

Poems from *Olive Senior's Gardening in the Tropics*, www.dloc.com/olivesenior

"Seeing the Light": <http://www.dloc.com/AA00061857>



"Seeing the Light", text of the poem, annotations, and commentary are on (or to be added) the following pages and online: <http://www.dloc.com/AA00061857>

Audio: *forthcoming*

SEEING THE LIGHT

1

1. Gardening in the Tropics nowadays means
2. letting in the light: they've brought in machines
3. that can lay waste to hundreds of hectares
4. in one day, they've brought in (since we have
5. passed this way) other peoples to hack
6. and burn through; smoke obscures the sun for
7. months now, there are not enough trees to pull down
8. the rain. The animals are gone too; without hunters
9. they're no longer game. By the time they've cut
10. the last tree in the jungle only our bones
11. will remain as testament to this effort to bring
12. light (though in their chronicles they might have
13. recorded it by another name: *Conquista?*
14. *Evangelismo? Civilización?*)

2

15. Before you came, it was dark in our garden,
16. that's true. We cleared just enough for our huts
17. and our pathways, opened a pinpoint in the canopy
18. to let the sun through. We made the tiniest scratch
19. on Mother Earth (begging her pardon). When we moved
20. on, the jungle easily closed over that scar again.
21. We never took more than we needed. Always gave back
22. (to Earth) our thanks and our praises, never failed
23. to salute the gods of the rain, the wind, the sun,
24. and the moon in her phases. Never failed to provide
25. tobacco smoke for the spirits to feed on that show us
26. the game. When the yuca or the maize was ripe,
27. we celebrated. By the stars and planets across
28. the green (and dark) terrain, we navigated.
29. In all of this, we took up so little space,
30. it would have been easy for you to greet us
31. when you came - and move on. There was enough
32. in the jungle to provide gardens for everyone.
33. All over these green and tropical lands there
34. could have been pinpricks of light filtering
35. through the leaves to mirror the stars of Heaven,
36. invert the Pleiades.

3

37. But from the start, Earth did not please. You
38. set it alight, you disembowled it, you forcefully

39. established marks of your presence all over it.
40. As you tore up what sustained us, our world
41. under your sway fell into true darkness
42. of Night, fell apart from lack of regulation.
43. For we no longer had power to summon the spirits
44. with tobacco, with invocations to harness the
45. blessings of the sun, the rain. You told us your
46. one God had the power to bring us the true light,
47. but we've waited in vain. To this day - as catastrophe
48. holds sway and earth continues to burn - there are
49. things we still cannot learn. Why did those
50. who speak of Light wear black? the colour
51. of mourning? Why was their countenance so grave?
52. Why on a dead tree did they nail the bringer
53. of light, one Cristo, torture and kill him
54. then ask us to come, bow down and worship him?
55. Yet, with all the strange things that have happened
56. to us since your first coming, it's not so hard perhaps
57. to believe that in some far-off land this Cristo,
58. this person who had never heard of us, was
59. nevertheless put to death, gave up his life,
60. in order to enlighten us. Maybe many more trees
61. must die to illuminate his death, as many leaves
62. must fall to cover up our dying.

Annotations to the Poem

(prepared by Olive Senior)

13-14] Conquista? / Evangelismo? Civilización?: to conquer, Christianize, civilize - refers to the intention of the European conquerors towards the native peoples, often with negative results.

26] yuca: (manihot esculenta) - a root crop that is one of the principal foods of native peoples of the Caribbean and Latin America, including the Taíno. Known as Cassava or Manioc in the English-speaking islands.

36] Pleiades: group of stars—the “Seven Sisters”—that are very important in ordering the yearly routine of Amerindian life.

53] Cristo: Spanish for Christ.

Commentary

Written by Hyacinth Simpson, Ryerson University and Emily Allen Williams, Texas Southern University / University of the Virgin Islands

“Seeing the Light” is one of twelve poems included in the section titled “Gardening in the Tropics” in Olive Senior’s poetry collection of the same name. Erin Wunker’s description of the collection as “polished and thematically cohesive” (169) draws attention to the way in which

Senior's repetition of the words "Gardening in the Tropics" at the beginning of each of these poems allows her to employ the gardening motif in highlighting and re/mem/ber/ing¹ the lived realities of Caribbean peoples in historical and contemporary times. In this particular poem, the tropical garden is both the physical and socio-cultural landscape of the Americas; and the act of gardening refers to the different attitudes towards, and values placed on, the physical and cultural environments by indigenous peoples and the European colonizers. The speaker in the poem is an indigenous American whose knowledge of life in this tropical garden spans both the pre- and post-Columbian periods. In describing the changes made to the American landscape over several centuries by the European newcomers, the poetic persona challenges the narrative of progress and civilization that the colonizers used to justify their subjugation of the land and its peoples.

The differences between how things are "nowadays" (since the Europeans' arrival and up to the present time) and how they were "before [the Europeans] came" are stark. In the name of modernization and civilization, machines now "lay waste hundreds of hectares/ in one day" (lines 3-4) whereas before the indigenous peoples made only "the tiniest scratch/ on Mother Earth (begging her pardon)" (lines 18-19). Under the exploitative labour conditions of *encomienda* and later slavery and indentureship, the Europeans oversaw the hacking and burning through of the landscape compared to the respectful and sustainable use of natural resources when indigenous peoples "never took more than [they] needed" and always gave back thanks and praise to the Earth (lines 21-22). Similarly, the Europeans' destruction of flora and fauna through excess and avarice is contrasted with the indigenous peoples' belief that there was enough for everyone and their practice of leaving only small footprints on the world they occupy.

The poem's critique of the Europeans' impact on the New World is to a large extent effected through a play between [images of] dark/ness and light and a reversal of the meanings usually associated with each of these terms. The title of the poem itself is part of this play and critique. Voicing the consciousness of indigenous Americans through the ages, the poetic persona is now "seeing the light"—as in arriving at an understanding of the true meaning and ramifications of the outcomes of the Europeans' arrival in the New World—and brings the reader into this understanding. As such, the poetic persona rejects the claims of dominant versions of History, which present the Europeans as the bringers of light—those who edified and instructed through *conquista*, *evangelismo*, and *civilización* and illuminated the darkness of paganism/ignorance and traditionalism/primitivism/primitiveness in which the indigenous peoples lived. Instead, the speaker offers another interpretation of the outcome of the contact between indigenous Americans and the European newcomers: that the spiritual beliefs and cultural practices of indigenous peoples were not backward or primitive. Rather, they encapsulated a worldview that emphasized harmony and balance between humans and the natural world and mutual recognition and regard between different groups of people. Such a worldview, although still under seize by dominant political and cultural forces, provides a model for the kind of environmental sustainability and cross-cultural respect which are still elusive ideals in many twenty-first century societies.

In lines 15-16, the speaker affirms, "Before you came, it was dark in our garden, / that's true." But in this case dark/ness carries positive connotations of protection, respect, and reverence for as well as balance between humans, animals, and the natural world. For example, where the Europeans saw only a dense and unruly jungle requiring the force of human hands to cut, tame and order it (or, in their parlance, bring in "light"), the Indigenous peoples respected the role that canopies and understories play in maintaining ecological balance. Ironically, then, it is the self-professed bringers of light whose worldview and unsustainable practices have over time resulted in environmental disasters and ecosystem imbalances such as drought ("there are not

enough trees to pull down/ the rain" [lines 7-8]), atmospheric contamination ("smoke obscures the sun for/ months now" [lines 6-7]), and the decimation of wild life ("The animals are gone too; without hunters/ they're no longer game" [lines 8-9]). The positive connotations of dark/ness are also carried over into lines 27-28: "By the stars and planets across/ the green (and dark) terrain, we navigated." Here, the speaker acknowledges the Indigenous people's use of the science of astronomy in their everyday lives. This is a powerful rebuttal of claims that the Others the European explorers encountered in their travels were ignorant of science. When Columbus made his first voyage to the Americas, celestial navigation was just being developed in Europe although Indigenous peoples had long used their knowledge of astronomy to aid them in land and sea travel.

At the close of the second stanza, the speaker further suggests that the ecological harmony prized by Indigenous cultures was/is an important expression of their spiritual worldview. In lines 33-36, the speaker argues that if the Europeans had not destroyed the New World environment they encountered through force and exploitation, a natural—and integral—balance between Heaven and Earth would have been maintained. A similar spiritual worldview is espoused in the collection's opening poem "[Gourd](#)" where that poetic persona warns against the "chaos" that "would ensue/ if heaven and earth parted" (lines 19-20). The image of the inverted cluster of stars (the Pleiades) created by pinpricks of light filtering through the leaves onto an unscarred landscape conveys the idea that Heaven and Earth are mirror images of each other. One is necessary to the other, and the speaker seems to suggest that their mutual and unbroken reflection not only sustains existence itself but also allows the true light of life to shine through.

Assessed through this worldview, the Europeans are recast as bringers of darkness in the third stanza: "our world/ under your sway fell into the true darkness/ of Night, fell apart from lack of regulation" (lines 40-42). This is a powerfully ironic reversal given that, in its role as the dominant religion in the Western sphere, Christianity is often touted as the one true faith system that brings Light to a world in darkness. The Indigenous speaker questions the actions of the Europeans who used the pretext of a civilizing mission and the notion of "saving" the peoples through they encountered by converting them to Christianity to cover over their true intent: that is, the acquisition of wealth through conquest. As such, the speaker sees little or no distinction between *Conquista*, *Evangelismo*, and *Civilización*. In motive as well as outcome, all three are closely related—even interchangeable. Together, they structured the nature of the contact between European and Indigenous peoples from the Age of Exploration onward and informed ideas about the "native" Other who, as Arjun Appadurai argues, does not exist but is simply a construction of the "anthropological imagination" (39). In the anthropological imagination, the "native/ "native culture" is typically/usually presented as different from a familiar norm, with strange beliefs and practices that require investigating and explaining before they can make sense to the outside observer. However, in a telling shift in perspective, it is the Europeans and European culture that become the subject of inquiry halfway through the final stanza. To the outside (Indigenous) eye, the conquerors' religion appears to be not only contradictory—"Why did those/ who speak of Light wear black, the colour/ of mourning?" (lines 49-51)—but violently so: "Why on a dead tree did they nail the bringer/ of light, one Cristo, torture and kill him/ then ask us to come, bow down and worship him?" (lines 52-54). Having "waited in vain" for the "true light" that the Europeans said their "one God" would bring, the speaker adopts a satirical stance/ tone in the poem's closing lines. The folly of the Europeans' actions/ position is exposed as the speaker links the "dead tree" of the crucifix to the forestry/landscape and environmental damage, wildlife extinction, and human genocide chronicled throughout the poem. These are the "strange things" (line 55) brought about by the Europeans' arrival in the New World. As well, the ironic interplay between "death" and "life,

"illuminate" and "cover over" cements the speaker's indictment of the impact the Europeans have had on the Indigenous world.

In *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, Édouard Glissant contends that New World Caribbean history is marked by "ruptures" and "brutal dislocation," which forestalled the possibility of a regional "historical consciousness [being] deposited gradually and continuously like sediment." Instead, that historical consciousness "came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces," causing disruption to/in the continuum of memory and meaning making (61-62). The resultant/resulting fragmentation of self and story has made attempts at re/mem/ber/ing difficult—although not impossible. It is precisely such re/mem/ber/ing that Senior facilitates in "Seeing the Light." Mindful of the written records of **H**istory which have rendered Indigenous peoples as prehistorical/outside of history, Senior creates a poetic persona whose first-hand witness account becomes an important act of Indigenous historicization. This spoken, oral history calls into question the status and veracity of the written **H**istory while the speaker's location across multiple temporalities merges past, present, and future in a way that knits back together the collective historical consciousness of Indigenous [Caribbean] peoples.

Notes

¹ The virgule(s) in this word denote/s the manner in which Senior has her poetic persona reassemble / put back together pieces of the past, which is a "re/mem/ber/ing" of the psycho-social and physical body of a people and culture dis/mem/ber/ed by conquest and colonization.

Works Cited

- Appadurai, Arjun. "Putting Hierarchy in its Place." *Cultural Anthropology* 3.1 (Feb. 1988): 36-49. Print.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Trans. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: Caraf Books/University Press of Virginia, 1992. Print.
- Wunker, Erin. "Speaking, Pausing for Breath, and Gardening." *Canadian Literature* 192 (Spring 2007): 167-169. Print.