

# *The Fiction of Olive Senior: Traditional Society and the Wider World*

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IN HIS FOREWORD to Michel de Certeau's *Heterologies*, Wlad Godzich points out that in many parts of the world the old colonial order has been supplanted by a "neo-colonialism of center and periphery" in which the "former colonial powers together with other economically dominant nations constitute the core whereas the former colonies form the periphery. The latter admits of measurement in relation to the core as an index of its degree of development, where it is of course implicit that the core's own development is normative and somehow 'natural'" (xi-xii). Nowhere is this more true than in the Caribbean where, as Olive Senior has put it, "a new center-periphery system is evolving which is based in Washington and a new cultural system is evolving located somewhere between Dallas and Hollywood" ("Interview" 487). The problems inherent in the literary expression of cultural identity come into particularly sharp focus in the twelve nations of the English-speaking Caribbean because the lingering pull of the old colonial power, Britain, is so forcefully augmented by the looming presence of the United States. To a certain extent, Caribbean writers have little choice but to define themselves within the "empowered" or "dominant" discourse of the West. They may adopt a different point of view (and often a political stance at least mildly critical of the West), but their linguistic medium, their genres, and even their audience tend to be primarily Western.

Senior succeeds, to a greater degree than most, in finding a voice that is, through the frequent use of Jamaican English and a shrewd reliance on the devices of oral storytelling, somewhat different from standard forms of European discourse. Although

she has published only two volumes of short stories, she has already established herself as one of the more talented artists currently working in that genre and a major force in the development of a postcolonial West Indian literature. Senior's astute deployment of Jamaican Creole in dialogue within stories narrated in standard Jamaican English<sup>1</sup> does not mark her originality or significance. This is an old, reliable device employed by many writers from both the Caribbean and elsewhere. Moreover, inasmuch as those fragments of dialect are subsumed into and dominated by the language of the narrator, a colonial situation, with regard to the two forms of discourse, still prevails. The language of narration in effect works as a corrective, reducing the dialect language to the status of a variation on a norm and thus marginalizing it.

But this situation does not obtain when writers tell stories entirely in Jamaican English or some other creole dialect, as V. S. Reid and Samuel Selvon (among others) have done. Some of the difficulties inherent in such a project are formidable. Kenneth Ramchand observes that "few West Indian authors reproduce dialect precisely in their works" but calls Reid's efforts in *New Day* "a convincing extension of the familiar" (*West Indian* 99-100). And Selvon, speaking of *Moses Ascending*, says, "I experimented . . . with using both this [modified dialect] and an archaic form of English which is not spoken anywhere today." Moses' language in that novel is, in Ramchand's words, also a kind of "successful invention"—successful because it evokes real creole speech but remains intelligible to a wider audience. The exclusive use of "pure" dialect, Selvon argues, "would have been obscure and difficult to understand." He goes on to say that "Standard English or 'proper English' is also used as a part of [West Indian] dialect in certain phrases or words" (Selvon 60-61). When that happens, parts of the formerly dominant language are themselves subsumed into a new vernacular. As Ramchand has written more recently, "[o]nce there came into existence a class of West Indians who combined Standard and dialect in their linguistic competence, the two registers became open to influence from each other" (*West Indian* 105). This is the point at which Senior enters the picture.

Clearly, the search for an authentic voice for the expression of the "matter" of the West Indies has been in progress for decades, and Senior owes a considerable debt to distinguished predecessors and older contemporaries like Selvon, Reid, and John Hearne. In several of the stories in her first book, *Summer Lightning*, a version of vernacular Jamaican speech—and one not so obviously "invented" as Reid's or Selvon's—is the norm rather than the deviation. Senior's importance as a writer does not rest exclusively upon those stories, but they are among her best, and her bold placement of them alongside ones narrated in standard English is a signal confirmation of her status as a leading post-colonial writer. The dialect stories in a sense validate the others, and the polyphonous voice that emerges moves from one form of discourse to another with facility and commanding assurance. The most immediate effect gained is one of intense verisimilitude, for Senior's prodigious mastery of the varieties of English speech in Jamaica, the "continuum" of Jamaican English, is a brilliant reflection of the linguistic versatility in daily life that is a hallmark of Caribbean creole culture. On a deeper level, the medley of discourses that constitutes her two short story collections represents the countercolonization of a language once associated with hegemonic authority.

Yet even though Senior accomplishes this linguistic feat, she is still the product of a society whose educational, economic, religious, and political institutions are predominantly European in origin and character. And the genre itself—the written fictional story created for its own effect—if not entirely a European or American invention, is at least intimately connected with that cultural matrix. Wilson Harris, along with many others, has roundly criticized the Anglophone Caribbean's most celebrated man of letters, V. S. Naipaul, for his allegiance in his early novels to what Ramchand calls "the mainstream tradition of the English nineteenth-century novel" (*West Indian* 9). Naipaul and others like him, Harris insists, employ "a 'coherency' based on the English social model to describe a native world" (45). Harris decries the use of that literary form to render "invalid" the native world and to pander to the wider audience outside the Caribbean by supporting Western notions of superiority. But surely

(whatever one may think of Naipaul) Senior's fiction does not aim for or achieve such an effect. Her studies of family relationships, while as conventionally realistic as Naipaul's fiction, are actually subtle attacks on systems of power dynamics analogous to those underlying colonialism itself. And, moreover, her tales owe as much to a tradition of oral storytelling in Africa as to the genre developed by Poe, Chekhov, and deMaupassant. Reflecting on her childhood, Senior has remarked: "My major influence then was the oral tradition. . . . Later came formal exposure to 'English' literature in high school" ("Interview" 480). The single word "later" speaks volumes about the subordination of the written and the "formal" to the oral and the vernacular in the genesis of Senior's stories, and their final manifestation as works of literature is still marked by a spoken quality, a sense of a personality telling the story, that emerges from and vitalizes the written text.

## I

Senior herself has offered the most succinct description of her fictional world. The stories of *Summer Lightning*, she says, focus on the Jamaica of her childhood and emphasize the problems and perspectives of poor rural children, while those in *Arrival of the Snake-Woman* are more expansive, involving characters "of different races and classes," rich and poor, in both rural and urban settings. But both collections are explorations of Jamaican experience and identity within a larger network of competing cultures. "I want people to know," she states, "that 'literature' can be created out of the fabric of our everyday lives, that our stories are as worth telling as those of Shakespeare—or the creators of *Dallas*" ("Interview" 484). An awareness of that enveloping, sometimes corrosive larger culture is never very far in the background of Senior's stories precisely because the problematic relationship between the isolated, enclosed societies of the West Indies and the wider world is such a pervasive fact of Caribbean life.

It is striking how insistently that wider world encroaches upon the rural and traditional in Senior's fiction. The collision occasionally occurs when an outsider appears in a rural village (as in

"Arrival of the Snake-Woman") and initiates a process of change that may or may not be beneficial.<sup>2</sup> More common is the plot involving the return of a native who has been altered in some important way by exposure to the outside world. Several times in *Summer Lightning* Senior employs variations on this formula. In "Ascot," for instance, a pretentious ne'er-do-well comes back to the village of his birth after several years spent in the United States drifting from one job to another. Since boyhood his ambition has been "to dress up in white clothes and drive a big white car" (29). When he appears at the house of Lily, the story's narrator, and her parents, he is indeed dressed in white and driving a white rental car. He is also accompanied by an American wife who is "just finishing up her Master Degree" (32). All agree that Ascot has come up in the world, but his financial and social successes have not been matched by moral growth. At first he attempts to convince his wife that he is a member of Lily's more prosperous family; when that ruse fails, he repeatedly slights and insults his mother, Miss Clemmie, and her younger, darker children. Ascot, whose features are largely Caucasian, has always conceived of himself as belonging to the larger, white world. And although maintaining that self-image necessitates the humiliation of his own mother, Miss Clemmie remains intensely proud of him. The other neighbors in the district are quite impressed as well, when they hear about Ascot, but Lily confides to the reader at the end that "is only me one Miss Clemmie did tell how there was not a bite to eat in the house that day and Ascot never even leave her a farthing" (35). Lily's disapproval, as well as that of her outraged father, casts a cloud over Miss Clemmie's parental pride, strongly suggesting that too casual an adoption of the materialistic and racist values of the West is a high price to pay for Western prosperity.

"Real Old Time T'ing" displays the contrast between traditional values and outside corruption less starkly. Like "Ascot," this story is told entirely in Jamaican English, the narrator here being an unidentified member of the community. Her commentary on the action and sardonic asides dramatically enhance the spoken quality of the tale, linking it firmly to an oral tradition that predates the "short story" by many centuries. The comic plot

has to do with one Papa Sterling and his upwardly mobile daughter Patricia who, having married a successful Kingston lawyer, decides that her father needs a new house, "for it look bad how [he] living in this old board house it dont even have sanitary convenience" (54). Much of the story's considerable humor derives from Patricia's conflict with Papa Sterling's third cousin, Miss Myrtella, who has lived in England and speaks with a "foreign" accent. One of the funniest effects in the story is the narrator's effort to mimic Miss Myrtella's British English through her own Jamaican dialect. Miss Myrtella has also acquired, along with her accent, a number of antiques, and when Patricia, who is intent on "finding her roots" (54) by buying all the "old time ting" she can find, offers to purchase some of them, Miss Myrtella responds acidly, "You seem to forget that this his my ouse. Hit his not ha store you know." Patricia is so annoyed that she "grab up her handbag and flounce out of the house" (62). Some time later Papa Sterling's new home is finished, and Miss Myrtella, whom Patricia did not invite to the housewarming party, shows up anyway as Papa's new bride. Patricia, however, swallows her pride and kisses her new stepmother, realizing that she now stands to inherit "all kind of old time ting" (66).

Patricia's acquisitiveness is a less serious offense than Ascot's egotistical pretense and crass ambition, and her greed is, after all, balanced by her generosity (albeit self-serving) to Papa Sterling. In "Ascot" people can get hurt when the modern and traditional collide, but "Real Old Time T'ing," with its gentle mixture of old and new, urban and rural, England and Jamaica, implies that such things can and perhaps must coexist in the construction of a distinctive creole culture. Only rarely does Senior present Western influence as an unalloyed evil, or even as a factor wholly extraneous to Caribbean experience. Although she clearly recognizes the destructive potential in headlong assimilation of Western (especially American) ways, she also implicitly acknowledges the interpenetration of the cosmopolitan and the insular as an essential element in the process of creolization.

Growing up "racially and socially a child of mixed worlds, socialized unwittingly and simultaneously into both," Senior

recalls that those worlds “embodied the polarizations of race and class” but “at bottom could not be separated.” The process, she readily admits, leaves a substantial measure of alienation in its wake, and she speaks eloquently of the conflicts that she and other West Indians have endured—“contradictions inherent in race and class, in poverty and wealth, power and powerlessness, European values versus indigenous values rooted in Africa.” Those contradictions, Senior perceived early in life, “were manifested in the *word*, in the politics inherent in the spoken word versus the written, in Jamaican creole versus the language of the Bible, Shakespeare — and the schoolroom” (“Interview” 481-82). The sense of displacement that can accompany creolization as a new culture gradually, often painfully, emerges is the dramatic impetus of many of Senior’s stories, and clearly her command of voice is one of her most effective means of transcending and transforming that sort of anomy.

Other such strategies in Senior’s fiction have more to do with the architecture of family relationships than with language, but they, too, bear directly on the connections between power and identity and often have distinctly political implications. One of the most frequently recurring of these is the imaging of childhood alienation as both a product of and a metaphor for the displacements of colonialism. Senior, who herself grew up with relatives, maintains that the stories in *Summer Lightning* told from a child’s perspective “express some of the powerlessness, frustrations and lack of understanding by the adult world . . . I myself felt as a child” (“Interview” 484).<sup>3</sup> But her tales of childhood, in *Arrival of the Snake-Woman* as well as in *Summer Lightning*, are more than autobiographical. In many of these stories children live with people who are not their natural parents (or occasionally with parents who are distant and uncaring). More often than not, as in “Summer Lightning” or “Bright Thursdays,” the child’s real parents are less well off financially, less educated, or less “cultivated” than the surrogate family. Frequently, too, the child or her natural mother is a dark-skinned Jamaican whereas the adoptive family is light-skinned or even white. In almost all cases, authentic parents or parental figures are for some reason absent or placed at a distance from the child. The foster parents are

suffocatingly present, but they embody different (more European) values and exercise a kind of authority closely associated with the schoolroom and the established church. Senior's stories are not simple allegories, however. It is far less useful to see family relationships as a disguise for colonial politics in her work than to understand both structures as analogous, and sometimes interrelated, systems of power dynamics.

Examples of these and similar configurations are not hard to find in Senior. In "Bright Thursdays," a young girl named Laura lives with her affluent grandparents in "a big house with heavy mahogany furniture" (36). Laura is the illegitimate child of their son and a servant girl who is both poor and black. The story's pronounced preoccupation with skin colour emanates from Myrtle, Laura's mother, who earlier tried to "improve" her complexion by rubbing cocoa butter into it, and from the grandmother, Miss Christie, who is acutely embarrassed by the dark little child she has agreed to raise. Laura herself is embarrassed and alienated not only by her skin colour but by the difficulty she faces in learning and remembering "the social graces that Miss Christie had inculcated in her." When her father arrives for a visit from abroad (like Ascot, with an American wife in tow), she suffers "a two-fold anxiety: not to let her mother down to Miss Christie, and not to let Miss Christie down in front of this white woman from the United States . . ." (52). But Laura's greatest desire is that her father "attend her, acknowledge her, love her" (52). Instead, he first ignores her, then angrily dismisses her as "the bloody little bastard" (53). With that Laura silently declares herself "an orphan," and the clouds, which she has always associated with her fears and insecurities, seem to disappear. This conclusion is very similar to that of "Confirmation Day," in which another little girl declares her independence from a patriarchal god who sits in judgement among the clouds: "I know instinctively that not the reeds in the river nor the wine nor the blood of Christ nor the Book of Common Prayer can conquer me. And not a single cloud of god in that sky" (84).<sup>4</sup> In both stories liberation from authority figures and the ideologies they embody—the deconstruction of repressive cultural and psychological codes—is an essential pre-

requisite for the construction of an adult identity—whether for an individual or for a society as a whole.

The novella “Ballad,” the longest and best story in *Summer Lightning*, is an elegiac reminiscence of a woman who has been a positive and necessary force in the life of the narrator, a girl named Lenora. The account is a self-consciously “told” story. At one point Lenora even addresses her audience directly, and throughout, the language is her natural creole speech. But more importantly, this *telling* is a substitute for the composition about Miss Rilla that Lenora has been forbidden by her teacher to *write*. Miss Rilla, it seems, is not considered a “fit” subject by the guardians of polite society—at least not a fit subject for the written discourse that encodes that society’s ideologies and values. It is appropriate that the battle lines are drawn in this way at the beginning and that Lenora instinctively turns to the tradition of oral storytelling for her tribute, because in the process of finding that authentic voice to describe Miss Rilla, she discovers herself as well.

Miss Rilla, more forcefully than Myrtle in “Bright Thursdays,” is the embodiment of traditional, rural Jamaica and its values. Throughout the telling of her “ballad,” Lenora grapples her way toward a recognition that this woman, who is scorned by her family and her teacher, is her true spiritual mother. Lenora lives with her father and MeMa, her stepmother, but she gets no affection from them. Speaking of MeMa, she says, “I know that she dont love me like her own children but that Miss Rilla love me because she dont have no other children to love” (102). And whereas Lenora’s home life is filled with violence and abuse (as is that of everyone she knows), Miss Rilla and the man with whom she lives, Poppa D, are “nice to one another” (118). In objective terms, the conduct of the churchgoing, “respectable” members of the community is no more exemplary than that of Miss Rilla, but she has had a number of men in her life, and one of them, years before, shot and killed another. This scandal looms in her background and fixes her forever in the community’s eyes as a “bad” woman. MeMa and her friends “talk about the wicked thing that Miss Rilla do and how she is harlot” (113). To Lenora she is something else entirely. Even very early in the story she has

enough understanding of the importance of the relationship to describe her friend's death like this: "O Lord. No more laughing. No more big gold earring. No more Miss Rilla gizada [a coconut tart] to cool down me temper when MeMa beat me. All the sweetness done" (104).

In "Ballad," the conventional, restrictive values of the community are transmitted through two institutions of largely European origin: the schoolroom and the church. At school Lenora is one of her teacher's favorites, but after Miss Rilla's death she finds it hard to concentrate on her studies, and her schoolwork suffers. MeMa beats her, telling her that the teacher only likes her because she is darker than MeMa's own children "and everybody saying how black man time come now and they all sticking together" (109). And she adds that "everybody know this country going to the dog these days for is pure black people children they pushing to send high school. Anybody every hear you can educate monkey?" (109-10). MeMa, who has earlier denounced Lenora's friend Blue Boy as "pure Coromantee nigger" (101),<sup>5</sup> is fearful that the old order, in which light-skinned Jamaicans like herself and her children enjoyed social dominance, might be passing. Both Teacher and MeMa, in different ways, represent the establishment, although Teacher, with his more democratic notions about education, is certainly the more sympathetic of the two. What has kept Lenora going, however, has not been Teacher's encouragement but that of Miss Rilla, who wanted her to stay in school to liberate herself from the familiar cycle of pregnancy and male domination.

The established church is not attacked quite so directly in "Ballad" as in some of Senior's other stories, but Lenora does move clearly away from revealed religion as she reflects on Miss Rilla's ostracism by the society that practices it. Earlier in the story, Lenora has expressed concern about Miss Rilla's fate, saying: "And sometime I not so sure that she really gone to Heaven at all since from the time I know her she never even go to church" (115). But by the time she comes to the end of her journey of self-discovery, she is able to reject any belief system that excludes the only real mother she has ever had. As for Miss Rilla "down there burning in hell fire," she boldly asserts, "I dont

believe that at all. I believe that Miss Rilla laughing so much that Saint Peter take her in just to brighten up Heaven" (134). Having previously lamented that with Miss Rilla's passing, there is "nobody to tell me nothing" (112), she finally wishes only to be like Miss Rilla in life and to join her after death.

In many of Senior's stories that foreground a child's rebellion against repressive adult/colonial values, there is in the background a loving mother (or mother surrogate, like Miss Rilla) whose effect on the child is potentially more positive. The "true" mother in these situations is almost invariably blacker and less formally educated than the people who actually raise the children, but she often possesses a wisdom and generosity of spirit that the adoptive parents lack. Even the bewildered and spurned Miss Clemmie in "Ascot" has much to teach (if her son would only learn) about forgiveness and love. Senior has commented that "the topic of the Caribbean mother . . . and of our relationship to that mother" has become one of the "great literary preoccupations" of the region ("Interview" 485). Senior consistently stresses the importance of the mother and identifies her with a valuable, nurturing mother *culture*, and the empowerment of the mother figure, subtly and a bit hesitantly in *Summer Lightning* but explicitly and forcefully in *Arrival of the Snake-Woman*, can be seen as a virtual paradigm of decolonization.

## II

The major themes of *Summer Lightning*—the search for personal and cultural identities, the nurturing role of the West Indian mother in creole society, the problematic and complex relationships between traditional ways and the wider world—are continued and expanded in *Arrival of the Snake-Woman*. "The View from the Terrace" takes up the question of identity most directly, focusing as it does on the lifelong struggle of its protagonist, Mr. Barton, to associate himself with what Senior has called "the colonial superstructure" that "determined everything" ("Interview" 481-82). From early childhood Barton has longed for "a world that somehow seemed rooted on its axis" (96) and finds it in the literature of "daffodils and the downs and snow and damsels in distress" (96)—the imagined world of England. Culti-

vated by teachers and “a succession of English bosses . . . who appreciated . . . his liking for things ‘civilised,’ i.e. English” (96), he develops a distaste for black people (although he is himself darker than his first wife) and a deep-seated discomfort for his native country.<sup>6</sup> But trips to Europe make him aware that he is not really English, either, and his second marriage, to an “incredibly vulgar” (105) white Englishwoman, ends in divorce.

Barton is, moreover, estranged from all three of his children. One son has moved to Canada, married a white woman, and “lost all interest in the West Indies” (98-99); another has been cut off by his father for marrying “a coal black girl” (99); and Barton’s daughter cannot be forgiven for having once been involved in radical politics. Even in his relations with his children Barton is caught between identification with the islands and the African heritage on the one hand and defection to the world of Europe and North America on the other. Toward the end of his life Barton, alone except for his servant Marcus, builds a house on a secluded hillside and is distressed, though intrigued, when a black woman with several children puts a hut on the opposing slope. As the years pass, the number of children increases. His inability to accept this alien presence on “*his hill*” (90), or even to comprehend who the woman is and what she represents, epitomizes the central dilemma of his own life, and shortly after being informed by Marcus that the woman’s children have been fathered by several men, including Marcus himself, Mr. Barton dies—evidently of shock. The woman’s shack, however, after being washed away in a rainstorm, is rebuilt, and she returns to the hillside to continue to raise her family. That continuity, based firmly upon a traditional, rural, African-rooted culture, stands in stark contrast to Barton’s isolation. The view from his terrace is the future, and the image that lingers after the story ends is that of the two houses—the one filled with life (the woman’s name is Miss Vie), the other, a grand but desiccated shell, awkward and out of place.

The idea of home—where it is, what it is—is never very far from the centre of Senior’s attention. Barton’s “European” house in “The View from the Terrace” is divided from Miss Vie’s “Jamaican” hut by a deep ravine; in “The Tenantry of Birds”

Senior attempts to bridge that gulf, bringing the two kinds of homes, with all their iconic associations, together. The "tenantry" of the title is a "rather bedraggled" (46), somewhat wild-looking bird tree growing in an otherwise very formal, English garden belonging to a wealthy Kingston couple. For the wife, the tree represents a small part of the countryside where she spent many pleasant summers as a child. For her husband Philip, a university professor and political activist, the tree is an "unsightly" (47) excrescence which he would like to cut down. Nolene, the wife, is particularly fond of watching "the star boarders . . . the pecharies" drive out the "rough, uncouth, chattering and uncaring" (46-47) kling-klings when they attempt to take over. This detail provides the story with its governing metaphor and Nolene with the example she later needs to take similar action of her own. As Philip becomes more involved in politics (and acquires a black mistress), the marriage disintegrates. He sends Nolene to Miami with their children "for safety's sake" (56), as he puts it. One of the most delicate points Senior makes is that Philip, who like his wife is a light-skinned Jamaican of the privileged social class, does not immerse himself in island politics because of any innate sensitivity to island culture. His political activity is motivated more by ambition and ego than by sympathetic understanding; and his behaviour toward his wife is closely akin to that of master to servant—or of colonial power to colony.

The story explores several sets of oppositions—city and country, artifice and nature, the modern and the traditional—but Senior does not reconcile them in the easiest or most obvious way, by reconciling Nolene and Philip. Instead, she has Nolene return from Miami and reclaim the house. But the formal garden will have to go: "She would plant a new garden. First she would find the gardener and tell him never to touch the bird tree. It was *her* tree and *her* house and she was staying. *He* could move out" (61). To reassure herself she recites a spell that she and her cousins used to call out deep within the Jamaican countryside (to chase away wasps), and she laughs "at the craziness of it. The power" (61). "Power" is the key word here, for the inner strength Nolene draws on to expel the domineering, exploitative, and faithless husband—her colonial master—and seize the house as

a home for her children is explicitly linked to the folk ways of rural Jamaica. The story's conclusion is strongly positive. The house, like Barton's, is a "European" structure in modern Kingston, but it will have a garden evocative of the countryside, and it will be presided over by a mother who has reached into her past and found a core of values to sustain her.<sup>7</sup>

"Lily, Lily" is an interlocking web of familiar Senior paradigms, with particular emphasis on the empowered mother as a source of both strength and liberation. One Lily of the story's title is a little girl born out of wedlock and brought up by prosperous relatives, the DaSilvas, who raise her as their own child after she is given up by her mother, Mrs. DaSilva's cousin of the same name. In the course of time young Lily, sexually abused by her "father," flees to the home of her "Aunt Lily." As in several other Senior stories, a child finds herself in a foster home, under an authority that misuses its power, and without the ability to free herself easily or claim her real heritage. When Lily finally comes under the protection of her natural mother, she is liberated not just from the danger of physical abuse but also from the restrictions placed upon women by the society of that day. Lily agrees to send her daughter back to the DaSilvas only on the condition that the girl be allowed to go to St. Catherine's, a school formerly restricted to whites, so that she may "get out of that house" and just as significantly reap the full benefits of "the very process of change that is sweeping the world" (141). The elder Lily has herself quietly grown in learning, sophistication, and ambition during the years since her daughter was born. As the story closes she is preparing to leave Jamaica temporarily for Panama to "seize the opportunities opening up elsewhere" and learn "new ways of seeing, of doing" (141-42). For Lily, interaction with the wider world promises to be a strengthening, constructive experience rather than the morally and culturally debilitating one it is for many of Senior's characters.

The narrative method of "Lily, Lily" distinguishes it from all of Senior's other fiction. The point of view is multiple. Emmeline Greenfield, a local gossip, begins the tale in a long monologue spoken to a visiting friend. This section provides background

information from a member of the community whose knowledge is as partial as her prejudice is blatant. Other parts of the story are relayed through an omniscient narrator, the consciousness of young Lily, the perspective of Mrs. DaSilva, and most important, a letter from the elder Lily to the DaSilvas. It is in this letter that Senior scores her most potent political points. If Emmeline Greenfield's and Lucy DaSilva's accounts are "official" versions of the events that take place (the versions authorized by a community that places social status above all else), Lily's letter is the impassioned, personal version—and the true one.

Nowhere in Senior's fiction is the protean power of discourse to alter reality more vividly enacted. Lily's letter, openly didactic, frequently strident, always polemical, is a rhetorical trumpet blast that brings the DaSilvas to their knees. Declaring that *she* will make the decisions concerning Lily's future (and will expose Mr. DaSilva's crimes if he or his wife should oppose her), she criticizes the limitations imposed on women by society; she denounces "male betrayal" as well as the "things called 'status,' 'power,' 'respectability'" (139); and she heaps scorn on "the people who rule" Jamaica, "the Governor and the clique surrounding him at Kings House" (141)—all male figures, of course, and all, in the early years of this century, English. The corrupt patriarchal family structure that Lily undermines when she forces the DaSilvas to obey her wishes is as much a product of the colonial sociopolitical system as a microcosmic model of it. The way to liberation from this kind of oppression is exhibited by Lily both through the example of her conduct and through her warning to Mrs. DaSilva to place her responsibilities as a mother above those "as a wife and social arbiter" (143). The inherent power of motherhood in this story extends far beyond protection, however, or even nurturing. Lily's gift to her daughter—and to herself—has to do also with intellectual and moral growth, the freedom to be a whole person, and the means to define and shape one's own future.

The ideas explicitly articulated by Lily in her letter to the DaSilvas—ideas about growth, freedom, and a new society—are woven so delicately into the fabric of "Arrival of the Snake-

Woman" that their presence is hardly detectable, but this novella is nonetheless Senior's most eloquent meditation on the birth of modern Jamaica out of the island's exposure, for better or worse, to the wider world. The story is actually told, or rather written down, shortly after the turn of the century, but most of it takes place in "the old days" (45), when the narrator, a physician, was a small boy growing up in an isolated rural community. The plot hinges on the coming of an Indian woman, Miss Coolie, to the village, her initial ostracism by most of its inhabitants, and her profoundly constructive effect on them over the years. When Miss Coolie first arrives, she is shunned by the people of Mount Rose largely because she refuses to be baptized in Parson Bedlow's church, causing the Parson to brand her a "Whore of Babylon" (10). She is gradually accepted by most of the villagers, however, and in time she does join the church so that her young son Biya can attend Bedlow's school. Later she opens a small shop in her house, expands it as business grows, and becomes "the most prosperous citizen in the district" (42-43)—eventually even living "at Top House where the old time white people, then Parson Bedlow, used to live" (43). More than a quietly satisfying Horatio Alger story, "Arrival of the Snake-Woman" is a moving exploration of cultural convergence in which a shift in power relations among people of African, European, and Indian ancestry signals the emergence of a modern creole society.

The story opens in a time when slavery is still a living memory—at least to Papa Dias, the oldest man in the community, and Mother Miracle, whose father "was one of the old masters" (16). These elderly figures are the bearers of an African tradition that still, many years after emancipation,<sup>8</sup> holds sway in rural areas like Mount Rose. Papa Dias, who is also of mixed African and European descent, is "a man of *knowledge*" who can do "*workings*" and "divine fate from throwing *bisi* the way his old Oyo<sup>9</sup> grandfather had taught him," and some say he can "summon Shango god of thunder" (15-16). Mother Miracle's magic is more mundane. She conducts services in her yard, "reading" people's illnesses and treating them with bush medicine and "holy water" (19).

Parson Bedlow and his wife Miss Rita are the first white people to come back into the district since "the old-time" whites "died off or moved away" (12) after slavery ended. The arrival of these new authority figures is announced, amusingly, through a bit of pre-Columbian technology—a man blowing on a conch shell. What Parson Bedlow represents, with his fire-and-brimstone fundamentalism, is nothing less than the establishment of a neo-colonial power structure. The villagers are surprised that the Parson has not come to take their land, but the hegemony he intends to impose is more insidious as well as more thorough. The first words of "this strange white man" are, "My children, Let Us Pray" (14), and he immediately proceeds to gather the people into the protective custody of the ultimate patriarchal authority, with himself, installed at Top House, as chief deputy and warden. Gradually, the Parson's "preaching about devils and idolaters and false prophets and miracle workers" (20) has its desired effect, and the influence of Papa Dias and Mother Miracle wanes. But what really binds the people to Parson Bedlow and Miss Rita is "the book-learning" that they pass on "to the children in the little schoolhouse which they built," for no one wants to give up "the magic . . . contained in black and white squiggles on paper" (23). It is important to note that Papa Dias, too, knows "how to write things down in a book" (15), and this, along with his Oyo knowledge has been a major source of his influence. Senior herself, speaking of her childhood, has called "knowledge as embodied in the word . . . a key to personal affirmation and power" ("Interview" 480). Throughout the story, this emphasis on writing and the role of the writer in asserting such power is a subtle but significant subtext. Ironically, the knowledge that provides Bedlow with his hold over the villagers in the short term may ultimately provide them with the means to define themselves and create their own society.

The attitude of Ishmael, the narrator, toward Miss Coolie is crucial to the development of the story. From the beginning, when his cousin SonSon brings the "Snake-Woman" to the district as his wife, Ishmael stands in awe of her. Because he has already learned "all about India and the Ganges and the Hea-

then" (3) in Parson Bedlow's school, Ishmael sees her as a romantic figure, evocative of a world far beyond his remote village. He strikes up a friendship with her (greatly displeasing his mother, who is afraid of alienating the Parson) and remains loyal to her all his life, even marrying one of her daughters. When Miss Coolie becomes "the chief demon in Parson Bedlow's pantheon" (10), Ishmael refuses to turn against her—and she, in turn, provides him with a motivation for remaining healthily skeptical toward the Parson. Matters come to a head for Ishmael when young Biya becomes seriously ill and Parson Bedlow, who administers modern medicines to the community, will not treat him. Miss Coolie has to take the child on donkey back to the nearest hospital—a "day and night journey for a man and so lonely no one ever went alone" (30). Biya survives, but the event leaves Ishmael unable "to reconcile Parson's preaching about charity and love and the ministry of Jesus . . . with his behavior to Miss Coolie and Biya" (32). He vows to reject Parson, "his life, his world, his book learning" (32). In the end, Ishmael does not reject everything that Parson represents—but it is Miss Coolie (like the beloved Miss Rilla in "Ballad") who insists that he go back to school and become a doctor.

Miss Coolie's eventual baptism, far from signaling her defeat by Parson Bedlow, marks her emergence as a free person—the stage when she begins "to control her own destiny." As Ishmael puts it: "It was as if she herself had decided to accept totally the life into which she had been thrust, to become fully a part of the district, to cast off the mantle of outsider and outcast" (39). But her conversion is ambivalent. Later in life, when she is prosperous and her children are grown, she reverts to wearing saris and bangles. By this time Parson Bedlow is long gone and Miss Coolie is the matriarch of the community, free to be both Jamaican and Indian.

A similar ambivalence colours Ishmael's thoughts as he brings his story to a close. He realizes that Miss Coolie brought to Mount Rose "an understanding of the world that the rest of us lacked" (43). Freed from her own past, she has acquired a "flexibility" that enabled her to transform herself from a passive outsider to a

shaping force within the community. But, as always in Senior's fiction, such "flexibility" has its negative side. "Miss Coolie," Ishmael reluctantly concludes, "is our embodiment of the spirit of the new age, an age in which sentiment has been replaced by pragmatism and superstition by materialism" (44). Ishmael lives in the city so that his own children "will not have to go through the pains of adjustment" (42) that he did when he first left Mount Rose, but he returns "home" occasionally to visit Miss Coolie and her family, which, through his marriage, has become his own. When he does return, he admits to himself that he still feels "halfway between the old world . . . and the new, unable to shake off the old strictures . . . not feeling, like Miss Coolie, at ease enough to shift fully into the relentless present" (44-45).

For Ishmael, living in a world increasingly removed from Oyo grandfathers and bush medicines, telling his story is a way of establishing and comprehending who he is. "And this," he reflects, "is why I sometimes sit and write down the things that happened in the old days, so that my children will be able to see clearly where we are coming from, should they ever need signposts" (45). "Arrival of the Snake-Woman" takes place in the later years of the nineteenth century, when rural Jamaica's exposure to a wider world was just beginning. Today, the age of colonialism is over, but the "new center-periphery system" is a reality. It would be naive to think that the process of cultural convergence will stop (what culture, after all, is not in some sense "creole?"); but it would be needlessly cynical to assume that the process must end in the obliteration or absorption of one culture by another. That is why the problem of voice is so important and the role of the writer, so essential. Like the Caribbean mother in Senior's stories, the writer must both nurture and liberate. If Ishmael's story is a "signpost," pointing the way not just forward to a complex future but also back to the wisdom of the ancestors and the sound of the conch, so is Senior's fiction. As she herself has put it, "I want to reaffirm those parts of our heritage that have been misplaced, misappropriated, subsumed, submerged, never acknowledged fully as the source of our strength" ("Interview" 484).

## NOTES

- 1 It should be pointed out that standard English as spoken in Jamaica differs somewhat from that spoken in Britain (even though the two are mutually intelligible), just as there are differences among standard American, British, and Canadian speech.
- 2 A prototypical example of this plot device is found in Lovelace's *The Schoolmaster*, where "progress" associated with education or knowledge is presented in Miltonic terms as corruption.
- 3 Pollard makes several perceptive observations on Senior's criticism of received authority.
- 4 This sentiment is also expressed in Senior's "Ancestral Poem": "One day I did not pray. / A gloss of sunlight through / the leaves betrayed me so / abstracted me from rituals. / And discarded prayers and / disproven myths / confirmed me freedom." See Mordecai and Morris 78.
- 5 "The place of origin of many of the slaves brought to Jamaica in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. . . . in Jamaica, those who escaped and joined the Maroons came to dominate them and gained a reputation for fierceness." See Cassidy and LePage, *Dictionary of Jamaican English*. The Coromantee territory was located in present-day Ghana.
- 6 Senior has made the point that "the exploration of race and class, that is, the subtleties of race and class, the encounter with race" is a major theme in Caribbean literature but that it is by no means limited to "battles with 'white racism' per se." This is clearly the case in her own fiction. See "Interview" 485.
- 7 Another story in *Snake-Woman*, "The Two Grandmothers," moves toward quite a different kind of ending, as its narrator, growing up with a light-skinned, wealthy, cosmopolitan grandmother and a dark, poorer one who lives in the country, ultimately opts for the life of wealth, glamour, and modernity epitomized by her favorite television program—*Dallas*.
- 8 The abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire took full effect in 1838.
- 9 The Oyo state, located in present-day Nigeria, was a powerful kingdom during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

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