

Calabash

A JOURNAL OF CARIBBEAN ARTS AND LETTERS

Volume 2, Number 2: Summer/Fall 2003

Information about this work:

Of Hearts Revealed: An Interview with Olive Senior

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URL: <http://library.nyu.edu/calabash/vol2iss2/0202003.pdf>

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Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters

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Dolace McLean & Jacqueline Bishop

OF HEARTS REVEALED: AN INTERVIEW WITH OLIVE SENIOR

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It is as if Olive Senior's first and only pleasure has been in language and the choices that she makes in her writing are an explosion of that pleasure. For Olive Senior, language and its possibilities provide the components of passion that drive her fiction and her poetry. Her short stories and poems reflect a desire to capture something authentic about Jamaican life that can only be expressed through the memorable characters of Miss Rilla in "Ballad," or the accurate portrayal of class and social positioning in "Lily, Lily," or the honest depiction of women in "Discerner of Hearts."

Jacqueline Bishop and I caught up with the author while she was teaching for a semester at Columbia University. We talked for a long time and we laughed and reminisced about the past, analyzed the present and proclaimed on the future of Senior's most intimate recipient of her "love orange": the island of Jamaica and the stories, poems, and social treatises that grew out of that love. In the conversation that follows, Olive Senior talks about writing, Jamaican culture and her position as a Caribbean writer living in North America.

D.M.: Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with us. The first thing I want to ask deals with the issue of culture as related to your characters. Most of your characters are usually young children who are isolated and lonely, and the point of view from which they speak is one of what I call in my work, "Islandism" – the idea of being an island. It's almost if they're little islands in a sea of [adult] people who do not really care about them. Does that reflect something about Jamaican culture specifically or Caribbean culture in general?

O.S.: My first book of short stories reflected those kinds of characters but I would say, looking at the body of my work, I have a much more varied range of characters, though people tend to focus on the children. And I like the use of the term, "Islanded." In fact, I

just wrote a whole set of poems called “Islanded” and I think that’s what my young characters are. I don’t think they reflect Jamaica, they just reflected me and how I felt as a child [who was] totally alienated from my environment. And although I’m not writing autobiographically, I think I’ve infused my characters with my own emotional states and feelings and so on. They reflected the fact that I felt like an isolated, lonely child. Totally alienated from adult culture. I don’t know that it’s more than that really.

D.M.: So how would you then address someone who reads your work as somehow indicative of a larger Jamaican culture? Your work speaks for you as the writer who wants to break boundaries but at the same time it does seem to fit into certain categories....

O.S. I wasn’t writing about myself. I was writing about the people around me that I grew up with and so on. However, I’m just saying that as a writer I infused my feelings into the writing. I don’t see it from the point of view of the critic who’s reading it, as a paradigm of something else. That’s not how writers write. So, I’m [not sure if I can] answer that kind of question. It’s for the readers and the critics to bring that to bear on the work. I am just telling stories.

D.M.: Oh so they’re stories.

O.S.: Even my poems are stories. I’m a storyteller.

D.M. Interesting that you should say that because it brings up a whole lot of questions, critical questions, which you say aren’t [necessarily] “writerly” questions, but at some level, it seems that the writer has to almost consciously say, I’m not going to be a critical writer, I’m going to be a writer’s writer. How do you make the distinction between just writing your work as stories and writing them for people? How do you negotiate that? How do you get your readers to know what it is that you’re trying to convey? To get what it is that you are trying to say?

O.S. Well, you see, I don’t feel it’s my job to negotiate anything. It’s my job to tell a good story and to tell it in the best way that I can and to tell it honestly. I see my stories, or what I do, as part of a half of something and the reader then has to bring something to bear. It’s a kind of contract between myself and the reader and it’s up to me to be convincing and to touch the reader in some way. That’s my job. A story isn’t an essay. People can read politics into it, they can read all kinds of things into it but that’s not what I set out to put in. I set out to communicate something about one human being to another human being. That’s what I’m about.

D.M. Interesting. So then who is your audience? The thing about writing is that writers write, they create. But it seems that writers actually have to create for someone and sometimes they have to think “How will I market this,” To whom will I target [my work],” “Who is my audience?” and so I’m just wondering if you have an audience in mind?

O.S. None of that enters into mind. For me what matters is the writing. What I'm doing here and now. If it never gets published, it never gets published. I consider it my imperative to write and all these issues about getting published and so on have come long after I started to write. And I'm not even that concerned about them. I write what I want to write. I'm not writing for a particular audience. I'm not writing because I want to sell. That's not my motivation at all. I'm just fulfilling a need in me to accomplish the most important thing in life which is to put stuff down on paper.

D.M.: And if that never went anywhere beyond a let's say self-published copy to your family, that would be okay?

O.S.: Well, I've gone beyond that so it's not really an issue. However, the thing is [that] when I wrote my first collection of stories I didn't think of being published. You know in North America and in the metropole it's interesting to see how people approach writing. It's very different from how I approach writing. To me writing was something you did because you had to do it. It had nothing to do with a market. What's a market? I knew nothing about that. And I still have this attitude. I teach writing and have students who have not published anything handing me a card which says, "So-and-so. Writer". Or I know people who will say to me, "You're writing something and it's not commissioned? You mean nobody's paying you to do it?" So my attitude towards writing is, I guess, a very old fashioned one, which I will not advocate for anybody else, but it is also the attitude of the people that I grew up with, people of my generation coming from the Caribbean.

D.M.: And it's interesting that you should say that because in very many ways what you are saying ["I write because I write"] is pretty much a luxury these days.

O.S.: I agree that it is a luxury but I don't think I write because I write. I think you become a writer because you can't help it. It's not a choice that you make, you are chosen. It's a burden that's placed on you, and you just fulfill it, you just get on with it. I don't see writing as a 'career choice' which is the way some people see writing now a days. I've never been to university to learn anything about writing. It's just part of who I am. I think I'm coming from a very different place, than where people now a days are coming from, in relation to becoming writers.

J.B.: I agree with everything you are saying right now and indeed as someone who writes myself I really do understand. So would you say then [that] you are writing to kind of understand something? For yourself?

O.S.: Yes. I guess [my writing] began as a way of understanding myself. I started writing merely as therapy, in a sense that I just needed to work out a lot of things about my identity really, and that's when I started to write. I didn't start to write for other people but in the process of doing that, I discovered not just things about myself but about my society, about the people around me. So in a way it's an interrogation. For me

writing is an interrogation not just of myself but of my society and I think what has happened to me is that I've moved away from self. Very little of my writing now has anything of me in it and that's deliberate. Whereas, it's very much concerned with Caribbean society, both my poetry and everything I do. Because I feel my engagement now is with the society; trying to explain this society to myself really.

D.M.: That's actually really interesting because it brings me to the other large issue on our agenda which has to do with living in North America but writing about the Caribbean. Why is it that you live in Canada and write about Jamaica from that place? Is it that you did not want to continue or could not continue to produce in the Caribbean?

O.S.: Well, the fact that I moved out of the Caribbean is really accidental. I sort of left for a year because I needed a break and the year became two and three. And you know now it's become ten. But everything I write is about the Caribbean, I've never written another word about anywhere else. I suppose I was a little bothered by the whole notion of living in one place and writing about another but then I read what someone said to the effect 'the writer's country is writing' and that seems to apply to me.

D.M. That is quite interesting. After all there are all kinds of reasons why it's difficult to produce in Jamaica or in the Caribbean. It is a frustrating thing not just because there's a lack of resources but because there's also a lack of critical appreciation for the kinds of work that people do. But it would seem to me that if writing is the only home that a writer ought to know and if writing is a burden that a writer must express, then it would seem that it should be okay for all those writers to stay in the Caribbean because then it won't matter where one is placed as long as one is doing what it is that one is chosen to do.

O.S.: Well to me personally it doesn't matter where I live because most of what happens to me, happens in my head. I live inside my head. And I spend a lot of time in Jamaica, so its not that I am so far away. Besides, I like traveling, I like going around the world, and I like seeing new things. I don't think I have to sit in Jamaica in order to write. And in fact I think I've had a much better perspective on Jamaica living outside of it because it has given me some space and distance. I wrote eight books living in Jamaica or seven books. So it's not problematic. And I didn't leave because I could not write there. It's accidental that I left. I didn't leave to leave. I'm still very much engaged with Jamaica and what's going on there.

J.B.: Speaking of what is going on there, Olive, there are some questions I want to ask about your view of life in Jamaica now and I am interested to know what you make of the crime situation in Jamaica?

O.S.: Well I don't know if that's something I really want to go into. Because what do I make of it? What does anybody make of it?

D.M.: What about the violence? Is it cultural and how so? In your work there's a sense of colonial disorder and imperial order and I'm just wondering is it that the violence is a natural outgrowth of independence so to speak? That somehow the vernacular culture of Jamaica is taking over and that there is this [social] tension because the former structures of class positioning are being upset?

O.S. It's extremely complex. But I think we tend to forget that violence is ingrained in our culture from the beginning. Columbus arrived and the first thing that he did was set dogs on the Tainos. Our history, our written history, is born out of violence. If you look at who the first settlers were, they were pirates, they were buccaneers, there were slave owners, and I think that Jamaica had more slave insurrections than any other country in the new world. So for us to look at violence today as if it's something new is, I think, ahistorical. I think we need to see it as a product of colonialism and of our history. Our failure at managing disputes in the home or larger society. I think what's different today is the form the violence is taking and the fact we are now equipped with deadly weapons of destruction. So now all disputes, no matter how small, are settled not with words or fists but with bullets. And, of course, there are all kinds of other elements involved, such as the drug trade.

When I was growing up I suppose there was a lot of domestic violence around me, but if there was ever a murder anywhere in the country, this was big news. I grew up in a place where doors were left open. I had no fear as a child, absolutely none. I never, ever felt threatened or anything. So things have changed. But also I think we have to look at the root causes of violence. I don't think it's a product of independence; unless it's a question of independence failing to meet people's expectations. But I do think it's a product of poverty, of injustice, of our failure as a people to provide for the majority of our citizens. To educate our children. To provide people with the basics of life, I mean food shelter and so on. Violence is bred out of those kinds of conditions. But what bothers me about the violence is that there doesn't seem to be any serious analysis on a national level as to the causes of violence and our collective responsibility and therefore we can't really address it. Collectively we need to examine who we are and where we want to go, what kind of society, and what kind of culture do we want to create and we haven't done that.

D.M.: And why do you think it is that the violence is characterized the way it is? It seems that there is a rigid class structure that blames certain kinds of people for the violence, and in the face of the overwhelming amounts of violence that are there now, why is it do you think that those class structures still prevail? And what are they supposed to accomplish especially in light of the fact that they are failing?

O.S.: Part of it is that the whole society has broken down in a way at the level of leadership and there are lots of other factors that we need to look at. For instance, the impact of migration on the socialization of children. Who is raising those children left behind? And of course there are serious economic factors which are getting worse and worse. What bothers me about all of this is the impact it's having on all the youth and the children and the kind of world that the majority of them will inherit. I think something

like 1/3 of the population lives in Kingston and a very significant portion of the population in Jamaica is under age 14. What are we giving them as adults? What kind of world are they growing up in? What values are they being given considering that the old values are broken down and we haven't replaced them? I just see it as something very, very complex.

D.M.: Oh it's extremely, extremely complex. The thing that I feel is that in some way I have to try to make it better or do something differently to help to replace those [old] values. How does that happen? I'm not quite sure. But I do have classmates who have gone back and others who are in training who harbor some ambition to go back and contribute. So how are you trying to replace some of those [old] values with your writing especially now that your writing has gotten more socially conscious?

O.S.: Well I'm not sure I myself am consciously trying to replace values. I think that my job as a writer is to hold the mirror up to society and to say this is how things are. But I don't think it's for me to prescribe. I also think though that part of the problem of countries like Jamaica are the people like us, the people who have left over a long period of time. We have to see ourselves as part of the problem.

D.M.: How so?

O.S.: Well in the sense the people who leave are usually the people who are educated, the people with the skills, training or ambition --- and when we leave [we are] draining the country of [our] talents. Let me hasten to say, I am not blaming people for leaving -- - we all have to follow our dreams. But I personally feel the need to give something back. And that is why I've spent the last twenty years of my life working on the Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage. Because in a way I say, okay, I'm part of the problem, and this is my way of giving back something.

D.M.: Is that realistic? I have this strange feeling that the average 14 and under youth will see attempts through literature and writing as some sort of romanticized part of our history that we can always look back to and say "oh that's how it used to be." I get this strange sense that writing and literature might not be as pertinent to modern Jamaica as it should be.

O.S.: One has to be optimistic. That's a very pessimistic view and I'm aware of it. However, my attitude is that if I can impact just one child, [that's good]. If one child is going to get interested and say "Oh I didn't know this, I didn't know this, oh wow!" then it is enough. It is enough because he or she will read this book that is about everything -- history, literature, plants, animals --[the Jamaican] world that I grew up loving and learning about. So although there are all these other cultural influences that have penetrated the society, I still believe we have to keep trying. We just have to believe that there are enough young people out there who are going to make a difference.

J.B.: It's so funny how I found out about you. I'd almost finished my bachelor's degree. I was living in France and I found a book in France that had one of your stories. You know it wasn't even here [in North America] it was all the way in France and when I found it, I couldn't believe it. I didn't know that there were writers from Jamaica and I especially didn't know there were women writers from Jamaica. I was a junior at that point in college and it did make a difference in *my* life to know that.

O.S.: It's good that you say that because it brings me back to the question of, who I write for. I don't write for anyone in particular. My work is read by people all over the world because I'm really writing about the human condition. I'm willing to touch anyone who is willing to be touched by it. But I must say that I'm really pleased when my work is taught in schools or universities and when young people say to me that they saw themselves reflected in it, because I grew up not seeing myself reflected in literature. So from that point of view I'm very pleased that this is happening.

J.B.: There's another way to look at it also that I have found in my life. Whenever I'm interested in a topic that topic seems to find me. And I feel that people who want to know more about Jamaica in the way that Olive Senior writes, will find Olive Senior and will find the Jamaica represented in your work.

O.S.: Yes. But part of our problem is that in the Caribbean we don't see literature as having that kind of impact, we no longer see culture as part of the development process.

D.M.: In Jamaica?

O.S.: Yes. You know, independence was really a wonderful time because we were engaged in a dialogue then, the whole society. People were talking about things we'd never talked about before and I found it very exciting and I was really caught up in it. For a while we were really trying to come to grips with who we were, with questions of identity. This was when all the cultural institutions, like the National Gallery, and training schools for the arts were set up, and I think that Jamaica has a terrific history in that regard. But the way I see it, it was like a window opening or a door opening for a moment and then it's slammed shut again. That is what is happening in Jamaica.

D.M.: And what happened...why did it slam shut?

O.S.: Well I think a lot of it is based on political decisions because culture needs money to survive. And when the economy shrinks, as it has done in Jamaica, then it becomes a question of how you cut the pie. You need public support for what you're doing. If the public support is not there then cultural activities fade away, they die on the vine. But there also has to be a recognition in the society at large of the need to develop and promote what's local. The contempt that local booksellers seem to have for Caribbean books is a case in point. But ... we haven't talked much about the writing...I mean I don't know why you want me talking about Jamaica to get me into trouble!
(LAUGHTER)

D.M.: Well, it's only because I think that work comes out of a context and work is put in a context as one reads and it's important to be able to pull out those things that are implicit in the text and make them explicit and say well this is what this text actually does or can do and that is why I ask. (LAUGHTER)

O.S.: Oh I understand. It is just that I think we should make it clear that the writer's perspective is different from the critic's perspective. I think part of the problem now is critics assume that writers write politically. And that, you know, writing is this political act as if I'm going "this is my post-colonial moment" which is nonsense. I mean this is something I try to make clear to people, that we writers are coming out of a different space and it is for the readers and the critics now to bring something else to it which is not the same thing that the writers are bringing. I do think we need each other, and that writing develops best in a space where we have critics and reviewers and critical readers. One of the reasons that Caribbean writing has developed is precisely because we've had institutions like the University of the West Indies and critics who started to write about Caribbean literature. I think this is a very important part of the process.

I see that anything we as writers do is bound up with what other people are doing. People of my generation were very much influenced by music and by the voices that we were hearing. I can remember as a seminal moment the first time I heard certain Jamaican songs on the radio because these were raw country boy voices. These were not BBC voices. And I think that was a liberating moment, a liberating experience for all of us who were being socialized to be English men and women [because] this is what high school did for you at that time. And suddenly to hear these voices and to hear that rhythm in the music, I think that had a lot to do with our thinking and the changes that took place in literature and in art.

J.B.: Olive, I have read all the books and my favorite story in the entire world is "Ballad" and I wonder if you can talk a little bit about how you wrote "Ballad" because I remember once you said that you'd been trying for a while and "Ballad" was your breakthrough story.

O.S.: Yes, it was. I decided at a very early age I was going to be a writer, when I was four I would tell everybody, because I learned to read at a very early age. Reading was a consolation for me and I used to bury myself in books. But I also listened, I grew up hearing stories, I grew up in an oral culture and I was very, very conscious of words and the power of words. As a child I wrote all through school and won prizes, the usual thing. But although I wanted to write, I just found I couldn't write using the third person, objective point of view...it just didn't feel comfortable. And so that particular story...that was a break through story for me. It's when I chose to allow my character to speak with her voice which was the voice of a little country girl. I came to think of it as the 'little tradition' bursting forth, for, like other people I had been raised on "the great tradition", which included the English literary canon. But the minute I allowed that girl to speak her story, to tell her story in her own words, that allowed me to enter the world of writing because it just opened it up. And then I felt more confident about allowing my

characters to speak patois because those were the people I wanted to write about. These characters arrived with their voices.

J.B.: Another thing I've realized is that sometimes you write about characters who are not really given a say in Jamaican culture. For example, the main character in "The Arrival of the Snake Woman," the snake woman herself. How did you think to come up with that title? Anyway, she's an Indian woman and she misses her country and she runs her hand over the map and expresses that kind of longing that I guess I feel here for Jamaica. But that's a character that we don't generally see much of.

O.S.: People have written a lot about that story because that was a sort of breakthrough for the Indian in Jamaican fiction. I remember meeting Indians in Portugal who read that story and they said that they were so touched because I had her crying and using the end of her sari to wipe her eye and they were asking "how could you have known this?" But the gesture just seemed natural to me. I say I write intuitively because a lot of what I do is not conscious. It's not because I think, okay I'm going to have her doing this. My attitude is that I'm recording everything as I go through life. And that is what happens. The fiction or poetry are products of all my life experiences, and you know that life experiences are not just existential, but it's what you've read, it's what you've heard, it's everything.

J.B.: My three favorites for the record are "Ballad," "Arrival of the Snake Woman" and of course "Discerner of Hearts" and they really do bring out a whole world when one reads them. But back to "The Arrival of the Snake Woman," I mean how did you come up with this Indian woman in the first place?

O.S.: When I was growing up in this little village, there was this Indian woman and everybody called her "Miss Coolie." I've been roundly criticized by various people for that but anyway.... She was very old when I was small and I didn't know anything about her but she was the village midwife who delivered babies so she might have delivered me, I'm not sure. But she stuck in my mind and I started to speculate about how this one little Indian lady came to be here in a village of mainly African-Jamaicans because [she didn't seem to] belong there. At the time I knew absolutely nothing about Indians of course, it's much later that I realized they'd come as indentured workers. But it is just from speculating about that woman and deciding to give her a background that I wrote this story. Of course this story is set much further back in time, it's set around the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, but it was just from my imaging, knowing nothing about this woman, and thinking about how she got here -- that's where that story started.

J.B.: Olive, I've read these stories and I've read these stories (LAUGHTER) and sometimes I'm totally envious! I wish I'd written "Ballad" because it's my all time favorite story in the world! And in another of your stories that I so love, *Zig Zag in Discerner of Hearts*, we have these girls growing up with all the contradictions of being a young girl in Jamaican society. On the one hand, the dark-skinned girl gets pregnant, and her mother is furious but proud at the same time. So how do you deal with all those

contradictions in your characters? Are your characters always contradicted in some kind of way?

O.S.: I think so. I think I was always aware of these contradictions growing up in real life and I think my stories mirror real life, although they are fictional creations. I think at a very early age I was very aware of social forces and so when I come to write I worry about my characters and the narrative and so on but I don't worry about the background. I automatically know what the background of each character is --- it's as if it's there, it's patterned, it's in my mind. I think I truly understand Jamaicans, in that sense. I suppose I've always been interested in asking "why" which is the most important question for a writer to ask. I've always asked myself "why" even as a small child and so I've grown up with a good understanding of how things operate. Of course I've also read a lot, and my reading and everything I do sort of fits in with everything else. When I was doing the research and writing for [the book] Working Miracles, that helped to inform my understanding of things that I knew from experience but I also think I was able to put a lot into that book from my creative self.

J.B.: And having been the editor of *Jamaica Journal* must have given you a whole wealth of information. I sometimes think well that's why Olive Senior knows so much! (LAUGHTER)

O.S.: Well yes it did but I also know a lot because I've always been a voracious reader. And as I say, I've always been very curious. I'm tempted to put a picture on the Encyclopedia of me at age 4 and say this is when my research began. (MORE LAUGHTER)

D.M. & J.B.: You should...no you should.

O.S.: I'm the kind of person if I don't know something, even now, I'll go look it up because I cannot bear not to know. But there is a difference between growing up in a society where you just learn as part of the process of growing up as opposed to moving to somewhere new where you have to start from scratch. And I think this is why I still write about Jamaica because it is already so much of my knowledge base.

D.M.: That's true and that's reflected in your work. You know the names of the birds, you know the names of the trees and it's even the way you describe the topography....

J.B.: You have a love affair with Jamaica.

O.S.: Yes, It's in my blood.

J.B.: What do you think of the idea that contradiction moves Jamaican society?

O.S.: Contradiction is at the heart of Jamaican society. It's part of what makes the country exciting but it's also something that causes such pain. We are people who

experience a great deal of pain precisely because of these contradictions. It's the pull that we feel between all these different cultures from which we've come and which have shaped us. And we have love/hate relationships with everything and everybody. So it gives us our "Islandism" [the we discussed in the beginning] and our excitement but at the same time it also makes it difficult to move -- to sort of transcend this, because we're so preoccupied with existence.

D.M.: And I think some of that is tied to the whole cultural values that we were talking about earlier which are now missing.

O.S.: Yes. It is a different climate now, it's harder now and young people who are going to the universities have to be pragmatic and think "I have to get a job." There are just so many things working against the development of national literature in those places.

J.B.: Can we expect a novel from Olive Senior?

O.S.: I have written one novel which is in the bottom drawer still and probably will stay there, but part of my problem is, I don't have time. I mean I work for a living and novels require [a lot of time]. I know there are people who have ten children and write at the kitchen table every night, but that's just not how I function. I need a lot of headspace. And all the things I have in my head right now are long books, novels, but I don't know if they'll ever get written. I have a lot of things in my head I want to write. I'm interested in looking at events in the past or time periods in the past that were formative moments. But I might say that today, this is what I'm going to do and I might wake up tomorrow doing something else. Who knows?