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Abstract

Over the course of the 20th century, recourse to satellite and radar technology, and the use of reconnaissance aircraft, has greatly assisted the tracking of tropical cyclones. In addition, data buoys are now employed throughout the Gulf of Mexico and along the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard to relay air and water temperature, wind speed, air pressure and wave conditions that enable more accurate prediction and monitoring of storm systems. But before the people of the Caribbean had recourse to modern instrumentation and communication, surviving a regular hurricane season was founded on sensitivity to environment, accumulated knowledge passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth; and what amounted to a rehearsed, even ritualised, set of practices. As Jamaican Canadian poet Olive Senior writes in 'Hurricane Story, 1903':

In those days storm warning came by
telegraph to Postmistress. Living in
the bush, Grandfather couldn't see her
rush to broadcast the news by posting
a black flag. But he was the seventh son
of the seventh son and could read signs
and interpret wonders so when the swallows
flew below the roof line, when the sky
took on a special peach glow, when flocks
of birds sailed west over the hill,
when clouds banked at the far side and the air
was still, he knew it was time to batten down.

The poem, like the time-honoured story, acts as an archive of knowledge and practice that might otherwise be lost; and like the oral tradition in which Senior's poetry is grounded, it registers and tussles with change. The atmosphere of the poem itself registers the poet-narrator's shift from childhood to adulthood, from tradition to modernity, from rural to urban, from small island view to big world view. This chapter will explore the often oppositional and difficult relationship between poetry and science, professional and amateur knowledges, indigenous and colonizing ways of reading the environment, different ways of sensing and responding to changes in atmosphere, and the question of personal responsibility in the face of depersonalised knowledge systems that emanate from outside a community.

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A slow reading of Olive Senior's hurricane story.

Anne Collett

IN 'Hurricane Story, 1903,' Jamaican-Canadian poet Olive Senior recalls the days when “storm warning came by telegraph to the Postmistress” who rushed to “broadcast the news by posting a black flag;” and celebrates Grandfather (who lives beyond sight of the black flag) for his ability to read the atmospheric signs of imminent hurricane – changes in sky colour, cloud formation, bird movement. These signs were read, that is, detected and interpreted, and then acted upon with appropriate measures to safe-guard family, home and possessions, “time and time again.”³³¹ The poem, like the time-honoured story, acts as an archive of knowledge and practice that might otherwise be lost; and like the mix of oral and written traditions out of which it was formed, the poem tussles with change. The atmosphere of the poem itself registers the poet-narrator's shift from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience, from tradition to modernity, from rural to urban, from small island view to big world view.

To read 'Hurricane Story, 1903' with the respect that the author and poem ask of us requires the recognition of indigenous knowledge – knowledge grounded in local habitat; and an understanding of the author's position as a “blue foot traveller”³³² in a global economy. As Senior explains in the poem, 'Embroidery', a “blue foot” is one who has “crossed water” and is therefore “a stranger” – “not born-ya.” This is her position in Canada, the country to which she migrated in her early twenties; but although Senior returns annually to Jamaica, having “crossed water” she cannot be but changed – although a “born-ya” she is also “a stranger.” The difference between “there” and “here” is absence – here is marked by the absence of “t” and there, by the presence of “here.” The opening line of the poem 'Here and

There' is: "I knew I couldn't get there from here" and asks, "what magic words for the gateway?" The poem concludes:

... one day, I walked through without knowing

I had finally chewed into dust and absorbed
into my being the fibres of what it meant to be.

Here.³³³

To be, here, is to absorb and be absorbed into earth (dust) – the materiality of life. But what Senior also suggests in this poem, if read in relation to her own life trajectory as a blue foot poet, is the value of "chewing over words" – the value of tussling with the difficult relationship between word and thing, word and action, the words of here and of there. For poet and audience, the magic words of a poem can be a gateway to understand what it is to be, here – to be present, whilst remembering the past and dreaming the future. What is required is a chewing over – time taken to digest the fibrous matter of being; time taken to pay careful attention to reading and interpreting a nuanced complexity of signs. To chew the cud is to ruminate, to consider and reconsider, to digest and digest again what is difficult to absorb quickly. What is required is a slowing of time; a slowing that is associated with the lingering and pondering required of dwelling. I like the world "dwell" as its usage makes claims not just on residing somewhere but a lingering, a pondering, a deep situatedness. Understanding a poem and understanding the weather require particular kinds of paying attention, sensitivities that are developed over time. They require meaningful practice. They require us to dwell on them and in them.

This essay then is a form of slow reading – a shared indwelling. It is a kind of reading that I believe to be of value as much to our understanding of material and social ecologies as it is to literary ecologies. We might understand poetry as "culture," the work and product of the cultured, that is, an educated person; or of

a particular culture – Afro-Caribbean or Jamaican, or Jamaican-Canadian for example. But we might also understand poetry, and 'Hurricane Story, 1903' in particular, as the cultivation of the soil – the product or that which grows out of the soil (nature) of the world that the poet inhabits or in which s/he dwells. The word “culture” is found in Middle English to denote a cultivated piece of land; a word derived from the Latin “*colere*” meaning to tend or cultivate. The intimate relationship between nature and culture is only severed when we forget or neglect to pass on remembrance of their history. “Tend” is another word I like as it suggests both tenderness and attentiveness: to tend is to take care of, to look after, to protect and nurture. Tending requires the investment of time, attention and effort. In the history of the word “culture,” the shift from cultivation of the soil to cultivation of mind and manners occurs over the sixteenth century. Here is evidence of the close relationship between earth (nature) and word (culture) and the work or labour of love that links the two that are in effect, one.

To place this discussion within a Caribbean context, we can turn to the influential Barbadian poet and social historian, Kamau Brathwaite, whose poem 'Negus' rages against the separation of a people from their habitation and their language – a separation of nature and culture – through the violence done by conquest, colonisation and neo-colonisation. The loss suffered by indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and transported Africans is understood as a loss of creative “Word” in which nature and culture were one. The poet asks for the gift of “words to shape my name/to the syllables of trees,” “words to refashion futures/ like a healer’s hand:”

I

must be given words so that the bees
in my blood’s buzzing brain of memory

will make flowers, will make flocks of birds,
will make sky, will make heaven,

the heaven open to the thunder-stone and the volcano
and the unfolding land³³⁴

Openness, receptivity, and unfolding are key words here. In *Mother Poem* (1977), Brathwaite writes his “mother” (back) into being: in preface to the volume he speaks of the poem as:

about porous limestone: my mother, Barbados: most English of West Indian islands, but at the same time nearest, as the slaves fly, to Africa. Hence the protestant Pentecostalism of its language, interleaved with Catholic bells and kumina.³³⁵

The poem is about the healing of a nature/culture split and the recovery of a submerged “indigenous” language that runs under the island as water in limestone channels. Indigenous here does not refer to the language of the people who inhabited Barbados at the time of European “discovery,” but rather to a language of “country.” “My Mother” is the limestone island; “My Mother” is the poem. In ‘Driftword,’ the final poem of *Mother Poem*, my mother is “echo of river trickle worn stone:” “she knows that her death has been born:” she knows and acknowledges her death by genocide of people and plantation; but she will be reborn if word is once again born out of and creative of her materiality and her spirituality. In the final verse of the poem the poet declaims:

if it be so

let it be clay that the potter uses
and he will curve her hollow cheek and carve
her darkness

...

so that losing her now
you will slowly restore her silent gutters of word-fall

...

linking linking the ridges: the matchbox wood houses

past the glimmering downward gully and pebble
and fountain

of ancient watercourses

trickling slowly into the coral
travelling inwards under the limestone

widening outwards into the sunlight
towards the breaking of her flesh with foam³³⁶

Mother Poem re-establishes intimate and indivisible relationship between nature and culture, the material and the ephemeral, word and Word.

Where Brathwaite situates the origin of his w/Word in the slow trickle of water through Bajan coral, Senior writes of dwelling in and of 'Cockpit Country,' Jamaica. Here her self as person and poet "form[s] slowly like stalagmites," nurtured by bird song and green.³³⁷ For Senior, like Brathwaite, poetry can be incantatory; thereby not only remembering submerged histories but capable of re-establishing the indivisibility of nature/culture relationship. She most often does this work through the naming and thus, calling up – a kind of possession (in the *kumina* sense) of and by trees native to the Caribbean, and more specifically to Jamaica. Part way through her first volume of poetry, *Talking of Trees* (1985), Senior inserts an epigraph: "What kind of period is it when to talk of trees is almost a crime because it implies silence about so many horrors?" (Bertolt Brecht).³³⁸

For Senior, who was born of a country whose indigenous inhabitants, human and vegetable, were "cleared" for plantation labour and crop and were "replaced" by peoples uprooted and transplanted from their native lands, to talk of trees is not to signal a silence about such horror, but to give that horror voice. To talk of trees is to talk of loss and to make present the absence of vegetable and human lives that were intertwined before the Fall, and expelled after the Fall (the Fall here being an allusion both to the biblical expulsion from the garden and the rift that occurs between culture and nature in the Americas with the violence of

European “discovery”).³³⁹ This talk of trees is a naming exercise that returns them, and those who gave them names, to mind, heart and tongue. The many that have been devalued and denigrated are reborn and accorded value in the poem:

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 Woman’s Tongue clatters out of turn:

Who hears this? Who sees this? And who knows?³⁴⁰

Senior’s poem gives voice to those disappeared and silenced so we might hear, see and know the truth. The trees named in this poem were trees planted in Parade Gardens (also known as Victoria Park and St. William Grant Park) at the heart of the city of Kingston in 1870–71. Senior notes that over 120 trees were planted including 35 different species, some of which were native to Jamaica. The creation of a garden at the heart of Kingston is an act of ironic hubris – a marker of colonial power that acts to restore, for its value to science and aesthetics, indigenous gardens destroyed by colonisation and plantation. Such a minor remedial act has little long term impact for at the time of writing the poem virtually all the trees had gone but one, a “woman’s

tongue,” described by Senior as “a downtown vagrant” who, “in her mad way tells their story – and ours.”³⁴¹

Woman’s tongue (*Albizia lebeck*) is not native to the Caribbean, but like the enslaved Africans, was transported (from what Senior describes as the Far East) to Jamaica in the late eighteenth century. The plant has subsequently become “naturalised” and is commonly found growing in city yards.³⁴² So in calling up this tree, in particular by its common rather than Latin name, Senior evokes its place in the history of the island as integral to a human history that is too easily forgotten. She notes how its long seed pods “rattle in the slightest breeze – hence the tree’s popular name.”³⁴³ These trees have been removed from the colonial garden for purposes of urban planning, but they have by no means disappeared. Like gossip that gathers momentum through whispered talk at the ragged edges of unauthorised human discourse, and weeds that refuse to be put down, proliferating and indeed thriving on disturbed ground, the vegetable world is envisaged in Senior’s work as the power that resides in root and rhizome, having the twinned capacity for depth and breadth, for trenchant stability and transgressive mobility. Trees “on Parade” suggests an army; an army in this case of veterans who might be wounded but are by no means disabled or disempowered:

1907 Earthquake when churches fell down
Tamarind Tree swayed. But Banyan held firm.
Come. Let us sit under Banyan tree and
reason together. Like Prophets of old

or the Big-tree boys
of old Kingston town

They baad
They tough
Like Ironwood
Lignum Vitae³⁴⁴

Human and plant resistance and rebellion are here brought together; joined by the power of creative w/Word.

Senior's homage to the vegetable kingdom and inquiry into the nature of its entanglement with human history is central to her poetry collection, *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994). In 'Plants', the poem that opens the section 'Nature Studies', she warns (part tongue in cheek, part earnest) of "a vast cosmic program that once set/in motion cannot be undone though we/become plant food and earth wind down:"

They'll outlast us, they were always there
one step ahead of us: plants gone to seed,
generating the original profligate,
extravagant, reckless improvident, weed.³⁴⁵

In the final section of the volume, 'Mystery/African Gods in the New World,' the poet acknowledges and calls up African gods, transported to the Caribbean. Her words are again incantatory, making visible that which has been sent into hiding, making present. Among those gods are Osanyin, God of Herbalism, who the poet "halloas" in "voice as tiny/as beat of bird's wing" and asks that he provide one leaf for sorcery, one leaf for prophecy, one leaf for healing:³⁴⁶ leaf and word are one, for this is the purpose and power of the poet's craft as declared by Senior in 'Ode to Pablo Neruda.'³⁴⁷ In this, the final poem of *over the roofs of the world*, Senior records her loss of faith in her poetic craft and the reassertion of that faith through poetic dialogue with Pablo Neruda – a dialogue in which she recovers her sense of purpose as a poet and where she accepts the demands and risks of one who speaks "truth to power."³⁴⁸ She acknowledges that this will require enormous love, courage and a power she cannot muster on her own. The burden of healing, the burden of speaking for those "lost ones, the limboed, the un-cared for,/the un-loved. The mortified, the discarded, the 'disappeared'"³⁴⁹ is a weight so great it sometimes reduces her to silence and despair. So she calls upon "that old woman, the wizard of the cords/who used to tie up the wind with three knots in a bundle/and sell it to

sailors.”³⁵⁰ The unravelling of each knot determines the strength of wind – one knot unloosed for “light breezes,” two knots for “clipping along” and three - “woe betide – for a battering.” Despite knowing the powerful impact of loosening the third knot, and despite her declared innocence, the poet narrator defends her (poetic) act:

But my/hurricane heart feels better for its roaring,
for scouring/the world. For it's the strong wind that
cleanses, that/unburdens and purifies. It uplifted
the fallen.³⁵¹

Although destructive, hurricane is also creative and a powerful force for good. One of the African deities to whom Senior pays tribute in *Gardening in the Tropics* is Oya, Goddess of the Wind:

You inhale
Earth holds its breath
You exhale
Cities tumble
...
You whistle
We dance
You sweep
We fly
You yawn
Death rattles³⁵²

Breath is word: creative and destructive. If the poet can harness the breath of the hurricane in her word, she can change the world.³⁵³

Hurricane Story

Hurricane season in the Caribbean is annual, expected and to some extent ordinary; but its effects are nevertheless often devastating, if not extraordinary. It is a natural phenomenon that has an integral place in the culture of Caribbean life. Hurricane blows through song and story; hurricane is the “stuff of legends

– tragic, comic, epic:³⁵⁴ it is the breath of national, communal and personal histories, where nature and culture are utterly entangled. In *History of the Voice* Brathwaite identified hurricane as definitive of Caribbean life and that upon which a poetics of the Caribbean might be created:

What English has given us as a model for poetry ... is the pentameter ... the pentameter ... carries with it a certain experience, which is not the experience of hurricane. The hurricane does not roar in pentameters. And that's the problem: how do you get a rhythm which approximates the *natural* experience, the *environmental* experience.³⁵⁵

Martinique writer, Edouard Glissant, speaks of the “storyteller’s cry” as needing to be “grounded in the depths of the land.”³⁵⁶ He claims that this is where its power lies, for it is not “an enclosed truth, not momentary succor,” rather, perhaps paradoxically, story grounded in the geology of rock (as Brathwaite’s is grounded in the limestone of Barbados) provides a communal path “through which the wind can be released.”³⁵⁷

Hurricane stories trace the personalised histories of that communal path in Senior’s “tropical garden.” The volume includes Jamaican hurricane stories from 1903, 1944, 1951 (Charlie) and 1988 (Gilbert). The first of these hurricane poem stories – first chronologically within meteorological record and first in Senior’s *Gardening* volume – begins: “time and time again ...” The hurricane of 1903 was the first of the twentieth century, but one of a long succession of hurricanes to make landfall in Jamaica across planetary time. This sense of small story within big story is signified in the title and the first words of the poem, “time and time again.” The words recall the classic folk story/fairy tale opening, “Once upon a time,” and signal the iterative nature of story and of hurricane.

In the “Monthly Weather Review” of August 1903, EB Garriott details the “forecasts and warnings” for the West Indian hurricane of 8–15 August 1903:

The first indication of the presence of this storm to the eastward of Barbados was furnished by the morning telegraphic reports of the 8th. West Indian stations and Gulf and Atlantic coast shipping interests were at once notified that a disturbance probably of dangerous strength was approaching Barbados from the eastward and would move northwestward over the Windward Islands ... Reports from Kingston, Jamaica, show that the first effects of the storm were felt on that island on the 10th, and that the main hurricane center reached the island on the morning of the 11th, causing a heavy loss of life and property. At Kingston the minimum barometer, 28.80 inches, as indicated by the barograph, occurred at 5.30 a.m. of the 11th, and at 6.15 a.m. the barometer had risen to 29.36 inches. The anemometer cups were disabled, but the maximum wind velocity at Kingston was estimated at 65 miles per hour.³⁵⁸

One of the key warnings of approaching hurricane is a steady drop in atmospheric pressure, typically beginning 36 hours before the hurricane makes landfall and plunging steadily as the storm nears. The scientific literature lists other early warning signals that amount to not much more than the usual for an oncoming storm – increased speed and intensity of wind, increased wave motion, increased cloud. Over the course of the twentieth century, recourse to satellite and radar technology and the use of reconnaissance aircraft has greatly assisted the tracking of tropical cyclones. In addition, data buoys are now employed throughout the Gulf of Mexico and along the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard to relay air and water temperature, wind speed, air pressure and wave conditions that enable more accurate prediction and monitoring of storm systems. But before the people of the Caribbean had recourse to modern instrumentation and communication, surviving a regular hurricane season was founded on sensitivity to environment; accumulated knowledge passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth; and what amounted to a rehearsed, even ritualised, set

of practices. When swallows settle below the roof line, when the sky takes on a “special peach glow,” when flocks of birds fly west, when clouds bank and the air becomes still, Granny brings the goat and fowls into the house, and Grandfather battens it down – knowing exactly when “to board/the last window up and brace the door.”

“[T]ime and time again” speaks to time-honoured practices associated with both story and hurricane; but the words also carry a sense of the tiredness that comes with repetition, even the possibility of despair that might come with the cyclical nature of hurricane story from which there is no escape. In a poem published in 2012, titled ‘Hurricane Watch’, Senior begins: “Every year we are forced to reinvent ourselves,/growing shabbier.”³⁵⁹ This shabbiness is not discernible in ‘Hurricane Story, 1903.’ Here the cyclical nature of hurricane is entwined with rural poverty but Senior makes clear that this is a poverty of circumstance not of spirit and indeed, the capacity to “make do” and “make the best of” is praiseworthy – we might call it resilience. The corn is hung from rafters; afu yam and sweet potato are stored underground “safe from breeze-blow.” When the wind rises in 1903, Grandfather takes his good clothes out of his trunk and packs it with corn – the subsistence food that will ensure survival; while Granny adds cassava bammies and chaklata balls “with a string of nutmeg and cinnamon leaf” – the special food that will lend the survivors “courage.” Grandfather’s and Granny’s efforts to “shore up their lives against improvidence” ensure the family rides out the storm with little harm done. The positive can be found in the negative. Coconuts knocked to the ground by the ferocity of the storm provide the rare luxury of hot chocolate milk and oil to fry the bammies.

Here we see Senior’s careful rendition of the grandparents’ situatedness in which nature and culture are thoroughly entangled. In the first stanza of the poem, the penguin fence from which Granny plucks fowl coops “time and time again” is a living fence made of a cactus-like shrub, *Bromelia pinguin*, indigenous to Central America, northern South America and the West Indies. The plant is commonly used to fence pasture lands in Jamaica

on account of its prickly leaves and the six-foot height to which it grows. Both Afu yam (*Dioscorea aculeata*) and sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*), also mentioned in the first stanza, are native to the tropical Americas and both are integral to Jamaican food culture. In his work *Jamaican Food*, Barry Higman includes references to types of yam in the Jamaican diet and the origins of their popular names. His sources include local cookbooks and Martha Beckwith's study of Jamaican "folk life."³⁶⁰ The linguistic genealogy of "afu" can be traced to the Twi word "afuw," meaning "plant" or "cultivated ground." Higman notes that the Twi language group was centred in Ghana (the country in which many Africans were imprisoned to await sale and transportation to the West Indies); and that this language is also the likely source of the word "bammy."³⁶¹

Grandfather and Granny embody the "practice of everyday life" to which the provision and production of food is central. They are what Michel de Certeau refers to as "obscure hero[es]."³⁶² De Certeau begins 'the Annals of Everyday Life' with a quotation from Paul Leuilliot's preface to Guy Thuillier's *Pour une histoire du quotidien*:

Everyday life is what we are given every day (or what is willed to us), what presses us, even oppresses us, because there does exist an oppression of the present. Every morning, what we take up again, *on awakening*, is the weight of life, the difficulty of living, or of living in a certain condition ... Everyday life is *what holds us intimately*, from the inside.³⁶³

The food that is grown and husbanded (plant and animal) is integral to the culture that nurtures a people. It sits at the heart, mind and stomach of "what holds us intimately." As Higman writes in preface to his volume, the choices Jamaicans make about what they eat, when and how they eat, and how these choices change over time, "provide insight into the social cultural, agricultural, economic and political history of Jamaica:"

In everyday life, these choices are at least as important as decisions about whom to vote for and what to have faith in. Although it may appear transient, food is not just essential to bodily survival but vital as a driver of culture and identity ... In the past ... the sources of food grew in fields and forests, sea and stream, for weeks and months; they were observed from birth to maturity, and were watched closely as they came to ripeness or fatness ... For most of Jamaica's history, people lived in the midst of plants and animals recognized as potential foods.³⁶⁴

Here we have another reference to “slow” culture and the intimacy of relationship between nature and culture. In giving us a picture of Jamaican food ways of a particular social class and of a particular time and place, Senior's 'Hurricane Story' offers readers a potted history of a hurricane culture; for hurricane is not just an extraordinary event, it is interwoven into the fabric of ordinary life. That fabric is rent by hurricane, but that intimate relationship between nature and culture ensures the capacity to mend the fabric. Senior understands the poet's role as integral to that mending, that healing. She envisages herself as the female understudy of Anansi — the mythical trickster spider-man/god, prominent in the stories that survived the Middle Passage from Africa to the Caribbean. In the final stanzas of 'Ode to Pablo Neruda', the poet considers accepting her commission as apprentice spider — this is a commission that is not willed, but given. Gifts necessarily come with expectation and obligation. They demand a giving back of self. The poet muses:

Maybe I'll accept after all my commission as
apprentice Spider
who spins from her gut the threads for flying,
for tying up words that spilled, hanging out tales long
unspoken, reeling in songs, casting off dances.
And perhaps for binding up wounds?³⁶⁵

Story is integral to any process of recovery and indeed, survival. By situating the event of hurricane— this particular hurricane of 1903— within the lived trajectory of a family, a community, a nation, Senior ensures the perpetuation of folk and food ways. Her poem acts as a document of retrieval for that which has been lost, an archive in which the past can be housed “safe from breeze-blow,” in effect by incorporating hurricane within the poem and the community that gives it life. In turn, language and story are integral to the life of a community. By naming the plants and trees and the food they become when cultivated, and locating them within the life cycle of a community and the child for whom this is “the past,” the genealogy of a people is not only archived but “called up,” in much the same way that the African drummer recited the history of “the tribe.” The child who may have become a blue foot traveller, like the poet, is given a thread by which to cling on to, retrace, restore, re-connect to her ancestral and living culture of belonging.

The cassava bammies that give the family courage to build again when faced with the devastation of the storm call an ancestry to mind and remind those who have survived literal and metaphorical storm of strategies employed to keep ancestral African and indigenous culture and nature alive in the Caribbean. These streams, as Brathwaite reminds us, run underground, carving channels through stubborn rock, in the subversive double-speak of calypso and in the “slave grounds” and Maroon territory where seeds of African and indigenous nature and culture were nurtured in the form of every day practice. Indigeneity and transplanted Africa survive and grow in new ways, entwined with the colonial cultures of European origins.

'Hurricane Story, 1903' concludes with the grandchild spending time

...watching that sensay fowl that
strutting leghorn rooster, dying to be
the first to see the strange bird fated
to be born out of that great storm.

The sensay fowl – whose name is derived from African Twi - and the leghorn rooster – a breed of fowl whose origins lie in central Italy – survive the storm together, holed up in the cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) – a tree, according to Senior's *Encyclopedia*, that is associated with the sacred in Africa and the Americas.³⁶⁶ Here Senior records the indigenous people's use of the cotton tree for canoe building, reminding readers of Columbus' sighting of a huge dugout canoe in Jamaica. Recalling the cotton tree's symbolic history that associated it with "long life and continuity" she notes its centrality in belief and story of the Arawaks of Guyana, the Taino, the Mayas of Guatemala, and the Ashanti of Ghana. Finally, Senior draws our attention to the many events throughout Jamaica to which the cotton tree has been integral, making particular mention of the treaty signed by Cudjoe of the Maroons and Colonel Guthrie on behalf of the English forces, under a large cotton tree growing in the middle of Maroon Town, Kingston. She is told that "the tree was ever after called Cudjoe's tree, and held in great veneration," being the site of negotiated relationship between defeated colonising forces and victorious resistance fighters.³⁶⁷

'Hurricane Story, 1903' is a negotiation of past and present, of here and there, between born-ya and blue-foot, between author and audiences. The poem explores the often oppositional and difficult relationship between nature and culture, professional and amateur knowledges, male and female perspectives, indigenous and colonising ways of reading the environment. Something of this difficult relationship can be felt in Senior's poem where Grandfather is likened to a biblical prophet, a man of special talents because he is "the seventh son of the seventh son." The poet's tone is lightly mocking of such (gendered) hubris, but this is also a praise poem in which the passing on of what might be understood as "amateur" or indigenous knowledge from one generation to the next, is accorded value.

Reflecting upon historical attitudes and practices associated with hurricane in the Caribbean, Stuart Schwartz notes how "the great storms were part of the annual cycle of life" and the degree to which the power of storm was respected, often

deified; but he also describes how the indigenous peoples of the tropical Americas “sought practical ways to adjust their lives to the storms.” He lists “field management and crop selection, urban layout and drainage systems, house construction, forest usage and maintenance;” even warfare, migration and trade. The Calusas of southwest Florida planted rows of trees as windbreak to protect their villages from hurricanes; the Maya of Yucatan avoided building on the coastal strips, recognising the vulnerability of human construction to wind damage and flooding from tidal surge; the Taino who inhabited the islands of Jamaica, Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, selected a food staple from root crops like yucca, malanga and yautia because of their resistance to wind-storm damage. Both the Taino and the Carib peoples recognised the seasonality of the great storms, incorporating that knowledge into their cultural practice; they also learned to read “the signs by which their coming could be anticipated.” The Caribs, who waged war against the Taino, could navigate “three or four hundred miles by using the shape of clouds, the direction of the wind, the color of the sky, and their knowledge of the stars.” Their raids against the Taino were conducted seasonally, soon after the major storms had passed, in order to facilitate safe ocean traverse by canoe, and possibly in anticipation of disarray or preoccupation with storm damage among the Taino settlements. The Caribs’ ability to predict bad weather was seen as marvellous by the early European adventurers, among them Frenchman James Bouton, who described their knowledge as “uncanny.”³⁶⁸

Ritual practices of creolised peoples native to the Caribbean, based upon knowledge both observed and handed down the generations through song and story, are identified in Senior’s poem with grandparents – the “born-ya” post-indigenous generation. The tendency to see this ancestral knowledge as mysterious, mythical and possibly supernatural or “uncanny” is reflected in the description given Grandfather by the poet-narrator as “the seventh son of the seventh son.” If we read the poet-narrator as synonymous with the blue-foot traveller, the tendency to mythologise and affiliate indigenous knowledge and

practice in the tropical Americas with the supernatural can be ascribed to the “stranger” whose perspective is aligned with that of the European or North American anthropologist. But this perspective might also be aligned with a young child who is in awe of her Grandfather, the man capable of “orchestrating disaster” – a child still “too young to be schooled yet on disaster.” What does it mean to be “schooled in disaster?” Popular usage of “schooled” suggests that Senior is referring to the school of hard knocks. The child rides out the hurricane on Grandfather’s bed, safe in the capable hands of a generation who were schooled in disaster. For the young child, the event of hurricane provides the excitement of adventure, a reinforced sense of belonging, and the comfort of those who have acquired the knowledge of experience to ensure safety. The child’s feelings of awe and wonder are a response, not to the hurricane, but to Grandfather’s heroic orchestration, to Granny’s unexpected nakedness, and to the hoped for birth of an extraordinary bird, born of the very ordinary inhabitants of the domestic fowl coop. All the actions and actors are contained within the bounds of the penguin fence – that common native demarcation of family plot in Jamaica. The prickly *Bromelia pinguin* not only safeguards animal and plant, human and non-human, it provides fruit for eating and fibre for clothing. Nature sustains culture, so culture must nurture nature – this is both a “joy and an obligation.”³⁶⁹

When I started writing about hurricane, I didn’t expect to be talking of trees; but in the 'Monthly Weather Review' of August 1903, Garriott not only records the barometric readings and the wind force, he records the many losses suffered, noting that:

The principal sufferers were the owners of banana plantations whose losses were estimated at more than £500,000. The orange, pimento, and coffee crops suffered severely; the towns of Port Antonio and Port Maria were almost destroyed, and throughout the parishes of St. Mary, Portland, St. Andrew, St. Catherine, and St. Thomas the destruction to houses, property, and plantations was appalling.³⁷⁰

The loss of plantation crop has a devastating impact on the economic viability of the nation; the impact upon individual lives and communities is enormous. But while plantation crops are destroyed, Senior's poem documents the means by which a poor rural Jamaican family survives – the measures taken to store food underground or in the safety of the tin box, and to take advantage of windfall. Survival is dependent on knowledge of a set of practices, that like story, are told and retold – the core of the tale remaining the same though the embellishments may change with each individual retelling. To talk of trees is not only to give voice to horror, not only to expose and condemn a long history of violence and oppression; to talk of trees is also to give voice to everyday courage, tenacity, heroism and love.

Trees give hurricane voice – they are the natural lyre³⁷¹ of the forest. Breath given poetic voice in Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' is not a gentle breeze that ripples the willows but a ferocious wind that rages through the forest, scouring the land of pestilence – a "Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;/Destroyer and Preserver." It is not inappropriate to recall the British colonial education that necessarily informs Senior's poetry. She herself recalls minds yoked to "declensions in Latin/ and the language of Shakespeare" in her poem, 'Colonial Girls School.'³⁷² But Brathwaite is right: the hurricane does not roar in pentameters. When Anansi is "let out of his bag," the young Jamaican girls are kissed awake by a less than charming prince.³⁷³ The strange and beautiful bird, "fated/to be born out of that great storm," might be a hurricane story poem.