

Poems from *Olive Senior's Gardening in the Tropics*, www.dloc.com/olivesenior
"Amazon Women": <http://www.dloc.com/AA00061916>



"Amazon Women", text of the poem, annotations, and commentary are on (or to be added) the following pages and online: <http://www.dloc.com/AA00061916>

Audio: *forthcoming*

AMAZON WOMEN

1. Gardening in the Tropics, sometimes
2. you come across these strong Amazon
3. women striding across our lands –
4. like Toeyza who founded the Wori-
5. shiana nation of female warriors
6. in the mountains of Parima – of whom
7. the missionary Brett and Sir Walter
8. Raleigh wrote. Though nobody believed
9. them, I myself could tell a tale or two
10. (though nothing as exotic as the story
11. of Toeyza and her lover Walyarima who
12. swam the river disguised as a black
13. jaguar whenever he visited her). Now
14. we've got that out of the way let me
15. hasten to say I'm not into sensationalism,
16. I merely wished to set the record
17. straight by averring that the story
18. of Amazon women might have begun
19. because when the warriors went away
20. – to war or voyages – it was the
21. women who kept the gardens going
22. and sometimes if the men were not
23. heard from again (as occasionally
24. happened) they banded together and
25. took up arms to defend the territory.
26. So somebody – like Cristobal Colón
27. or Sir Walter Raleigh – could have
28. come along and heard these (marvellous)
29. tales of (fabulous) lands full of
30. (pure) gold and fierce (untamed,
31. exotic) women (you know how men stay!).
32. And the rest (as they say) is history.
33. Mark you, the part about Toeyza's
34. husband sending her and the other
35. women to gather cassava for a feast
36. while he ambushed and killed her lover
37. is true (at least, my auntie says so
38. and her husband's uncle's grandfather
39. told him as a fact – and he got it
40. from someone who knew). I don't know
41. about you but the part I find
42. disgusting is that while they were
43. away, the husband (the chief at that)
44. skinned and hung the lover up
45. in the women's hut as a lesson
46. to faithless wives. (Though if men
47. go around in jaguar disguise, what
48. can they expect?) If you ask me,
49. that husband got what was coming

50. (poisoned by bitter cassava juice
51. mixed in with the beer) though
52. I can't see what the rest of the men
53. did to deserve equal treatment.
54. But that Toeyza (with liberated words)
55. led all the wives in flight and they
56. managed (despite pursuit) to fight
57. their way across the jungle to the
58. heights and freedom in their own
59. nation which ever since has been
60. justly celebrated as the Land of
61. the Amazon. The best part (I hear)
62. is that they allow men to visit them
63. once a year. Boy children they send
64. back to the land of their fathers,
65. girls they keep to rear (though
66. I'm not sure I would want my girl
67. raised by a band of women outlaws
68. keeping company with jaguars). But
69. you see my trial! I'm here gossiping
70. about things I never meant to air
71. for nobody could say I'm into
72. scandal. I wanted to tell of noble women
73. like Nanny the Maroon queen mother
74. or the fair Anacaona, Taino
75. chieftainess who was brutally
76. slain by the colonists, or of
77. the Carib women whom the said Colón
78. relied on for navigation
79. through the islands. I hadn't meant
80. to tell tall tale or repeat exotic
81. story for that's not my style.
82. But we all have to make a living
83. and there's no gain in telling stories
84. about ordinary men and women.
85. Then again, when gardening
86. in the Tropics, every time you lift
87. your eyes from the ground
88. you see sights that strain your
89. credulity – like those strong
90. Amazon Women striding daily across
91. our lands carrying bundles of wood
92. on their heads and babies strapped
93. to their breasts and calabashes of
94. water in both hands.

Annotations to the Poem

(prepared by Olive Senior)

7-8] missionary Brett and Sir Walter Raleigh: two Englishmen who helped to propagate the legend of the Amazon women. The Rev. William Henry Brett was an Anglican missionary who travelled the interior of Guyana in the nineteenth century and published two books on the legends of the Guyanese people. He also translated part of the Bible into the Arawak language. Sir Walter Raleigh is a seventeenth-century explorer who led two expeditions to the Orinoco in search of gold. He also spread the story of Amazon women in the Americas.

26] Cristobal Colón: Spanish name of Christopher Columbus whose diaries and letters about the New World are full of fantastical and legendary stories.

73] Nanny the Maroon queen mother: a Maroon leader in Jamaica in the eighteenth century who is now one of the country's official National Heroes.

74] the fair Anacaona: a Taíno leader who was brutally murdered by the Spaniards.

Commentary

Written by Denise deCaires Narain, University of Sussex

"Amazon Women" is one of twelve poems in the "Gardening in the Tropics" section of the collection of that name. In this poem, as in several others in this section, the speaker uses the phrase "gardening in the tropics" as a disarming opening gambit that invites the reader to share the speaker's reflections on a topic that she appears to stumble upon. The speakers in the poems in this section are presented as ordinary people whose gardening activities are part of the business of "making life" in the Caribbean where small-scale market gardening was historically a crucial aspect of survival for enslaved peoples. In "Amazon Women," the speaker suggests that in the innocent act of gardening, she has "come across" the mythical Amazonian women; and, in the process, Senior deftly implies continuities between post-slavery garden plots and pre-Columbian small-scale agricultural practices. The poem opens:

Gardening in the tropics, sometimes
you come across these strong Amazon
women striding across our lands –
(lines 1-3)

"Gardening in the tropics" operates here as a playful pretext for the reconsideration of these monumental female figures of History and myth. The poem offers a retelling of the story of Toeyza, a Worishiana woman whose dalliance with her lover, Walyarima, incited her husband to kill him as a lesson to all wives. Rather than obey this lesson, Toeyza leads the other women through the jungle where they, in Senior's words, establish "their own/ nation which ever since has been / justly celebrated as the Land of/ the Amazon" (lines 58-61).

Senior's poem engages with the familiar story of an exclusively female community of Amazonian women in interesting ways, drawing attention to and recalibrating the sensationalist elements of these stories while also retaining and re-circulating aspects of that very sensationalism. It is clear from the outset in the direct reference to Brett (an English missionary who worked for many decades in Guiana) and Sir Walter Raleigh that specific historical resources are being drawn upon; and, indeed, Senior's annotations to the poem provided above confirm these details. The speaker, while hastening to remind her audience that she is "not into sensationalism" (line 15), retells the bare bones of the story so that it is sensational. But this

sensationalism is qualified by the wry commentary the speaker offers on these extraordinary events. She is disgusted that the husband skinned and hung his wife's lover up for the other wives to see, but it is the addition of the bracketed aside that the husband is "(a chief at that)" (line 43) that deftly aligns the extraordinary with the ordinary, the fabulous with the everyday. Similarly, the exotic potential of Walyarima crossing the river disguised as a jaguar to visit Toeyza is deflated by the comment: "(Though if men/ go around in jaguar disguise, what/ can they expect?)" (lines 46-48).

Senior's strategy here might be read as enacting Edward Said's idea of the "contrapuntal" in its alertness to the ways that smaller histories (and quieter voices) interrupt and snag dominant narratives of History. The opening stanzas of William Henry Brett's poetically rendered account of the genesis of the South American Amazons demonstrate the heroic, exoticizing tone that Senior's text draws on, reworks, and resists:

Of the fierce "Worisiana"
 (Such their nation's name)
I can tell the ancient story:
How their warlike strength and glory
 First began in shame.

For a chieftain's wife, "To-eyza,"
 Faithless dared to be,
Caring nothing for disaster;
Haughty was her lord and master,
 Haughtier was she.
("Origin of the Amazons"180)

Brett's speaker narrates, with a knowing assurance, a perspective that the regular stanzaic structure and rhyme scheme consolidates. Senior's poem is written in free verse that is punctuated by bracketed asides, exclamations, and interruptions; and its poetic qualities are much more covertly embedded (in internal rhymes and choice of words, for example). The declamatory mode of address that characterizes Brett's account signals a rhetorical oral quality that does not anticipate interruption. While Senior's poem is similarly oral and declamatory, it anticipates, welcomes, and pre-empts interruptions, frequently hailing the listener/reader directly. The speaker makes use of vernacular Jamaican idiom in several places—for example in "(you know how men stay!)" in line 31 and in "But/ you see my trial!" in lines 68-69—to establish an intimate mode of address and to appeal directly to the reader/listener as someone who shares a similar worldview and values. In doing so, the speaker seeks to establish her position as an ordinary but respectable member of the community whose opinions should be trusted. Senior's speaker cunningly deploys wit and humour to establish the sense that the views she expresses are widely held, familiar, and uncontentious. The frequent use of asides consolidates the sense of a shared cultural terrain and invites consensus, as in "(you know how men stay!)" and "I don't know/ about you but ..." (lines 40-41).

Senior uses respectability¹ strategically in "Amazon Women," as she does in many of her poems, particularly in ways that allow her to inscribe resistance to dominant cultures in a quieter register than is more usually associated with Caribbean poetry (in the work of Louise Bennett, Kamau Brathwaite, or Linton Kwesi Johnson, for example). The understatement and self-deprecation that characterize many of Senior's speakers allow them to figure resistance in cunningly sinuous ways; like Anansi the trickster, they insinuate rather than proclaim their

subversive tactics and, as a result, often seem "to have their cake and eat it too." So although the speaker in "Amazon Women" asserts early on that her purpose is to "set the record/ straight" (lines 16-17) by explaining the origins of Amazonian women-only groups in more practical terms (as maintaining the gardens while the men were away), she spends more time on the sensational myths than on the practicalities, and her account includes an unapologetic celebration of Amazon women. The poem concludes by suggesting that there are historical continuities between powerful mythical women figures (Toeyza; Anacaona (a Taino woman-leader brutally slain by the Spanish); Carib women who helped Columbus to navigate; and Nanny of the Maroons) and the strength displayed by ordinary Caribbean women everywhere who toil every day to sustain their families. The celebration of this varied feminist genealogy is an important one for it emphasizes powerful connections between Amerindian women and the African-Jamaican leader Nanny in relation to contemporary Caribbean women's lived realities. In so doing, it also quietly affirms an indigenous lineage of feminism that is embedded in Amerindian myths as a source of power that informs African Caribbean feminist solidarity, a trajectory that bypasses the usual narrative that feminism originated in the West.²

The obviously feminist agenda of the poem is mediated by the speaker's tone which is coyly dissembling, simultaneously declaring and disavowing its challenge to the reader. After commenting admiringly on the gender segregation of Toeyza's community of women where boy babies are sent back to "the land of their fathers" (line 64), the speaker qualifies her position with another bracketed aside: "(though/ I'm not sure I would want my girl/ raised by a band of women outlaws/ keeping company with jaguars)" (lines 65-68). It is this playful shuttling between avowal and disavowal, between the ordinary and the extraordinary, and between varied registers (the literary and the colloquial tenor of gossip) that allows the poem to domesticate the mythical/historical material it draws upon. In doing so, Senior's poem does not simply repeat the frequently reiterated truism that the pre-Columbian peoples of the Americas were "exterminated" but works actively to allow these cultures to resonate in, and inform, contemporary Caribbean understandings of itself.

The final section of the poem consolidates the sense of fluid navigation across time, landscape, and register that I am arguing distinguishes the poem under discussion and many of the poems in the "Gardening in the Tropics" section. In a similar manner as with Senior's knowing use of a word loaded with exotic freight as is "tropics," "Amazon Women" a culturally loaded choice. This is made clear in the wry way that Senior lists the expectations of men like Columbus or Raleigh, who find just what they expected, having heard "(marvellous)/ tales of (fabulous) lands full of/ (pure) gold and fierce (untamed,/ exotic) women" (lines 28-31). In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock makes reference to a "long tradition of male travel as an erotics of ravishment" and to places like the New World/Americas as "porno-tropics for the European imagination" (22). Senior's poem clearly references this exoticizing and eroticizing projection. Alert to the possibility that she, too, may risk being complicit with a "porno-tropical" imaginary, the speaker interrupts her own narration:

But
you see my trial! I'm here gossiping
about things I never meant to air
for nobody could say I'm into
scandal.
[...]
... I hadn't meant
to tell tall tale or repeat exotic

story for that's not my style.
But we all have to make a living
And there's no gain in telling stories
About ordinary men and women.
(lines 68-84)

Here the speaker acknowledges the powerful lure of the scandalous and exotic for everyone, everywhere—as well as the practical realities of making a living for the poet and story-teller. Having made the above declaration, the poem shifts again—“Then again, when gardening/ in the Tropics, every time you lift/ your eyes from the ground/ you see sights that strain your/ credulity –” (lines 85-89)—and closes with an image of Amazon women “striding daily across/ our lands” (lines 90-91) performing the everyday labour of many women everywhere: carrying babies, wood, and water. Once again, Senior deftly welds together the ordinary and the extraordinary as mirror images of each other. And, “then again,” in reminding the listener/reader of the speaker's location in the garden, the poem closes with an image of the speaker-poet tilling (and “reading”) the soil as if it were an archive that, with patient labour, will release its buried treasure of stories—stories that will allow those of Raleigh, Columbus, Brett and others housed in that more canonical archive to resonate in more mischievously promiscuous ways. Senior's self-deprecating, respectable woman-speaker, then, is deployed as a figure whose very understated ordinary-ness allows her resistance to “pass” while she runs amok rifling through the formal archive and creating a new one.

Notes

¹ Senior's texts frequently engage with and challenge ideas of “respectability” as a set of values and conventions that articulate “proper” female identity. Peter Wilson's *Crab Antics: The Social Anthropology of English-Speaking Negro Societies of the Caribbean* controversially and problematically opposed the conventional association of women with “respect” (via the church, home, use of standard English, and bourgeois values of decorum and honesty) to that of “reputation” (associated with the male culture of the street, Creole culture, and flamboyant display). Senior's work challenges this neatly gendered binary opposition to suggest that respectability can be deployed strategically to great effect. See my discussion of this in *Olive Senior* (3-4) and Michael Bucknor's “Sounding off: performing ritual revolt in Olive Senior's ‘Meditation on Yellow.’”

² See “Amazonia,” a bronze and mahogany sculpture by Jasmine Thomas-Girvan that was directly inspired by this feminist sentiment in Senior's poem at <http://www.normangirvan.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/jasmine-catalogue-20111.pdf>.

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