'And Woman's Tongue Clatters Out of Turn': Olive Senior's Praise Song for Woman-weed

Abstract

'What kind of period is it/when to talk of trees/ is almost a crime/ because it implies silence /about so many horrors?' Olive Senior quotes Brecht in the preface to the last section of Talking of Trees, but having read her two collections of poetry I am tempted to re-word the quotation to ask, 'What kind of period is it when to talk of trees is to voice so many silenced horrors?' These horrors to which Olive Senior gives voice are acts of barbarianism perpetuated in the name of civilization: European colonization of the Americas. As Wole Soyinka almost said, 'The [wo]man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny.'
‘And Woman’s Tongue Clatters Out of Turn’\textsuperscript{1}: Olive Senior’s Praise-Song for Woman-weed

‘What kind of period is it/when to talk of trees/is almost a crime/ because it implies silence/about so many horrors?’ Olive Senior quotes Brecht in the preface to the last section of \textit{Talking of Trees}, but having read her two collections of poetry I am tempted to re-word the quotation to ask, ‘What kind of period is it when to talk of trees is to voice so many silenced horrors?’ These horrors to which Olive Senior gives voice are acts of barbarianism perpetuated in the name of civilization: European colonization of the Americas. As Wole Soyinka almost said, ‘The [wo]man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny.’\textsuperscript{2}

... But
you see my trial! I’m here gossiping
about things I never meant to air
for nobody could say I’m into
scandal. I wanted to tell of noble women
...
... I hadn’t meant
to tell tall tale or repeat exotic story for that’s not my style.
But we all have to make a living
and there’s no gain in telling stories
about ordinary men and women.
Then again, when gardening
in the Tropics, every time you lift your eyes from the ground
you see sights that strain your credulity \textsuperscript{3}

Olive Senior is a woman whose tongue delights in ‘clattering out of turn’. Her two volumes of poetry, \textit{Talking of Trees} (1985) and \textit{Gardening in the Tropics} (1994), not only give voice to a people silenced by a barbarous history of colonization, but they are also a praise-song to the fecundity and survival strategies of woman’s gossip or \textit{su-su} and of the rampant and incorrigible plant life known as ‘weed’. Both woman’s gossip and weed have much in common, being colloquial by nature and held to
be morally reprehensible by those who would contain them. The First Epistle to Timothy in the New Testament, attributed to Paul, contains perhaps the most infamous attempt to silence woman's tongue under the law and logic of a patriarchal god: 'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection' (2:11), 'But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.' (2:12) In particular, Timothy is warned against the seductive dangers of 'profane and old wives' fables' (4:7), 'of tattlers also and busybodies, speaking which they ought not' (5:13), and of 'profane and vain babblings' (6:20) to which women are particularly prone. 'Gossip and fairy tales', observes Marina Warner,

have in common a cavalier relation to accuracy; the truths they seek to pass on do not report events with the veracity of a witness in court. They are partial, tending to excess in both praise and blame; tale-bearing is a partisan activity. Though both forms of speech tend to be practised by the least advantaged members of society, they can achieve considerable, even dangerous, influence by such means.  

Gossip is a powerful weapon because it is both partisan and oral: it offers a subversive alternative to the master narrative, and because its point of origin is uncertain, it eludes containment and defies suppression. Like its sister, weed, gossip is inflammatory. It spreads widely, insidiously and exultantly. In the poem 'Plants' Senior celebrates the counter-colonist moves of 'plants gone to seed, / generating the original profligate, / extravagant, reckless, improvident, weed'. (Gardening, p. 62). Weeds, observed Joseph Dalton Hooker (director of Kew Gardens during the period of intense economic botanizing in the latter part of the nineteenth century), are 'the tramps of our flora', tramps that Senior has significantly feminized rather as vamps. 'Weed', continues Crosby, 'is not a scientific term in the sense of species, genus, or family, and its popular definitions are protean; so we must pause to define it. In modern botanical usage, the word refers to any plant that spreads rapidly and outcompetes others on disturbed soil.' This definition seems particularly appropriate to the context and concerns of Senior's Gardening, for it is these very qualities that she praises: a protean nature and a capacity to adapt, survive and indeed, thrive under 'disturbed' conditions. In 'Meditation on Yellow' Senior catalogues a history of plant/people possession by the European colonizer:

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 chopping cocoa pods
for your chocolate bars
I’ve been mining aluminium
for your foil
(*Gardening*, p. 14)

Take the ‘y’ off the your and it becomes ‘our’; but Senior does not desire neo-colonial possession of plantation crop and the dubious profits of capitalist greed. Rather she sings the praises of woman-weed – song of survival and of rebellion – that will, when the battle is won and rights of possession regained, concede personal and specific ground to the cultivation of a sustenance that represents a unification of body, mind and spirit:

you cannot stop
Yellow Macca bursting through
the soil reminding us
of what’s buried there

You cannot stop
those street gals
Allamanda
Cassia
Poui
Golden Shower
flaunting themselves everywhere
(‘Meditation on Yellow’, *Gardening*, pp. 16-17)

Translated/transplanted to the specific context of the Caribbean or the wider Americas, the ‘profligate,/extravagant, reckless, improvident, weed’ (‘Plants’, *Gardening*, p. 62) takes the form of the non-cultivated, wild plant, native or that which is welcomed as a native because it refuses commodification and has no part in the rapacious process of plantation agriculture. Human weed, not always but often aligned with female gender and the profligate sensuality of othered body, is a significant trope in *Gardening* that has genesis in the seeds of the female-shaped ‘gourd’ that prefaces the poetry collection. In the poem ‘Gardening on the Run’ Senior cogently and wittily historicizes the imperial entanglement of fear and desire, self and other:

Although for hundreds of years
we were trying to stay hidden,
wanting nothing more than to be
left alone, to live in peace,
to garden, I’ve found
no matter what you were
recording of plantations and
settlements, we could not be omitted...
...
...Now I have
time to read (and garden), I who
spent so many years in disquiet,
living in fear of discovery,
am amazed to discover, Colonist,
it was you who feared me. Or
rather, my audacity. Till now,
I never knew the extent to which
I unsettled you, imposer of order,
tamer of lands and savages,
suppressor of feeling, possessor
of bodies. You had no option
but to track me down and
re-enslave me, for you saw me
out there as your own unguarded
self, running free.
('Gardening on the Run', Gardening, p. 108)

Typically, colonial plantation agriculture lays waste vast tracts of natural vegetation in order to plant profitable crops like sugar cane, coffee, cocoa and cotton. In the Caribbean the success (that is profitable outcome for the conqueror/colonizer) of plantation agriculture was enabled by the transportation, transplantation and commodification of foreign peoples and foreign plants. Not only slavers but economic botanists had blood on their hands. Kew Gardens itself provides the most condemning evidence of this rape and pillage, as do the various botanical gardens throughout the British colonies that were planted out, generally at Kew’s instigation, with seed pilfered in the name of science, progress and civilization. Jamaica’s ‘Parade Gardens’, over which a statue of Queen Victoria has presided since 1887, is an example of one such garden, of which Olive Senior notes, ‘Parade Gardens aka Victoria Park aka St. William Grant Park were laid out in the heart of the city of Kingston in 1870-71 on the “Parade” which was formerly used by British troops. Over 120 trees including 35 different species – some unique to Jamaica – were planted out.’ (Notes to ‘Talking of Trees’, Trees, p. 86). These botanical gardens acted not only as storehouses of plundered seed, but were insignia of imperial power, and as such, were often the first public works to be created in the new colonies, at once a symbol of foreign occupation – foreign roots laid down in the conquered land – and (usually) an indication of contempt for the local flora – the vernacular ‘weed’. (It was unusual to plant natives in these ‘royal gardens’.)

In a previous essay I have suggested that botanical imperialism was effected by a linguistic colonization that severed culture from nature, a severance in part achieved through the substitution of a signification that denoted specific and particular historical relationship between community and plant with that which was/is scientific, ‘objective’ and rapaciously imperialistic in its obliteration of history prior to European ‘contact’ and its righteous unrightful possession, removal and commodification of plant life. This is a right that Olive Senior’s poetry contests. Gardening in the
Tropics seeks to re-assert ‘native title’ by a poetic process of incantation/declamation: a naming that recalls and reclaims storied relationship between human and plant communities, re-uniting body/mind, physical/spiritual binaries imposed by European manicheism.

The botanist that had for so long taken the (often) female form of herbalist/healer/wise-woman/witch was replaced in the mid-eighteenth century by a new breed of scientific botanist (therefore predominantly male because necessarily a member of an educated elite), whose plant knowledge was systematized by an objective nomenclature and institutionalized by the formation of the Linnean Society of 1788. These men of science replaced the popular, vernacular, and therefore, place/people specific plant names (like ‘Woman’s Tongue’ or ‘Mountain Pride’) with the nominative objective language of species and genus - a language of patriarchal imperialism - a language that indeed refuses subjectivity to that which is deemed to be other in a dualistic system of thought (self/other, white/black, man/woman, mind/body, culture/nature). Naming is a possessive function and this process of re-naming laid imperial claim to the natural world far beyond the shores of the European garden. A naming that does not function upon a system of personal relatedness, one that does not recognize a history of human/plant relationship, generalizes and de-possesses the plant of particular human claim, or people of plant claim. It in fact refuses story, also denying the intimate and entangled relationship of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’.

Olive Senior’s poetry articulates the possibility of the mental in the material, it refuses Cartesian metaphysics and suggests that wild women are a powerful breed, as signified by the ancient correlation of witch and weed, or in other words, ‘the lady is a tramp’. In notes on ‘Talking of Trees’ (Trees, p. 86), Olive Senior remarks with characteristic irony upon the ‘beautification’ of Kingston gardens in which only one native inhabitant, ‘Woman’s Tongue who has become a downtown street vagrant’, remains to tell a story that is both ‘theirs’ and ‘ours’. This is a story in which transplantation, containment, oppression, suffering and most importantly, survival, is a colonial history of plant and people entanglement that results in a heritage of shared and meaningful signification. A meaningful signification is that which allows us to make informed sense not only of the past and present, but also of future possibility.

The signatory poem of Gardening in the Tropics takes the form of a gourd – a gourd becomes vessel of word. This pictorial poem represents a re-habitation of culture in nature. It signals the felt need to heal the wound made by the imperialistic ontological incursion of Europe in the Americas:

Yet hollowed dried calabash, humble took-took, we’ve walked far from that water, from those mystical shores. If all we can 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', *Gardening*, p. 7)

Unlike the Burton Palm House,\(^10\) whose transplanted inhabitants bear the linguistic signification of a foreign culture upon their captive bodies in the form of a Latin name-tag, the gourd is the original source of word. Nature is not only deemed to be intelligent and capable of meaningful inscription, but is source of culture. The gourd is female, that is, ovarian, in shape and might also be seen to be female in signature—an inverted representation of the European scientific symbol of the female. The resemblance may be coincidental, but fitting, as Olive Senior’s body of poetry might be seen to invert patriarchal determinants of nature and woman.

Like the palms in the Burton Palm House and the African peoples of the Caribbean, 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.

In Senior’s poetic garden, nature study becomes culture study: a ‘significant marker on the road of life’ (‘Anatto and Guinep’, *Gardening*, p. 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 she would recover them and re-establish meaningfulness of nature study/natural history through her poetry. Thus the enmeshed and symbiotic relationship of people and plant is recovered and celebrated in the stories of anatto and guinep, starapple, pineapple, Madam Fate, Mountain Pride, fern, guava, pawpaw, bamboo and the histories of alternative gardening.

In an article on Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng*,\(^11\) François Lionnet, points to the parallel tropes of mango and maroon, both of which connote the wild, uncultivated and free, and both of which imply a radical resistance to any form of hegemonic control.\(^12\) She quotes from Cliff’s novel: ‘Some of the mystery and wonder of mangotime may have been in the fact that this was a wild fruit. Jamaicans did not cultivate it for export to America or England—like citrus, cane, bananas... For them the mango was to be kept an island secret’ (p. 4); and ‘The Windward Maroons... held out against the forces of the white men longer than any rebel troops... Nanny was the magician of this revolution—she used her skill to unite her people and to consecrate their battles’ (p.14). The mango, observes Lionnet, represents femininity and fertility; and linked as it is to maroon culture and the mother tongue of a creole vernacular language,\(^13\) it also represents the survival power of female resistance. This exuberant abundance that refuses to be ploughed under or submit to commodity culture finds
resonance in Olive Senior's woman-weed/word. The invincible Nanny appears too in Senior's tropical garden ('Amazon Women, Gardening, 97), mother of the maroon culture, a brave and resourceful woman and survivor against incredible odds (known to have caught the bullets of the enemy in her bum and farted them back!), but Senior refuses to partake in a battle of the heroines – despite her protestations of innocence, she would rather fantasize, 'tell tale', 'repeat exotic story' and indulge in a little gossip. She appears to reappropriate and valorize the mode of communication for which women have been condemned and deplored at least since Eve, by men of course; but this is not the whole story.

Trinh T. Minh-ha has recently remarked upon the postcolonial and feminist critique of a tendency to 'oppose nature to culture, to feminize and primitivize it within the escalating logics of confine-and-conquer, or expropriate-and-dispossess systems fundamental to ideologies of expansionism', and notes that 'critical debate has moved past the phases of assimilation and rejection to that of struggle (to use Franz Fanon's terms), where affirmations and negations are diversely reappropriated as strategies and tactics toward the emergence of new subjectivities.' 14 The same might be said of creative work, that so often charts the ground of concern well before what might increasingly be viewed as a colonizing tendency of critical response to appropriate the creative text of imagination within a 'scientific' discourse that is both elitist and universalizing. The parodic and self-reflexive tendency of Olive Senior's work effectively refuses this most recent form of colonization.

In the time-honoured tradition of the folk story/fairy tale that is both familiar because ageless and yet different because new each time it is retold, Olive Senior leans over the fence and imparts a little gossip, or su-su, to her reader/listeners, thereby both validating and celebrating an orality and colloquiality of woman-word:

Su-su
Su-su
Su-su

Once upon a time
there were trees on Parade

Trees on Parade?

Trees on Parade. Listen:

The Ebony trees are celebrating rain
Spathodea's lapping Kingston like a flame
On the western railing Scarlet Cordias burn
Casuarina weeps Laburnum's numb
And Women's Tongue clatters out of turn:

Who hears this? Who sees this? And who knows?
('Talking of Trees', Trees, p. 80)
Now we hear, we see and we know something more of a secret history – secret because thought unworthy of record, or secret because deliberately silenced. We have shared story with the trees, we have shared knowledge because our lives are signified by theirs. Their past is our past; their future is our future; but gossip leads more often than not to loneliness, derision, sadness and suspicion. Although there is something of regret in the lines, ‘No more//Su-su/Su-su/Su-su’, because an allusion to the absence of trees talking in whispers each to each and each to us, there is also a refusal and repudiation of gossip as that which is better spoken so all might hear. Gossip then might be seen to be a necessary survival mechanism, a mode of speech that defies patriarchal containment, but the day must come when woman’s talk rises above the fearful whisper of a colonized and oppressed people to ‘belly an’ bawl it out ya.’ (p. 84) Olive Senior enjoins us to ‘roll in the Dustbowl and kick up our heels’ shouting in celebration the names of rare and beautiful trees, ‘Sissoo/Sissoo/Sissoo’. (p. 85) We cannot afford to stand any more on the doorstep, boys dreaming of the hunt and girls of freedom:

We stand quietly on the
doorstep shivering. Little boys
longing to grow up birdhunters too
Little girls whispering
Fly Birds Fly.
(‘Birdshooting Season’, Trees, p. 2)

Our salvation, Senior would seem to suggest, might be found in the recognition that our spiritual and physical sustenance lies in the shared garden of our own making. We have not been expelled from an Eden by a wrathful god, jealous of his kingdom of knowledge, but by our own refusal to share knowledges and to recognize the sacredness of worlds that are no less valuable because we cannot fit them into our narrow epistemologies:

... Listen
to me (and don’t tell anybody):
Once you find the right spot
for your garden, before you fell
a tree or pull a weed, be sure
to ask pardon to dig, with a
sprinkling of rum for Mother Earth’s
sake (you should also take a swig
and rub some over your head
in case there’s a snake.)
...
... And when the vine is nicely
blossoming, ask a pregnant lady
to walk all over it to make the
fruits set and grow full, like
how she’s showing. I don’t have
to tell you plants won't thrive
if you're quarrelsome. Sometimes
I go to 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 ...

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.
('Advises and Devices', *Gardening*, pp. 109, 111, 112)

Is this poem valorizing different ontologies and epistemologies? Is it lending support to an essentialist ecofeminism? Or is it refusing the systematization of knowledge and the safe exclusive ground of moral orders? What Senior would appear to be refusing is a competitiveness based upon universalizing hierarchical positions, patriarchal or otherwise, that perpetuate and prop-up systems of exploitation and oppression in the name of the right and the good. She would appear to be suggesting that these rigid systems of order and control are not exclusive to a particular gender, race or class, but determined to a large extent by enclosure of the mind within a particular set of inherited historical parameters. In order to attempt an escape from 'the nightmare of history' and the inherited parameters of colonial determinants of self and other, Olive Senior declares her freedom of choice: 'My spirit ancestors are those I choose to worship':

...Understanding
reaches to shake hands across history books
blood kinship may well be a fairy tale
heredity myths mere lies, Yokahuna as real
as the Virgin Mary, Coyaba as close as Heaven.
('To My Arawak Grandmother', *Trees*, p. 11)

This Arawak grandmother is chosen 'for affirmations pulsing still/in spite of blood shed or infused.' (p. 11) In her chosen 'mother's garden', blood is sap, red is green. Olive Senior's poetry celebrates the intense sensuality and spirituality of a green that is both nurturing and nurtured ('green nurtured me', 'Cockpit Country Dreams', *Trees*, p.3); and in 'Touchstone' she writes:

This is the only way for the mind
to wander: firmly balanced against the hoe
rooted in the earth, grounded
in the province of my fields.
The soil warms to my feet. I am based
in reality. Cannot stray far become
a cloud dreamer. The grains of wood
score calendars in my hands.
(Trees, p. 14)

So what then is the relationship between the wild profligate weed, those street gals 'flaunting themselves everywhere', and a 'rooting in the soil' that is secure, sustaining and home-based, 'grounded in the province of my fields', as imaged in the Gardening poem, 'Hurricane Story, 1944':

My mother who hardly ever spoke
crooned hymns in the garden
to her skellion tomatis pumpkin melon
which thrived (as everybody knows)
from her constant labouring
(nothing like a pregnant woman to encourage
pumpkin and melon) (p. 25)

Both are image of female fecundity, the one wild, the other domestic, the one young, the other mature. Perhaps a return to Crosby's definition of weed would be helpful here. He writes: 'Weeds are very combative. They push up through, shade out, and shoulder past rivals. Many spread not by seed as much as by sending out rhizomes or runners along or just below the surface of the ground, from which "new" plants sprout...'

Weeds are the necessary creative rebellion that compete effectively for living space in disturbed areas, to grow profusely, as Crosby puts it 'in miserable micro-environments'. They are effective because they spread underground - they are secret and subversive. They are the gossips who develop a network of sister-strength. They build links and bridge gaps.

'They grow fast, seed early, and retaliate to injury with awesome power. ... As they take over disturbed ground, they stabilize the soil, block the baking rays of the sun, and, for all their competitiveness, make it a better place for other plants than it was before.' Having taking re-possession, and established 'native title', weeds, 'When the emergencies are over, ... give way to plants that may grow more slowly but grow taller and sturdier. ... Weeds thrive on radical change, not stability.'

The wild and the cultivated sustain each other in perpetual cycle. They are symbiotic in relationship, as indeed, are wild word and cultivated word. As Marina Warner has suggested, 'Gossip and narrative are sisters, both ways of keeping the mind alive when ordinary tasks call; the fiction of gossip - as well as the facts - act as compass roses, pointing to many possibilities.'

In a comprehensive and lucid discussion of ecological thinking, Michael Zimmerman observes:

So long as people conceive of themselves as isolated egos, only externally related to other people and to nature, they inevitably tend to see life in terms of scarcity and competition. When people conceive of themselves as internally
related to others and to nature, however, they tend to see life in terms of bounty, not scarcity, and in terms of co-operation, not aggressive competition.20

You know what I need

one leaf for sorcery
one leaf for prophecy
one leaf for healing
one leaf for the pot

O wilderness
O harmony
(‘Osanyin: God of Herbalism’, *Gardening*, p. 117)

NOTES

1. Olive Senior, ‘Talking of Trees’, in *Talking of Trees* (Kingston: Calabash, 1985), p.80. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text short-titled *Trees*.
6. ibid. Crosby, p. 149.
7. Kew Gardens is a botanical garden situated in the wealthy west of London and was initially the property of the British Royal Family. It became a public pleasure garden and scientific laboratory and library in 1841, when it won the battle to be maintained by government funding.
10. The Burton Palm House was erected in Kew Gardens between 1844 and 1848, specifically designed by the architect, Decimus Burton, to house the gardens’ collection of tropical palms, some of which grow to a height of over 60 feet.
13. Lionnet’s article includes a fascinating discussion of creole linguistic resistance and disruption (see in particular pp. 330-337).
15. This is a reference to James Joyce’s Ulysses (1922): ‘History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.’ (London: Bodley Head, 1960), p. 42.
17. Reference is made here to Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s concept of ‘creative rebellion’ as used in his talk on Mother Poem at the Association for the Teaching of Caribbean and African Literature Conference, 27 September 1980 (University of Warwick).

The Palm House at Kew Gardens in mid 19th century