

**Blue Be-longing: A Discussion of
Olive Senior's Latest Collection of Poetry,
*over the roofs of the world***

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In the twelfth annual Philip Sherlock Lecture, delivered in February 2005 at the University of the West Indies (Mona, Jamaica), Olive Senior spoke about the journey she had undertaken to becoming 'a woman-of-words,' and established the connection between 'tradition and the individual talent' with the claim that the voice of individual talent in the Caribbean is one that necessarily draws upon oral and scribal cultures. It is at once representative of the personal and the collective. In the Philip Sherlock lecture, "The Poem as Gardening, the Story as Su-Su: Finding a Literary Voice," Senior remarked, "I have learned that to answer to the calling of writer in Jamaica is a humbling experience. In a place where the oral culture is dominant, 'telling story' will always be more valued than authorship . . . what is valued is not authorship but the power of the story" (36, 43).

Although Olive Senior's repertoire as a poet now includes three collections of poetry, *Talking of Trees* (1985), *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994) and most recently, *over the roofs of the world* (2005), much scholarly work to date has focused upon her skill as a short story writer, possibly because 'telling story' is so valued in the Caribbean, but also perhaps because Senior came to international attention with the award of the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1987 for her first book of short stories, *Summer Lightning*. This volume was followed by *Arrival of the Snake-Woman* in 1989 and *The Discerner of Hearts* in 1995. It should, however, come as no surprise that 'telling story' is equally the art of Olive Senior's poetry as it is of her prose, and that her most recent collection of poetry places her as firmly in the literary world of the 'blue foot' poet-traveler as it does in the oral craft of 'born-ya' song and story. In a well-knit and

cunningly crafted poem entitled, 'Embroidery,' Senior tells the story of her 'blue foot' relationship to 'Aunt Millie':

The women of the family took tea all together except for
Aunt Millie, Uncle Vincent's wife. She read books, she
wore makeup and jewellery even on weekdays. On Sunday
afternoons behind locked door, she had me put colouring
(Madam Walker's, IMPORTED FROM AMERICA) in her
hair. She was a blue foot, a stranger, not a born-ya. She
had crossed water. (*roofs* 78)

If the dominant colour of *Gardening in the Tropics*, was yellow—
yellow of gold, sun, sand, bananas, fever grass (and piss)—the colour of
over the roofs of the world is blue—blue of the sea, blue of the sky, blue of
the traveler leaving and returning. In the poem 'Blue' Senior writes:

Never knew that blue was a song to be sung,
no, never knew. Thought blue was something
swallowed: a choke, an anguish, an ache,
a separation from everyone, a curtain, an
emptiness, a disappearance. Thought I was
the only person who knew the meaning of blue.

...

Blue was that in-betweenness, that moment
of change, of solstice, where you feared to fall
between worlds (*roofs* 58)

Although a 'born-ya' to Jamaica, the Caribbean island of her birth,
Senior is a 'blue foot' to the Canadian city of her adoption, Toronto.
She might be said to be one for whom be-longing is a longing both
for the lost home of birth and the unattainable land of adoption, and
thus the association of blue with the blues. Olive Senior would appear
to suggest that belonging is only realized through longing, or that be-
longing is never realized and only always a state of longing. The puzzle

of paradox lies at the heart of this volume in which Senior plays with the meaning of “flight as the only way home” (“Bird-Man/Bird-Woman” 91). The poem “Bird-Man/Bird-Woman” explores the relationship between contemporary female poet and ancient male shaman. It begins with a quotation from Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff’s work, *Goldwork and Shamanism*: “Over time, representations of the bird-shaman in pre-Columbian gold work evolved into heart-shaped icons,” to which Senior responds: “It takes heart to become one, the courage to be, to accept the separation from whatever life you embark from” (91). You must leave the world in order to discover or recover the world. You must leave the self, create distance from the self, in order to ‘see’ the self, but it is also possible that both world and self are elusive of discovery. In the poem “*Blue Foot Traveller*” she observes:

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 that artful dove Hopping Dick
you hopscotch. (*roofs* 72)

At one level, the poem is an acknowledgement (perhaps the first) of the degree to which so much of Olive Senior’s poetry to date has been a bountiful edifice constructed from the architecture of longing: a poetry that looks back over sea, across space and time, to a Caribbean past that is personal, historical and mythological. She is the migrant who denies exile, always believing in and always sustained by the idea of return. But even here there is acknowledgement of return that can never be return for the past is a different country and the place left has “shifted a heart beat.” The poem, however, is much more than an astute comment on the diasporic or migrant state, for it is also reminiscent of Wordsworth’s ode on “Intimations of Immortality” with its vision of children playing on the shore, and the increasing sense of loss as, with age, we move fur-

ther from 'home,' further from the sound of that immortal sea out of which we were born:

Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of that eternal Silence . . .

Hence in a season of calm weather
 Though inland far we be,
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
 Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

Then sing, ye birds, sing, sing a joyous song! (Intimations 190)

Like Wordsworth's ode, "Blue Foot Traveller" is a poem that combines the sublime and the homely, but unlike Wordsworth, its gravity is undercut by reference to Hopping Dick, the Jamaican name for the "white-chinned thrush" or in scientific jargon, *turdus aurantius*. Whatever you call him, he seems to carry a tinge of the salacious or not quite respectable, a dove perhaps but with none of the nostalgia attached (he's not white but black and artful as his hopping gait would indicate).

The story of Hopping Dick and White Belly is reminiscent of Ananse stories in which greed and cunning are necessary features of survival. According to James Anderson Hilton of Maroon Town, the tale goes like this:

Hopping Dick go up on sharp 'tump an' White Belly go up on
one tall tree an' bet one bet who can stay de longest widout eat.
Hopping Dick say, 'Chem chem. Cheery o!' White Belly say,
'Coo coo coo, me hearie you!/Coo coo coo, me hearie you!'
[White Belly drops a worm] Hopping Dick go down to do
groun' pick up worm. White Belly stay up on tree all de time.
White Belly fall down an' die. (Hare)

Hopping Dick is a survivor. Perhaps like Ananse spider-man, the black bird succeeds where others fail because he is cunning and skillful,

hopscoching adeptly from square to square in order to make it back 'home' safely. To win at hopscootch requires a well-chosen stone, a good eye, agility and a keen sense of competition. The players travel away from home in order to return home. Hopping Dick is a born-ya, his inborn Caribbean qualities plain to see, and yet, because he is a 'black bird' he is also a Blue Foot (one who has crossed water).

Blue foot could be the name of a bird, in fact the poem is the last of a series of bird poems entitled "*Ping Ya!*" "Blue Quit," "White Belly" and "Wild Nester." "Wild Nester" is the overarching title of the series and the poem that deliberately evokes the gospel blues of loss and longing for 'home,' be it Africa or God's Heaven:

*Wild nester, wild nester so far from home
Wish I had the wings of a dove (65)*

The link is thus affirmed between "Blue Foot Traveller" and Wordsworth's Ode, but the poem is also cunningly linked into Jamaican folksong and ring-tune, gospel and blues, as indeed the collection as a whole creates linkage between the gossip of Jamaican yards, and what has perhaps been mistaken as the high seriousness of poets like William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman (from whom the title of the collection, *over the roofs of the world*, is taken¹), Wallace Stevens and Pablo Neruda—all of whom took the common life, the common man and the common object, as their center and their politics. In this collection Olive Senior places herself among them, (one of a company), but something of a strange bird, not least because she is a woman. Her storying, as we have come to expect, is grounded in the domesticity of folktale and gossip, the familiar and the habitual worlds of guinea hen, yard fowl, magpie and hopping dick; and lifted 'above the roofs of the world' in the poetic flight of the mythic and spiritual. *Talking of Trees* and *Gardening in the Tropics* took the habitat of birds as center point/talking point; *over the roofs of the world* is guided by the pull of those birds.

"The Pull of Birds" is the title of the first poem in the collection, and one that creates a curious and unexpected alliance between the poet and Colón. Cristobal Colón (better known to the English-speaking world as Christopher Columbus) has been variously described as "one of the

greatest mariners in history, a visionary genius, a mystic, a national hero, a failed administrator, a naive entrepreneur, and a ruthless and greedy imperialist” (“1492 Exhibit”). How you see him depends upon your angle of vision, but rarely has he been described as “son and grand-son of weavers”: These are the words with which Olive Senior begins “The Pull of Birds” and the collection:

Colón, son and grand-son of weavers
rejected that calling but did not
neglect craft (keeping two sets of books).
On his first voyage, landfall receding
(where was Japan?) he sailed on (9)

The craft of which Olive speaks and that which binds poet to sailor is multiple: craft is the vessel in which each travels (ship and book). Craft is art (mariner’s and writer’s), and craft is most definitely cunning: las Casas writes that Columbus “always represented to the people [the sailors] that he was making little headway in order that the voyage should not seem long to them, so that he kept a record by two routes, the shorter being the fictitious one, and the longer the true one,” and the cunning word-play of the poet is evident in this particular example, but also throughout the collection. Poet and seafarer-adventurer then are blue foot travelers who ply their craft in unknown seas and lands, voyaging from the familiar to the distant and exotic; both have homely beginnings that shape and guide the means by which they understand the world and themselves. Verified by any number of sources on the web (some pedantic, some humorous, some just plain silly), it would appear that Colón was indeed the son of a weaver, and himself a weaver of tales (for which the double set of logs is telling evidence). Spinning a yarn is Olive Senior’s stock in trade, whether in poetry or prose. Thus alliance is created where one might least expect it (literally and politically), but it is, of course, imagination that guides and misguides both adventurers, by whatever craft they travel.

The relationship between text and textile is ancient, and one upon which Senior draws extensively in this collection. Lost at sea, the ‘unmarked immensity’ of Atlantic ocean is imagined by sailor and poet as a

stretch of blue fabric whose expanse is miraculously crossed—"as warp is to woof"—by the path of migratory birds flying south:

And suddenly from the north a density
of birds flying south, their autumn migration
intersecting his westward passage. ("Pull of Birds" 9)

Columbus' journal of 8 October 1492 records that the air was "as soft as that of Seville in April, and so fragrant that it was delicious to breathe. The weeds appeared very fresh. Many land birds, one of which they took, flying towards the southwest; also grajaos, ducks, and a pelican were seen"; and on the following day he writes that they "heard birds passing all night" ("1492 Exhibit"). Thus Colón is centered, saved by the familiar, and the new world discovered and charted in terms of the old. Senior writes:

At such an auspicious conjunction, his charts
he threw out, the flocks drew him south
across the blue fabric of the Atlantic.
weary mariners buoyed by the miracle
of land soon, of birds flying across the moon.
("Pull of Birds" 9)

Are "birds flying across the moon" a miracle of life or a portent of death? For whom is this conjunction auspicious? Meaning is dependent on the angle of vision from which the sign is read. It is at this point in the poem that an oppositional shift occurs, for in the final stanza we fly not with Colón and his buoyed mariners, but with the miracle of birds become prey to the floundering lost ship now turned predator. Birds seeking to outdistance three raptors skimming

the surface of the sea and sending skyward
their doomsday utterance of hawks' bells
tinkling endlessly. Birds speeding
to make landfall at Guanahaní. ("The Pull of Birds" 9)

Three raptors—the Pinta, the Niña and the Santa María—speed toward the horizon of their vision. The story is a familiar one: "At 2 a.m.

on 12 October the land was seen plainly by one of the Pinta's crew, and in the forenoon Columbus landed on what is now called Watling's Island in the Bahama group, West Indies. The discoverers named the island San Salvador . . . Immediately after landing Columbus took possession of the island for the Spanish sovereigns" ("1492 Exhibit"). But some of the names are perhaps not so familiar, as Colón was unfamiliar to anyone used to Columbus. We take possession of ourselves and our worlds by naming (a concept that is thoroughly explored in Senior's first two collections of poetry). The politics of which I was uncertain at the poem's beginning is now made plain in the reference both to "Guanahani" and to "hawks' bells." "Guanahani" is the indigenous name for the discovered island of San Salvador, a name whose use in this poem might refuse discovery, or at least assert recovery.

Hawks' bells are not only symbolic of the leisure pursuit of the noble and wealthy, they are also the trinkets that have become iconic of unequal 'exchange' between rapacious traders and native peoples throughout the coastal nations of Africa and the Americas. On Thursday 11 October Columbus records:

As I saw that they were very friendly to us, and perceived that they could be much more easily converted to our holy faith by gentle means than by force, I presented them with some red caps, and strings of beads to wear upon the neck, and many other trifles of small value, wherewith they were much delighted, and became wonderfully attached to us. Afterwards they came swimming to the boats, bringing parrots, balls of cotton thread, javelins, and many other things which they exchanged for articles we gave them, such as glass beads, and hawks' bells; which trade was carried on with the utmost good will. ("1492 Exhibit")

It is some little time after that Colón notes the evidence of gold, at which point perhaps "utmost good will" undergoes something of a shift, and on the 15 of October he writes:

About sunset we anchored near the cape which terminates the island towards the west to enquire for gold, for the natives we

had taken from San Salvador told me that the people here wore golden bracelets upon their arms and legs. I believed pretty confidently that they had invented this story in order to find means to escape from us, still I determined to pass none of these islands without taking possession, because being once taken, it would answer for all times. ("1492 Exhibit")

"Once taken, it would answer for all times" . . . the phrase has the dark sonorous tone of a funeral bell. Olive Senior's view of that astounding act of self-assertion is declared in no uncertain terms but with characteristic humour in *Gardening in the Tropics*. In "Meditation on Yellow" the poet reflects upon the history of conquest in the Americas and muses:

I like to feel alive
to the possibilities
of yellow

lightning striking

perhaps as you sip tea
at three in the afternoon
a bit incontinent
despite your vast holdings
(though I was gratified to note
that despite the difference in our skins
our piss was exactly the same shade of yellow)

I wished for you a sudden enlightenment that
. . .

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)

you cannot comprehend
the magic

of anacondas changing into rivers
like the Amazon
boas dancing in my garden (11–18)

Poet and Admiral are binary; there is no crossing the historical/political divide. Senior's angle of vision is clear: she is the 'born-ya' and he the 'blue foot.' Remarking on her younger self, Senior observes in the poem "Blue": "Blue was not me and you, but me / or you" (58). Yet "The Pull of Birds" suggests a more complex understanding of relationship and the possibility of something shared—the the blue of be-longing. Columbus' journal would indeed suggest that he was not incapable of comprehending the magic of anacondas or the beauty of the garden. On Friday 19 October he writes:

The wind being favorable, I came to the Cape, which I named Hermoso, where I anchored today. This is so beautiful a place, as well as the neighboring regions, that I know not in which course to proceed first; my eyes are never tired with viewing such delightful verdure, and of a species so new and dissimilar to that of our country, and I have no doubt there are trees and herbs here which would be of great value in Spain, as dyeing materials, medicine, spicery, etc., but I am mortified that I have no acquaintance with them. Upon our arrival here we experienced the most sweet and delightful odor from the flowers or trees of the island. Tomorrow morning before we depart, I intend to land and see what can be found in the neighborhood. Here is no village, but farther within the island is one, where our Indians inform us we shall find the king, and that he has much gold. ("1492 Exhibit")

Clearly Columbus veers between astonishment and appreciation of a difference he finds beautiful such that he is virtually immobilized,

even mortified by his own ignorance, and that of his responsibility to the desires and demands of the “Most Christian, High, Excellent, and Powerful Princes” (“1492 Exhibit”) who funded his voyage for the usual, less than altruistic, reasons of politics, power and the accumulation of wealth, as Senior remarks in *Gardening*:

. . . gold
on your mind
gold the light
in your eyes
gold the crown
of the Queen of Spain (“Meditation on Yellow” 13)

So when Colón throws away his charts to be guided by “the pull of birds” in *over the roofs of the world*, perhaps Senior here accedes to the possibility of a man pulled ‘both ways.’ Colón is associated with raptor and hawk (a bird of prey who brings doomsday to the ‘new’ world), but he also gives himself up, allows himself to be pulled, by birds who follow ancient paths, invisible and unknowable to men. He proves himself to be canny in the use of the familiar to guide him through the unfamiliar, and yet “the pull of birds” also suggests that Colón is not as much in command of ‘his’ world and his self as he and we might imagine or have claimed and blamed. Remember too that Colón is the son and grandson of weavers: hawks’ bells are not his birthright. So perhaps Colón and Senior, mariner and poet, are birds of a feather for whom “flight [is] the only way home.”

Olive Senior’s inheritance is also that of weaving, and it is a craft that, like Colón, she rejects only to embrace in other form. Weaving is aligned in *over the roofs of the world* with a female inheritance, but it is also associated with storying and more specifically, with Ananse, the spider-woman/story-weaver from indigenous traditions:

This thread of poetry: Where does it come from?
Are you born with it? Is it handed to you like a sweet
or a rattle to a child, who takes it without thinking?

. . .

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.
(“Ode to Pablo Neruda” 94)

Olive Senior is go-between: a poet who mediates, who makes connection, between the sacred and the profane, the mythic and the historic, woman's ‘craft’ and man's ‘art,’ oral and scribal word, small Caribbean island and the world, the past and the present, all the various homes of our belonging. At this point I would return readers ‘home,’ to the beginning of article, and to ‘embroidery’ and Aunt Millie:

. . . She was a blue foot, a stranger, not a born-ya. She
had crossed water. They did not know precisely where
Uncle V had found her. He was the eldest, family head.

A sly dog and purse-string controller, so no one said
anything. Aunt Millie smiled often but her mouth was
sewn up. Her reticence offering them few strands,
the women of the family enhanced them with embroidery
(washing lightly in vinegar to keep the colours fast).

. . .

. . . They thought she kept her distance because
she was all of the above and snobbish. *My dears, such airs!*
She and I were *What a pair!* Myself, orphaned with frayed
edges unraveling into their care. Everyone knowing my
pathetic history, I could wind myself up in Aunt Millie's
mysterious air, undulate in the sweet waves (artificially
induced) of her hair. She nurtured me on books and

reticence. The women of the family fed me cold banana porridge (or so everything then seemed) told me tales of girls who did and men who didn't marry them. Tried to enmesh me in their schemes to undo Aunt Millie's disguise.

In the end they embroidered her an elaborate cover when (I could have said) a plain winding sheet would have suited her.

For to me she gave her story, unadorned. The women of the family willed me their uniform tension. Aunt Millie left

me her pearls. I sold them, became a blue foot traveller. Kept no diary. Sewed up my mouth. Shunned embroidery.

(*roofs* 78–79)

Blue foot traveller maybe. But don't believe everything you read. Embroidery would seem to be the craft of poets, those ventriloquists who speak through closed lips. This is the magic of text/ile. In the last poem of the collection, "Ode to Pablo Neruda," Senior accepts the dual pull of her calling, the pull of earth and sky, body and spirit, joy and obligation, politics and poetics:

I wanted more than woman's knotted portion so I refused to learn the way of thread: sewing, embroidery, darning, weaving, tapestry, knitting or crochet do not appear on my CV.

But look at this:

In the sky
a kite
still aloft
and the one
holding
the thread
is me.

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?

...

And so, my trickster powers evolving, I'm learning like you,
Pablo Neruda veteran tightrope walker, to swing more easily
between joy and obligation

...

"God is dead," wrote Nietzsche.
"Heaven is empty,"
wrote Kadinsky,
"God is dead".

You, Pablo Neruda,
saw instead

*The heavens
unfastened
and open. (roofs 101–04)*

These heavens "unfastened and open" might be said to constitute the "blue be-longing" of which Senior writes. The phrase speaks of nostalgia for a lost heavenly home (the past and all that binds us historically and mythically together as community, and it proclaims belief in the possibility of heaven on earth) a heaven of our own word/world making that maintains connection between our past lives, our living present and our possible futures: "threading/threading/the moon/moonlight stories" (Brathwaite 166). The story-telling spider-wo/man poet spins the thread that will bind us together. It is not only the shared joys and obligations of the explorer-poet/weaver that connect Senior, Neruda and Cristobal Colón, but their shared humanity. Olive Senior suggests that we are all blue foots seeking return 'home,' assuring ourselves in our artful games of hopscotch that

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.

For home is where the heart is where the w/Word is.

Note

- 1 See Whitman: "The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me . . . he complains of my gab and my loitering./I too am not a bit tamed . . . I too am untranslatable,/I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" (85).

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