger is not so obvious.

Like a poem, a dictionary is cross referencing, but the links created or the knowledges documented in the dictionary are, or make linguistic claim to be, objective, impersonal and therefore nonpolitical, as in for example, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Botany*. If you look up the plant “annatto” you are referred to *Bixa*, and looking up *Bixa* you will discover that *Bixa* is “the sole genus of the family Bixaceae, comprising 1 species of tropical American shrubs, *B.orellano* (annatto), which is extensively cultivated and contains a vivid orange pigment in the \*testa, widely used as a food colourant” (51-52). If you look up the asterisked words within the text that refer to other relevant entries you move into verbal territory that is increasingly self-reflexive and impenetrable to all but the initiated. Scientific language is the language of an elite — the impersonal language of distanced objectivity, possibly even sanctified in the case of Latin nomenclature, by a Christian God — coded knowledge to which only an “educated” elect have access. In the encyclopedic *The Families of Flowering Plants* by J.Hutchinson, reference to annatto can be found under the heading *Bixaceae*: “Reichenback Consp 190 (1828): Shrubs or small trees with *coloured juice*; leaves alternate, simple, *palminerved*, stipulate; flowers . . . , medium-sized, showy, paniculate; sepals 5, *imbricate*, deciduous; [etc at length] . . . Widely distributed in the Tropics. — BIXA — Useful product: *Annatto dye* (seeds of *Bixa orellana* L.), Tropics generally.”

The only use of a botanical specimen in the colonized tropics was indeed its productivity — its material, economic worth — a usefulness in which

spiritual and physical function no longer coalesced. The avaricious sugar plantations of the Caribbean largely destroyed not only the indigenous plant life of the area, but also the indigenous peoples, their culture — their linguistic and ritualistic connectedness with the natural world. This catastrophic destruction was condoned and furthered by educated men of science, whose “objective” language of economics and science did not allow for the intervention of any personal or ethical argument. In 1862, Clements Markham, the man who “penetrated at great risk into the forests of Peru and Ecuador” (Bingham 26), and brought back the young Cinchona plants and seeds which were raised at Kew and then introduced into Jamaica and India in order to make quinine readily available in the tropical colonies), wrote:

The distribution of valuable products of the vegetable kingdom amongst the nations of the earth — their introduction from countries where they are indigenous into distant lands with suitable soils and climates — is one of the greatest benefits that civilization has conferred upon mankind. Such measures ensure immediate material increase of comfort and profit, while their effects are more durable than the proudest monuments of engineering skill. With all their shortcomings, [amongst which was the destruction of an indigenous people and, as Kamau Brathwaite has phrased it, the conversion of water to desert in an afternoon, with the draining of the Lake of Mexico]<sup>1</sup> the Spaniards can point to vast plains covered with wheat and barley, to valleys waving with sugar-cane, and to hillslopes enriched by vineyards and coffee-plantations, as the fruits of their conquest of South America. On the other hand, India owes to America the aloes which line the roads in Mysore, the delicious anonas, the arnotto-tree, the sumach, the capsicums so extensively used in native curries, the pimento, the papaw, the cassava which now forms the staple food of the people of Travancore, the potato, tobacco, Indian corn, pineapples, American cotton, and lastly the chinchona: while the slopes of the Himalayas are enriched by tea plantations, and the hills of Southern India are covered with rows of coffee-trees. ([1860] qtd. in Brockway 60)

Here there is no mention of human cost, of cultural, spiritual, linguistic, or even environmental cost. As Lucile Brockway observes,

Markham makes no distinction between the new crops in this post-Columbian exchange which the farmer took up to add to his subsistence, and the introduced plantation crops which extracted wealth from his labor. He sees only the blessings of the empire, to colonizer and colonized alike, a view held by virtually all nineteenth-century Englishmen, including the botanists of the Royal Gardens. They felt no conflict between the pure aspects of their science — extending their knowledge of the world’s flora, its habits of growth, its geographical distribution — and the application of this knowledge to enrich the Empire. (Brockway 60)

I would argue that the use of an increasingly specialized, objective, apolitical “scientific” language was an effective means by which to ignore any ethical or moral argument that might prevent the pursuit of a “scientific progress” that was and still is dependent upon government funding.

My personal memory of botanical science, otherwise known as “Nature Studies” during the years of my primary school education in “the colonies” (Australia), is of a depersonalization and artificial re-structuring of the living world in which my role was no longer that of subjective participant but of objective observer. The flower was uprooted, its various parts named and labelled, Latin nomenclature neatly printed in lead pencil and underlined precisely — neatly separated from any lived life — deprived of any personal significance it had no story to tell — a personal colloquial language was replaced by the specialized, impersonal language of a “science,” formerly known as “Natural History.”

It is the re-establishment and reappraisal of the story in “natural history” that Olive Senior achieves in her tropical garden. In the section of *Gardening in the Tropics* entitled “Nature Studies,” every plant has a story to tell. Senior re-establishes access to colonized-Caribbean communal knowledges that have been hidden or submerged and rebuilds links between plant and personal, cultural history. She re-politicizes, or in fact reveals the political nature of plantation languages — languages inclusive of both colonizer and colonized. She calls upon the native plants (plants that include those imports which have been nativized through intimate association with the life of a specific human community and culture) to assert the potency of their colloquial nomenclature:

starapple, yayama (pineapple), Madam Fate, Mountain Pride, guava, pawpaw, bamboo, guinep and anatto. Each has a personal, political history — a story to remember, to tell, to re-tell. Of “Anatto and Guinep” she writes:

No one today regards anatto and guinep  
as anything special.

No one puts them on stamps or  
chooses them

for praise-songs or any kind  
of festival. (74)

But once, she tells us, “nothing could happen” without the red of anatto paste or the black of guinep stain. For the Arawaks, indigenous people of the Caribbean who were virtually exterminated by the colonizers, nature provided the colours of culture. The body-paint of anatto and guinep were the signifiers of ancestral rite and occasion, declaring “in the most straightforward way: look at me: I’m beautiful!” A personal and ancestral history of plant/people association is, in the closing lines of the poem, given mythic significance:

How do you think Moon got stained  
black like that?

What do you think Sun used to redden  
its face? (75)

Nature study becomes culture study: a “significant marker on the road of life” (75), creating historical linkage between generations of people and ensuring a continuum of story. If that link has been lost due to the violent breakages imposed by a colonizing culture, then Senior would recover them and re-establish meaningfulness of nature study/natural history through her poetry.

In contrast to Olive Senior’s tropical nature study is the study of the colonizer, whose attitude toward gardening in the tropics might be represented by a “folio miniature” I recently discovered in the library, entitled *The Making of Kew* (Bingham). Significantly, the book is prefaced with a poem by Edith Sitwell which declaims the “sweet innocence” of spring come again to “the great gardens” of which Kew is one, but Kew, writes Madeleine Bingham, “is much more than a park”:

The frail, fernlike tentacles of its history stretch back into the annals of the Royal family, into the history of garden design, into the beginnings of exploration, into scientific discovery, into the enlargement of man’s ability to feed the growing population of the world, into the early medical knowledge of drugs and into the pure enjoyment of the culture of flowers for their own beauty.

Kew, like the tiny seeds which its botanists study, has caused life to spring and flourish all over the world.

As Madeleine Bingham asserts, the art of gardening in its many forms is indeed “the history of hope and renewal,” but it is also a history of violation and destruction that is all too easily subsumed under the philanthropic label of scientific progress. Kew is indeed “much more than a park,” and its tentacles might be more closely allied with the a rapacious octopus than that of the frail fern. Bingham’s “folio” ends with the high-seas adventure story of heroic empire, innocent of anything but the best of British intentions:

To garden is the best of arts for it combines the pleasure of  
physical exertion with love of beauty and the interest of discovery.

From dangers and death, from shipwrecks and from the high  
peaks, men brought back the seeds and plants which were to  
blossom and flourish under the green fingers of Kew, in whose  
great gardens we do find “sweet innocence come once again”.

(32)

It is this refusal of political implication, and indeed of unethical or immoral complicity, that Olive Senior herself refuses. In the first of the “Travellers’ Tales,” “Meditation on Yellow,” she repositions innocence with all the bite of a conquistador’s savage sword:

At three in the afternoon  
you landed here at El Dorado  
(for heat engenders gold and  
fires the brain)  
Had I known I would have  
brewed you up some yellow fever-grass  
and arsenic  
but we were peaceful then  
child-like in the yellow dawn of our innocence



so in exchange for a string of islands  
and two continents

you gave us a string of beads  
and some hawk's bells

which was fine by me personally  
for I never wanted to possess things (11)

Here Senior offers an historical (inclusive of time past, present and future) refusal of a capitalist culture based upon the possession of "things," and claims instead a cultural birthright of spiritual possession:

I prefer copper anyway  
the smell pleases our lord Yucahuna  
our mother Attabeira

This of course constitutes an ironic reversal, for it was the spiritual life of the American indigenous peoples that the messengers/warriors of the Spanish "Enlightenment" refused to admit. The intentional nature of this irony is reinforced by the use of the word "enlightenment" several stanzas later: "I wished for you," remarks the storyteller, "a sudden enlightenment that/we were not the Indies/nor Cathay" — might the Spanish then have left her people in peace?

Section Two of the poem begins on the verandah "at some hotel/ overlooking the sea" where "you can take tea/ at three in the afternoon/ served by me/ skin burnt black as toast/ (for which the management apologizes)." In another ironic reversal, the nineteenth-century adventurer cum twentieth-century tourist is battered by the complaint of she who has been travelling too long "cross the sea in the sun-hot" and stands in far greater need, after "five hundred years of servitude," of a little soothing fever-grass and lemon:

but I've been travelling long  
cross the sea in the sun-hot  
I've been slaving in the cane rows  
for your sugar  
I've been ripening coffee beans  
for your morning break

I've been dallying on the docks  
loading your bananas  
I've been toiling in orange groves  
for your marmalade  
I've been peeling ginger  
for your relish  
I've been chopping cocoa pods  
for your chocolate bars  
I've been mining aluminium  
for your foil

And just when I thought  
I could rest

...  
a new set of people  
arrive  
to lie bare-assed in the sun  
wanting gold on their bodies  
cane-rows in their hair  
with beads — even bells (14-15)

The exploited labour of the colonized is a labour in which the symbiotic relationship between that which is nurtured (the garden) and that which nurtures (the gardener) is broken by the commodity-based culture of capitalist imperialism — a labour in which emphasis is repeatedly placed on the possessive "your" (he/she who does not labour but reaps the benefits of that labour), an emphasis that at the same time points to the absence, and the silence that refuses to be silenced any longer, of "me" and "mine": too much given and lost for too long and at too great a cost. After five hundred years,

... I reach the stage where  
(though I not impolite)  
I have to say: lump it  
...  
I want to feel mellow  
in that three o'clock yellow

...

I want to feel  
 you cannot stop  
 Yellow Macca bursting through  
 the soil reminding us  
 of what's buried there

You cannot stop  
 those street gals  
 those streggehs  
 Allamanda  
 Cassia  
 Pouï  
 Golden Shower

flaunting themselves everywhere (16-17)

Plants representative of greed of empire — sugar cane, coffee, bananas, oranges, ginger, cocoa — are replaced by the native plants of resistance and rebellion — yellow macca, allamanda, cassia, pouï, golden shower. Commodified plants and their produce of blood, sweat and tears, are disrupted/erupted with the “bursting through” of an indigenous/nativized culture — “flaunting themselves everywhere” — a phrase, an image, a rhythm and a motion that is reminiscent of the “profligate,/extravagant, reckless, improvident, weed” celebrated in “Plants” (from the section entitled “Nature Studies” 62). From this celebration of plant culture there is an important move to a celebration of word culture and human culture, and a significant repossession and declaration of possession — “my song,” “my throat,” “my story,” “my rhythm,” and a refrain of “I want to feel” which is a plea for the reunification of the spiritual and the sensual, the political and the poetic:

I want to feel:

you cannot tear my song  
 from my throat

you cannot erase the memory  
 of my story

you cannot catch  
 my rhythm

(for you have to born  
 with that)

From reminder of what is buried, from memory, to song, story, rhythm, myth and magic — “anacondas changing into rivers like the Amazon boas dancing in my garden” — ownership of the tropical garden has been re-asserted, and from this point Olive Senior moves into “Hurricane Story, 1903,” a story of grandparents and family cultivation of garden that sustains the physical and the spiritual life of a community — afu yam, sweet potato, cassava bammies, chaklata balls, coconuts. Here is a naming of bodily and spiritual sustenance, and a celebration of the art of human survival against the odds:

Time and time again, Grandmother plucked  
 bits of fowl coop from the pinguin fence.  
 Grandfather drained his fields, shored up  
 their lives against improvidence.  
 When earth baked hard again, into  
 the forest he walked to cut the thatch  
 to patch his house. Corn drying in the husk  
 he hung from the rafters while afu yam  
 and sweet potato ripened (safe from  
 breeze-blow) underground.

Not only bodily, but spiritual sustenance is nurtured underground, for the plant is root and seed of life — “groundation” (see Brathwaite, *Arrivants* 271) and propagation of creative rebellion. Plantation work-song links plant with the labour of an historical rebellion of w/Word — a song born of servitude that becomes a song of freedom — song of “my way”:

I go my fields and sing. The  
 birds join in and we have a real  
 harmony going. I keep the crops  
 happy, treat them right, so

they'll put out their best  
 for me to take to the agricultural

fair and madden everyone there.

...

When they ask me for my tips,

I take a deep breath and come

right out and say: Just Live Right

and Do Good, my way. ("Advice and Devices" 112)

The humble took-took might look simple, but looks and indeed words are often deceptive: a little poetic gardening in Olive Senior's tropics unearths a subtle and complex relationship between language study and nature study: w/ Word is our daily bread.

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#### Note

- <sup>1</sup> From unpublished recording of Edward Kamau Brathwaite's talk on Mother Poem at the ATCAL conference, 27 Sept, 1980, University of Warwick.

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