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'And none can silence this song': A retrospective essay for Olive Senior

Abstract

Olive Senior is irrepressible. Not having met her, perhaps what I mean is her song is irrepressible, but then her song is her spirit — 'the soul's shining': 'so excuse me for interjecting an ode here' to Olive.¹ She is the shell of which she writes in her most recent volume of poetry — the vessel through which the voices of her personal and communal history speak; and she is the sea that informs the shell and carries the voices to shores far distant from their place of origin. Olive's poetry travels well because it carries her story lightly. Even though that story is often one of darkness, it is also a story that lets in the light — a little at a time so as not to blind us, a little at a time so as not to cause us to turn away. Let me give you an example from *Gardening in the Tropics*:

ADEL RIDDEN

‘And none can silence this song’: A Retrospective Essay for Olive Senior

Olive Senior is irrepressible. Not having met her, perhaps what I mean is her song is irrepressible, but then her song is her spirit — ‘the soul’s shining’: ‘so excuse me for interjecting an ode here’ to Olive.¹ She is the shell of which she writes in her most recent volume of poetry — the vessel through which the voices of her personal and communal history speak; and she is the sea that informs the shell and carries the voices to shores far distant from their place of origin. Olive’s poetry travels well because it carries her story lightly. Even though that story is often one of darkness, it is also a story that lets in the light — a little at a time so as not to blind us, a little at a time so as not to cause us to turn away. Let me give you an example from *Gardening in the Tropics*:

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’ 1994 83)

Senior’s poetry unearths the skeletons in her own back yard, but that yard expands and contracts to reveal the degree to which the intimate histories of family and local community in the Caribbean islands are entangled with the (global) history of the Americas, Africa, Europe, the world ... the planet. This sense of the little in the big and the big in the little is evident even in the titles of Senior’s poetry collections that begin with *Talking of Trees* (1985) and the politics of trees, to *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994) and the politics of gardens, to *over the roofs of the world* (2005) and the politics of birds, to *Shell* (2007) and the politics of eggs (!) — the houses (wombs) out of which we are born, and the houses in which we dwell. Like the spiral of *gastropoda*, the movement of Senior’s poetry is inward to the smallest point of beginning and outward to the largest expanse of universe; and always the poet belies the cunning of her art with a fluidity of literary shape-shifting and a simplicity of poetic language:

You think I’ve stayed home all my life,
 moving at snail’s pace, sneakily living off
 another’s labour? You think I’ve nought
 to leave behind but empty shell? Come:

study me. Take my chambered shell apart.
 Brace yourself for whirlwinds
 coiled at my heart.

(‘Gastropoda’ 2007 9)

Senior writes with the craft of Anansi — the spiderman/god of the Afro-Caribbean story-telling tradition that informs so much of her work. In ‘Ode to Pablo Neruda’ she makes connection between Neruda’s directive to grasp poetry ‘like a thread’:

*You must spin it
 fly a thread
 and climb it*

*This isn’t a matter
 for deliberation
 it’s an order²*

and the thread of Anansi story:

Here’s how I see it. This thread is one that crosses your path
 like the spider’s web. You walk through unaware
 The Great Spider still clings to it. So now Spider clings
 to you, my friend. This is not an accident. You have been
 chosen Spider’s apprentice. To master language. As
 Trickster, to spin and weave tales. To prophesy and heal.
 The go-between serving earth and sky. Sometimes the
 messenger left dangling.

(‘Ode to Pablo Neruda’ 2005 94)

The sticky web of Anansi stories clung to the Africans enslaved and transported to the Americas to be retold in new variation, adapted to new conditions. The history of slavery is not only a story of human and cultural devastation but also a story of survival. The poet’s role in this context is to ‘master language’, much like the slaves mastered the conqueror’s language to use it with cunning against him in work-song and calypso. The new culture that grew out of what Kamau Brathwaite has termed ‘creolisation’³ is a syncretic culture in which old traditions are grafted onto new. This is not of course an equal coming together, as much of the old culture that came from Africa was ‘vanished’ like the *desaparecidos*; but the trace of thread remains in the yard games of children:

That world no longer exists.
 Yet from the architecture of longing
 you continue to construct a bountiful edifice.

This is not exile.
 You can return any day to the place that you came from
 though the place you left has shifted a heartbeat.

Like the artful dove Hopping Dick
 you hopscotch.

(‘Blue Foot Traveller’, V of ‘Wild Nester’ 2005 72)

Senior's poetry skilfully hopscotches from children's skipping song and playground chant to a 'Misreading of Wallace Stevens', from Amerindian myth to Walt Whitman,⁴ from a transported penny reel⁵ to kite flying with Pablo Neruda. 'I needed, Neruda,' writes Senior, 'this kite-string to jerk me back to the/source of creation, to that mantra of obligation':

A chain-link of miles strung out across oceans
a creole spider-work of many hands.

The beads telling not decades but centuries.

...

Here's a bead
for the spirit necklace
of that other lineage.
The ones bound in chains
dragged across the Atlantic
in vessels, full-rigged.
Their vocal chords ripped
with their names
on the tips of their tongues.
Washed away in salt water
The cartography of home.

Survivors of these crossings transplanted shoots, planted
their children's navel cords to become
the roots and the vines for my string.

(*'Ode to Pabla Neruda'* 2005 98)

The 'black' history of enforced transportation and violent transplantation, of people and cultures broken and dispersed, requires the determined effort of the story-teller to imagine a world whole again — the beads restrung on a new thread that must be twisted with the remnants of the old to make it spirit-strong. This is both theme and practice of Senior's poetic oeuvre. 'I reach but a finger across the universe./ Distance is only space-time and we/ exist in the continuum' writes Senior, in her first volume of poetry. To her Arawak Grandmother she stretches a hand:

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.

My spirit ancestors are those
I choose to worship and that
includes an I that existed
long before me.

(*'To My Arawak Grandmother'* 1985 11)

‘I choose you’, my Arawak grandmother, the poet declares. Senior’s poetry reclaims a matriarchal inheritance that is at once personal, historical, mythological and literary, and intimately associated with woman’s tongue, that is with gossip. This is exemplified, with characteristic wit, in the poem ‘Amazon Women’ (*Gardening in the Tropics*). Here the poet interrupts her story of the Amazon women (a story that ‘is true’ because her auntie says so) to ejaculate:

... 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
 like Nanny the Maroon queen mother
 or the fair Anacaona, Taino
 chieftainess ...
 ... I hadn’t meant
 to tell 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.

(‘Amazon Women’ 1994 96–97)

Here then the orature of Anansi story converges with Amerindian mythology, women’s gossip and the professional poet of the new/old global economy who ‘has to make a living’. The exotic sells. But however street-wise, and however willing (always with a sense of self-irony) to tailor her ‘product’ to market demand, Senior’s poetry never forgets its obligation to recover the silenced voices, and never allows the reader to forget the politics of Caribbean story (even when talking of trees).⁶ When the poet chooses her Arawak Grandmother, she chooses her

for affirmations pulsing still
 In spite of blood shed or infused.
 Baptismal certificates are mute
 While the whisper of a clay fragment
 Moves me to attempt this connection

Her latest collection of poetry is a kind of literary archaeological dig in which Senior attempts to make sense, make meaning, from the fragments of the past. Each poem of the collection, *Shell*, is a fragment, a found object like a shell, that speaks to the future:

So if in years to come some people
 might be mad enough to search for us,
 to trace our passing, they would have
 to dig deep to find us here, sift ashes,
 measure bones and beads and shell discarded.

(‘Shell’ 2007 70)

The whisper of a clay fragment in Senior's earliest volume attracts other whispers until whisper becomes shout and human breath takes on the force of a hurricane — a whirlwind coiled at the heart of her most recent volume of poetry. 'Flesh is sweet but disposable', observes the voice of the shell: 'what counts/ is shell', for this shell contains 'everybody's/ history: *areito, canot histórico*, a full/ genealogy of this beach, this island people':

You could be blown away by what is held
custody here, every whorl a book of life,
a text, a motion picture, a recording,

or what passes for such in our island
version. You could begin anywhere.
Encoded in are full facilities for fast forward,

play, playback and dub, reversible though
not scrubbable. For we – as you know –
are master engineers when it comes to

scratching out a living on vinyl, on dutty
or plantation. We is Ginnal at the Controls!
Nansi Nation.

(‘Shell Blow’ 2007 33–34)

There s/he is again, that Anansi spider wo/man, spinning the thread of song and story through every whorl and every chamber of the poet's heart, 'and none can silence this song that s/he sings'. (‘The Song that it Sings’ 2007 29)

NOTES

- ¹ Quotation is from 'The Song That it Sings', published in Senior's latest collection, *Shell* (28–29) and reprinted on p. 191 of this issue.
- ² Neruda's verse is quoted in italics in Senior's poem, 'Ode to Pablo Neruda', *over the roofs of the world*, p. 92. (These lines are taken from 'Ode to Thread', *Selected Odes of Pablo Neruda*, translated by Margaret Sayers Peden [Berkeley: U of California P, 1990, p. 65]).
- ³ See discussion of creolisation in Kamau Brathwaite's *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1971.
- ⁴ 'over the roofs of the world' are words quoted from Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' (stanza 52), published in *Leaves of Grass* (1855).
- ⁵ The title of a section (3) and a poem (80–82) in *over the roofs of the world*.
- ⁶ The title *Talking of Trees* is a riposte to Bertolt Brecht's question: 'What kind of period is it when to talk of trees is almost a crime because it implies silence about so many horrors'. For Senior, to talk of trees is to break that silence — to speak the crime — because the history of slavery in the Caribbean is not only the history of human transportation and decimation (the Africans being transported to replace the nearly extinguished indigenous population) but the history of trans/plantation (native trees being decimated in order to plant the introduced plantation crops, also uprooted from their native soil). Senior quotes Brecht on p. 45.

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