



Publif@rum 10, 2009

## Les Caraïbes: convergences et affinités

---

Gianni TOMIOTTI

### The spoken and the written word: Jamaican Creole and the language of the Bible in Olive Senior's early fiction

---

#### Nota

Il contenuto di questo sito è regolato dalla legge italiana in materia di proprietà intellettuale ed è di proprietà esclusiva dell'editore.

Le opere presenti su questo sito possono essere consultate e riprodotte su carta o su supporto digitale, a condizione che siano strettamente riservate per l'utilizzo a fini personali, scientifici o didattici a esclusione di qualsiasi funzione commerciale. La riproduzione deve necessariamente menzionare l'editore, il nome della rivista, l'autore e il documento di riferimento.

Qualsiasi altra riproduzione è vietata senza previa autorizzazione dell'editore, tranne nei casi previsti dalla legislazione in vigore in Italia.

#### Farum.it

Farum è un gruppo di ricerca dell'Università di Genova

#### Pour citer cet article :

Gianni TOMIOTTI, *The spoken and the written word: Jamaican Creole and the language of the Bible in Olive Senior's early fiction*, Les Caraïbes: convergences et affinités, Publifarum, n. 10, pubblicato il 2009, consultato il 15/06/2024, url: [http://www.farum.it/publifarum/ezine\\_pdf.php?id=95](http://www.farum.it/publifarum/ezine_pdf.php?id=95)

Editore Publifarum (Dipartimento di Lingue e Culture Moderne - Univerità di Genova)

<http://www.farum.it/publifarum/>

<http://www.farum.it>

Documento accessibile in rete su:

[http://www.farum.it/publifarum/ezine\\_articles.php?art\\_id=95](http://www.farum.it/publifarum/ezine_articles.php?art_id=95)

Document généré automatiquement le 15/06/2024.

---

## The spoken and the written word: Jamaican Creole and the language of the Bible in Olive Senior's early fiction

Gianni TOMIOTTI

---

Olive Senior is the author of three books of poetry – *Talking of Trees* (1986), *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994), *Over the Roofs of the World* (2005) – four of non-fiction on Jamaican society and culture, and three of short stories: *Summer Lightning and Other Stories* (1986), *Arrival of the Snake-Woman and Other Stories* (1989), and *The Discerner of Hearts* (1995). Her first short story collection won the inaugural Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1987.

My analysis of Senior's first collection *Summer Lightning* (SL) is twofold: firstly, I intend to investigate how Senior denounces the role of Christianity – whatever its denomination – in Jamaica as a pillar of colonial culture, in that it has influenced the education of the people, and how in her fictions it is basically conducive to respectability and social status. Secondly, I have focused my attention on language, illustrating how the author's strategy bespeaks a subtle critique of imperialism past and present by escaping from the "literary imprisonment" of Standard English, the language of the colonizer. As a matter of fact, one of the most serious problems Caribbean countries have faced since "independence" – although one might argue that neo-colonialism has made a mockery of such notion – has been how to come to terms with the scars left by slavery and a past of colonization, and how to express a cultural identity whose fashioning is fraught with difficulties and which can be described as inevitably «impregnated with the culture of the oppressor.» (IPPOLITO 2000: 1)

Jamaica is a majority Christian country, with almost equal percentages of Anglicans, Baptists and members of the Church of God; other groups include Seventh Day Adventists, Methodists, the United Church of Christ, Pentecostals and Roman Catholics. Before emancipation, African slaves were denied education and, being very religious people, they sought comfort in their native cults such as Obi, Myalism, Voodoo (in Haiti), and Shango (in Trinidad). These religious practices were suppressed as soon as missionaries arrived to convert the heathen to Christianity, but if on the one hand this process brought some relief – the word of God taught them that they were not the only ones who had been oppressed – on the other, they could not deny the fact that the Jesus in the religious pictures was undoubtedly white. It followed that if whites were His children on earth, God was also instrumental in perpetuating the social inferiority of blacks, since, as the Jamaican proverb goes, "Parson christen him own pickney before anybody else's pickney". Despite the ostracizing of African traditional religious systems, the drive towards an autonomous identity, together with the independence from "white" Christianity, has turned the spiritual search back to the African roots, for instance to Kumina, which has been likened to Obeah (black/white magic used to cast spells and perform exorcisms). However, the Revivalist and Kumina cults, together with Rastafarianism, remain minor religions, and in the post-emancipation era Christianity has been embraced by an overwhelming majority. Religion has always been of considerable importance in educational processes, run by schools whose main purpose was «to 'civilize' and render them [men and women] good and faithful servants – a pliable and largely undifferentiated labour force» (SENIOR 1991: 46). In her book on Jamaican culture, *A-Z of Jamaican Heritage* (1984), Senior claims that «the Church of England was the church of the ruling class and planters and therefore supported the institution of slavery» (qtd. in THIEME 1994: 94). Later on, in an interview with Anna Rutherford (1986) she states that religious dogmas imposed by the colonizer combined with poverty «attack the spirit, they are both anti-life, they are both anti-freedom, soul-destroying» (qtd. in POLLARD 1988: 542).

Olive Senior's linguistic strategies and her deft use of Jamaican Creole witness the bonds that she has always maintained with her homeland (although she has lived in Toronto for many years). Following in the footsteps of other Caribbean writers such as Vic Reid or Sam Selvon, Senior has often recourse to Creole in her narratives, not only for comic purposes, but to draw a realistic portrait of rural Jamaican society and to question the supremacy of British culture and values in favour of an indigenous mode of expression with strong links with Africa, the ancestral country – at least in Jamaica, where the great majority of the population is of African descent. The use of Creole forms with a view to shaping a new identity rooted in historical and cultural memory is a Leitmotiv in Caribbean literature. In her strongly anti-colonial essay *A Small Place* (1988), Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid poses a straightforward question about the submergence of African languages due to the supremacy of English: «isn't it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?» (KINCAID 1989: 31) Code-switching between Jamaican Creole – although stylized to make it understandable to a wider readership – and Standard English reflects the shift between the two households where Senior spent her childhood: her parents' house in Trelawny Parish, a rural area near Montego Bay (currently a noted international seaside resort), and her well-

---

off relatives' house in Kingston. This language shift is common in Jamaica – as in all the other islands in the Caribbean – where Standard English is the official language in schools, media and public administration, while people switch to Creole in all informal situations or wherever they feel like doing it. In this regard, Merle Collins reminds us that the term “Creole”

is a fairly recent, academic formulation. It was just “the way we talk”, “we kind of language” or plain old “bad English”. It still is usually regarded as such. [...] The ongoing search for a name and for explanations of the grammar of languages forged in the Caribbean represents a perception that these languages are not dialects of English or French or Dutch but have structural differences related to the history and structure mainly of African languages. (COLLINS 1998: 90)

Barbadian poet and historian Edward Kamau Brathwaite resorts to the syntagma “nation language” vs. “dialect”, which carries pejorative overtones, and underlines the importance of the notion of “oral literature” in the Caribbean, the result of an African substratum (BRATHWAITE 1984: 13-14). In an interview with Charles H. Rowell, Olive Senior has acknowledged the importance of the oral tradition in her writings: «my early childhood was far removed in space and time from any substantive external contacts and influences. My major influence then was the oral tradition – storytelling, “hot” preaching, praying and testifying (for religious influence was strong), concerts, “tea-meetings,” and so on» (ROWELL 1988: 480). The influence of orality on *Summer Lightning* is manifold: in some cases, traditional folk figures provide inspiration for the shaping of literary characters; more often, the influence of orality is there in the use of language – when vernacular forms are not limited to the “scene” (dialogues) but are extended to the “summary” (plot) as well – and in narrative strategies inflected by oral poetics which help drawing the reader into the world of the characters, reducing the distance between them and conferring a higher degree of spontaneity and realism to the narrating voice. Hyacinth M. Simpson argues that «the affirmation of the oral signals a valid practice of literary *creolization*, in which the oral culture of the folk and European scribal traditions are equally acknowledged» (SIMPSON 2004: 831); this means that the assertion of oral cultures does not entail a rejection of European literary practices, but rather a “hybridization”, in order to put forward an alternative to Western discourse and to affirm the legacy of an indigenous culture. The fact that in *Summer Lightning* the Creole-speaking characters are all of humble origins and that the Creole-speaking Narrator is often a child could reinforce the notion of the vernacular as a lower linguistic medium, employed by speakers who cannot master Standard English, and this assumption would lead to downplay the social critique of the collection. However, as Alison Donnell suggests, in Senior's fiction «ideology-critique can be most powerfully enacted at the level of the personal» (DONNELL 1999: 119), and the spontaneity of the child's perspective – treated seriously by the author – contributes to outline more incisively the exposure of a society where he/she often feels alienated and displaced. Velma Pollard's comment on Senior's fictional strategy concerning the child's narrating voice is to the point:

The child's eye view is not childlike. It is a clear vision through which the irrationalities of adults, the inequities in society and from time to time the redeeming features in the environment, are expressed. The exploitation of the child's vision allows Senior space [...] for the dramatic presentation of human foibles seen from the point of view of the little person looking and feeling from under. (POLLARD 1988: 540)

In the short story “Summer Lightning”, told in Standard English by a third person Narrator, we find a typical example of “Jamaican household”. According to a survey carried out by WICP (Women in the Caribbean Project) in 1986, «only about one-quarter of the region's children are born into what conforms to the nuclear family, i.e. with father, mother and their children together under one roof. More often than not, the Caribbean child is born and raised in a household rather than a family unit» (SENIOR 1991: 8). The young protagonist, in fact, lives with his uncle and aunt, deprived of the warmth of a real, i.e. a child-oriented family. His loneliness is mitigated only by his imagination, which helps him create a world of his own during the afternoons spent in the garden room, the only place where he feels safe during thunderstorms. Even his parents are excluded from this world: «his father and mother sometimes appeared but his memories of them got dimmer and dimmer» (SL 2), and the boy's only solace is represented by the reassuring presence of Bro Justice, a Rastafarian, his only friend and the only human being who has access to his imaginary world. Senior's choice of a Rastafarian as the boy's lifeline can be read as an indication of a new path towards the shaping of an autonomous identity for the boy, against the alien atmosphere of his uncle and aunt's

---

house. The redeeming promise at the core of Rastafarianism – namely that all Africans of the Diaspora are but exiles in “Babylon” and destined to be led out of captivity by a return to “Zion”, that is, Africa – is one of the cornerstones of this controversial “religion” or “spiritual philosophy”, and the myth of repatriation arose in response to the system of social, cultural, and economic oppression on which modern Jamaica was built. Bro Justice’s rebellion against the social conventions inherited from the colonizer is evident in his drastic change after a symbolic (Christ-like) forty days and forty nights’ disappearance, and his refusal to address the boy’s aunt as “maam” and “mistress”. The boy’s attention is diverted from Bro Justice – to his aunt’s relief – with the arrival of a mysterious guest, described only as an “old man”, who comes to spend a few weeks in the house every year. Unpleasant physical details, like his smell which reminds of that of a «dirty wet dog» (SL 3), or about the man’s past, like his ambiguous attitude towards Bro Justice himself, instil the suspicion in the reader that the man might be a paedophile. Dangers of this kind are unfortunately not unusual in households where the parentless child is sometimes left at the mercy of people with no scruples, as Senior states referring to the above-mentioned survey by WICP: «In place of the father there might be a constant shift of male partners (‘stepfathers’), a situation which sometimes leads to emotional and physical abuse of another man’s child» (SENIOR 1991: 18). As the story proceeds, tension accumulates like menacing clouds towards a storm, and when the old man threateningly approaches the boy in the garden room, the open ending leaves the reader with the doubt whether a sexual molestation will actually occur or Bro Justice – whose help the boy silently hopes for – will come to his aid. Bro Justice had foretold a possible threat for the boy and had previously put his aunt in the know, but she had refused to listen to him and had taken the occasion only to reprimand him for his appearance and manners, incapable, as the Narrator ironically comments, to hear anything of «the foolishness that is bound up in the heart of a child». (SL 8)

This story, although written in Standard English, provides an example, in Bro Justice’s speech, of the influence of Rastafarianism on Jamaican Creole: «When Jah want to search I out Jah send the lightning to see right through I» (SL 1). Rastafarians’ Creole presents some lexical and grammatical features which are not to be found in Jamaican Creole, and this is intended as a strategy of resistance in order to build up a cultural barrier against a hostile environment. In the sentence above, the deictic “I” is given emphasis in that is used instead of “me”, regarded as more servile. Rastafarian speech also regards “we” as divisive and replaces it with the communal “I and I”. “I” can be employed in the reflexive form (“I-self”) and in the possessive too, as in the poet and musician Joe Ruglass’s famous statement “Jamaica is a islan’, but is not I lan’”, a pun which underlines the distance of Rastafarians’ doctrine of repatriation from Caliban’s proud claim, in his mother’s name, of his native island in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, 1.2.332: «This island’s mine by Sycorax, my mother».

The short story “Country Of The One Eye God” is an instance of the effects of poverty and violence in the society. In this context, religion is of little avail, and the Christian God seems incapable of giving comforting answers. According to Evelyn O’Callaghan, one lingering impression the reader is left with after reading this collection is «the sense of community that dominates in this rural world, a mutual support system of neighbours, friends and relations» (O’CALLAGHAN 1986: 93). Yet in my view in most of these stories, and this is one example, the sense of community which in traditionally structured societies could function as a shield is seriously endangered, first and foremost because of the disruption of the traditional family, with its members tightly woven together like a knit. As a consequence of parents frequently migrating to other islands or abroad in search of work, the traditional family has given way to atypical households where proxy parents or relatives take the place of real parents, and this fact has many implications for the child’s education, socialization and life options. The protagonist, an old woman, lives alone after her close relatives have moved to the United States, and her grandson Jacko, who is now a criminal on the run, comes back home after two years. When one night he breaks into his grandmother’s house asking for money, the ensuing dialogue leads the reader to sympathize not only with the poor old and lonely woman who is going to be robbed by her grandson, but with Jacko as well, who has grown up in an unsettled household with lack of bonding to real parents and thus can be – if not justified – considered as a victim of circumstances. Her grandmother herself reveals how her methods with Jacko have always been quite brusque: «that blood in him was bad from the start. A beat and a beat and it never come out. A never see a child come tough so. Yu could beat Jacko from morning till night and not a drop of eye water ever come» (SL 18), and Jacko inevitably hurls this back at her: «A would like to see you bawl for once for all the bawling you mek me do in my life» (SL 23). The “One Eye God” may be a comforting presence to Jacko’s grandmother, but only as a surrogate companion to talk to in her lonely days, and whose deeds are often inexplicable. Her main preoccupation is about keeping up appearances: she hides her money to buy an expensive coffin, not «to go into the next world as poor and naked as I come into this one» (SL 25), and she does not want his grandson to migrate to the United States to see his parents lest he might bring shame on them. Jacko’s sharp reply highlights the irresponsibility of his parents who, as the Creole phrase goes, “spawn like there is no tomorrow” – like Doris in “Real Old Time T’ing”, who is «so busy dropping pickney year after year» (SL 54): «Them never shame me when they walk way leave me? Look how long I wait for them to send for me and all I ever hear is next year next year. Next year never did come for me for every year them breed up a new pickney. They could never afford to send for me» (SL 21). Exasperated and hardened by all the sufferings he has been through in his life, Jacko only worries about the *hic et nunc* and questions God’s indifference towards those who need Him most:

---

Same ol foolishness bout God and judgement. That is the trouble with the whole lot a unno. All unno think bout is judgement and future life. But from morning me study seh in this country fe yu God is a one eye God. Him only open him good eye to people who have everything already so him can pile up more thing on top of that. Him no business with rag tag and bobtail like unno. God up a top a laugh keh keh keh at the likes of you. Fe see you, so poor and turn down think you can talk to the likes of him so high and mighty (SL 24).

The open-ended story leaves the reader with the doubt whether Jacko will spare his grandmother's life or not, and this narrative strategy, adopted by the author in the previous one as well, underlines the close relationship, stemming from the oral tradition, between the storyteller and his audience. The reader is implicitly asked to contribute in making sense of the narrative, as Senior herself explains:

For what you see on the page is only part of the story. The inexplicable, the part not expressed, the part withheld is the part that you the reader will have to supply from your emotional and imaginative stock, the part that will enable the work to resonate. [...] I believe it's my job as a writer not to say it all, for I am only one-half of the equation – reader-writer – and that the work becomes complete only when it is read, when the reader enters the world I have created (ROWELL 1988: 483).

As regards language, Senior's use of Creole to echo if not reproduce Jacko's speech captures the drama of real life, the authentic "Jamaican voice", and her "linguistic counter-colonization" adds emphasis to Jacko's act of rebellion against the respectability and hegemonic authority of Christianity. Although Velma Pollard, in her study on Olive Senior and Lorna Goodison, states that «The non-JC [Jamaican Creole] speaker is unlikely to have difficulty understanding the words» (POLLARD 1991: 245), in many of these stories the language is strongly connoted and, in my view, not always easy to understand. In the passage quoted above, the most evident Jamaican Creole grammatical features, which can be traced back to West African languages, are the pronoun "unno" and the preposition "fe". "Unno" means "you/your" in the second person plural and, according to Richard Allsopp's dictionary of Caribbean English, its use in the Caribbean is limited to Jamaica, Barbados, Belize and the Cayman Islands (ALLSOPP 1996: 577). The reason for the substitution of an indigenous lexeme for plural "you" has a relatively transparent explanation: «West African speakers were accustomed to a morphologically encoded number distinction in the second person and thus substituted a native item for plural *you* rather than incorporating the ambiguity that English offered» (MCWHORTER 2005: 217). The corresponding item in Igbo (Nigeria), "unu", is phonetically identical to the form found across the Caribbean, and it is also worth noticing that this pronoun also recurs in Nigerian Pidgin, namely the variety of English used in Nigeria as *lingua franca* by speakers of different ethnic groups – but not in schools, media and public administration, where Nigerian Standard English is the norm – as the following example demonstrates: «wen una mama rich hie yestade, a de chop» (ELUGBE, OMAMOR 1991: 99), meaning "when your mother arrived here yesterday, I was eating". "Fe", also spelt "fi", used only in Jamaica and Belize (ALLSOPP 1996: 229), can mean "for" (or "because", as in Jacko's "fee see you", meaning "just take a look at yourself"); "to" in the infinitive form, and it can also indicate the possessive when followed by the personal pronoun, for instance "fe yu God" ("your God") in the above-mentioned passage. The exact origins of this preposition are uncertain; it could be a borrowing from the Twi (Ghana) verb "fi" ("to come from"), or from earlier English dialects, where «there was a *tobefor* construction which denoted futurity and, by extension, intention» (MCWHORTER 2005: 216). "For" infinitives also occur in the dialects of North Devonshire and Liverpool, important places of embarkation for Africa and the Caribbean; «contact between dialects of English in Britain itself would have reinforced features that have survived in Caribbean usage» (LALLA, D'COSTA 1990: 107). Other Creole features in Jacko's speech are: the subject and object pronouns used interchangeably and as possessives as well ("him only open him good eye"); the idiomatic phrase "from morning" ("from the beginning"); "study" ("think"); "seh" ("say", in this case – "me study seh" – used a conjunction, "I think that"); "laugh keh keh keh", also spelt "laugh kya kya" or "laugh kiff kiff". This phrase means "mock at", "deride", and is originally referred to the comedic element typical of black people from the Caribbean. In her study on Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon, Maria Grazia Sindoni describes the "kiff kiff laughter" as «a way of facing problems and worries by firstly *telling* them, by liberating oneself from their burden, and then by laughing at them, as if trying to cathartically erase their dangerous potential» (SINDONI 2006: 180).

---

In "Bright Thursdays" and "Confirmation Day", both told in Standard English, religion comes to the fore. In the first case, an omniscient Narrator tells the grievous story – but never in a maudlin way – of Laura, a child of an extramarital relationship who now lives with her paternal grandmother, Miss Christie, and feels isolated in an alien environment. His father, whom Laura has seen only in a photograph, is a fair-skinned man of «very high estate» (SL 38). Laura's mother, Miss Myrtle, is in awe of the aura of respectability and affluence of Miss Christie's middle-class world, and above all of the fact that Miss Christie's son has a fair skin. She almost took for granted the fact that «his only acknowledgement of the birth was a ten dollar note sent to her at the time» (SL 39), and her attempts to further "improve" Laura's almost straight hair and to rub her skin with cocoa butter to make it "clear" demonstrate – at least in the 1950s, when these stories are set – the tremendous importance of the role played by skin colour and ethnicity in the conferment of status. When Miss Myrtle writes to Miss Christie pleading her to take care of the child, she acknowledges such hierarchy: «I am the Little One and you are the Big One» (SL 40). In her new "family", where she had always been referred to merely as «Bertram's Mistake» (SL 40), and where even a meal becomes a ritual, Laura struggles to find an identity away from both rural peasantry and middle class, which share the same tendency to keep up appearances and to associate only to "good families". Both find a common denominator in the Anglican denomination, which through its powerful influence strengthens the society's divisions and colour hierarchies, shaping a sensibility imbued with the sense of guilt. The clouds in the sky become ugly and menacing in Laura's eyes, because she imagines Jesus, as she had seen Him in pictures in her Sunday School, coming down to earth floating on a cloud: «these pictures only served to remind her that she was a sinner and that God would one day soon appear out of the sky flashing fire and brimstone to judge and condemn her» (SL 46). The vengeful God of the Old Testament is no solace to her, and only exacerbates her fear, guilt and feeling of unworthiness, all elements which, more generally, have always been exploited by colonial authority to keep the people in subjection. The second part of the story describes the visit of Laura's father with his American wife. It is a traumatic experience, as the man thwarts Laura's expectations and treats her with indifference, until she even hears him calling her a «bloody little bastard» (SL 53). Deeply hurt, she runs away, but the consequences of the rejection are quite unexpected; the trauma has paradoxically lifted her anxieties and helped her take a decisive step: she severs the ties with the two polarities which have shaped her world, and with the Christian God, whom she associated with the menacing clouds, thus suggesting a way towards a new and autonomous identity: «she had made herself an orphan and there were no more clouds» (SL 53).

In "Confirmation Day" the first-person Narrator recalls the day she received the sacrament, and in this case the rejection of the Christian God is firmer than in the previous story. Right from the beginning, there is a feeling of deep uncertainty in the child's heart: «today I will become a child of god [author's lower case g] yet I do not know what they mean» (SL 81) and the description is filled with gloomy images: the church walls have peeling plaster and damp water stains, the nave smells of bats' droppings, the pipe organ "squeaks", and her grandmother (again, the child is parentless) sings off-key. The ominous atmosphere emphasizes the child's alienation from what she feels as empty rituals, with the Bishop chanting words «that sound as if he speaks in a foreign language» (SL 82). Although the story is written in Standard English, the tense shift from past to present and the stream of thoughts prevailing over the linearity of the narrative are indications of the influence of orality, as this passage demonstrates:

the only time god ever spoke to me was on the lonely roads later as I walked home in the burning midafternoon and he raced in clouds of terror across the sky...clouds that became transformed transmuted into shapes of awe that funnelled into eternity and how could the bread and wine which my grandmother and the parson promise make me any stronger against the terrible reality of him chasing me in clouds of horror everyday... [...] now we are in another time another church and the smell of incense mingles with the smell of the church and the smell is the smell of the aged. (SL 82)

As in "Bright Thursdays", the Christian God is seen here as a threatening presence floating on billowing clouds; His greatness "obliterates" and His judgement is «swift and terrible» (SL 82). In the end, however, the protagonist, like Laura in the previous story, discovers a new power in herself and rebels against the conventions of society, an act which can be viewed as a claim to indigenous values rooted in Africa vs. European values: «the fixed mealtimes, the daily ritual and the necessity of Confirmation and other observances in the Book of Common Prayer created a mould into which the crazy-mad fragments of my other, disordered life were being squeezed» (SL 83). The story closes with the same clouds metaphor of "Bright Thursdays", and with the same rejection of ossified dogmas: «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 is in that sky» (SL 84).

Beccka, the protagonist of "Do Angels Wear Brassieres?", enacts the same rebellion against "respectable" values, although this story is written with a much lighter touch. It is in fact one of the most hilarious pieces of the collection, and one of the most anthologized among Senior's stories. The setting is another typical Jamaican household, where Beccka lives with her mother

---

Cherry – presumably very young and inexperienced – and God-fearing, authoritarian Aunt Mary, who is actually in charge of the child's education. Beccca's rebellion is at the same time brazen and subtle: even though she «stick out her tongue at the world» (SL 67), she does not question God's existence, but rather than a threatening presence He is seen as a companion with whom to make conversation and whose image she refashions into that of a «big fat anansi in a corner of the roof» (SL 67). Anancy, the spider-man, belongs to the Ashanti culture (Ghana), and is a God-like figure, legendary for his trickery and cunning. He has become a key figure in Jamaican – and Caribbean – folklore, and according to Senior's *A-Z of Jamaican Heritage*, he «personifies the qualities of survival in the face of colonial oppression» (qtd. in THIEME 1994: 94). Beccca's association of God to Anancy denotes the vitality of a culture rooted in ancient traditions and also suggests an act of revenge on an imposed faith embodied by the sacred text, whose reading merely poses an occasion to prove her wit. As the Narrator ironically remarks, «Beccca reading the Bible in secret from cover to cover not from any conviction the little wretch but because everybody round her always quoting that book and Beccca want to try and find flaw and question she can best with them» (SL 67). The importance of Christianity is thus reassessed through the candour of the child's vision, while the adults' behaviour proves how religion represents above all a means to achieve social status and respectability. This is evident when the Archdeacon comes for a visit, a cause for excitement and frenzy in the house – and envy in the neighbours – mainly because he is an Englishman: «Auntie Mary is due this honour at least once because she is head of Mothers Union and though a lot of them jealous and back-biting her because Archdeacon never stop outside their gate even once let them say anything to her face» (SL 72). Beccca, the opposite of the colonial ideal of obedient and submissive female, challenges the Archdeacon with puns and riddles and questions the textual authority of the Bible through her verbal rebellion. Beccca rebels also against another pillar of colonial authority: she refuses to follow her aunt's decision to send her to a boarding school – a decision that had been taken mainly to shift responsibilities onto others: «I put her name down for the three boarding school them that furthest from here. Make them teacher deal with her. That is what they get paid for» (SL 70) – and decides to run away from home, in an attempt to reassemble what the protagonist of «Confirmation Day» has called the «crazy-mad fragments of her other life». Beccca's is a path leading towards a new sensibility where imagination floats above-ground – she dreams of joining her father in a circus and becoming a tight-rope walker – and although she eventually changes her mind thanks to the rhetorical skill of her friend O'Connor, it is clear that she will not pinion her witty and defiant spirit: «Beccca cant wait to get home to dream up all the tricky question she could put to a whole school full of girl. Not to mention the teachers» (SL 78).

On the linguistic plane, in this story the language adopted for both summary and scene could be defined as «stylized Caribbean Creole», since grammatical or lexical features typical of Jamaican Creole are absent here (for instance, «to» never becomes «fe»), and Senior's aim – brilliantly achieved – seems to be less the faithful transcription of the vernacular than the recreation of a «Caribbean flavour», of a lilting speech that, extended to the narrating voice, becomes the perfect medium of the Caribbean writer/storyteller. We can notice a widespread syntactical and morphological simplification, evident in the frequent elision of the auxiliary verb, for instance «her mother gone» (SL 67) or «Right now she consoling about Beccca» (SL 68); of the main verb: «Beccca down on her knees» (SL 67); of the subject and of the third-person suffix in the verb: «Is so she ask me» (SL 69). The phrasing device known as «front-focusing» or «front-shifting» is a clear indication of a West African substratum in Caribbean Creoles; it occurs when the main verb of a short utterance is introduced and stressed at the beginning of a short statement in which it is going to recur in a normal position, to add impact to its use, for instance: «Lightning come strike me dead if is lie I lie» (SL 69). This particular kind of reduplicated form can also affect an adjective or a noun, as in this case: «Is just hard ears she hard ears.» (SL 69) «Verb copying» with front focusing is quite common in West Africa; Patricia L. Carrell gives an example in her study on Igbo: «o bè jí kà m rìrì jí» (CARRELL 1970: 49) with the meaning of «it is a yam that I eat a yam». George Tucker Childs provides an example from Kisi (Guinea): «pùén-ndán yá pùén ní» (CHILDS 2003: 135), «it is forgetting that I forgot»; Peter A. Roberts gives two other examples, from Yoruba (Nigeria): «gbigbe ni won gbe e lo» (take + is + they + took + it + go), «they actually took it away», and from Twi (Ghana): «hwe na Kwasi hwe ase» (fall + is + Kwasi + fall + down), «Kwasi actually fell» (ROBERTS 1988: 130). In Nigerian Pidgin, the verb emphasized in the initial clause is preceded by «na», for instance: «na bai i bai di moto» (ELUGBE, OMAMOR 1991: 105), «he actually bought the car». As regards the lexicon, we can notice typically Caribbean items such as «pickney», «facety» and «force-ripe»: «No pickney suppose to come facety and force-ripe so» (SL 70). «Pickney» is used to denote any young child of black parentage. According to Richard Allsopp, the lexeme has its origins in the Portuguese «pequenino» («little one») with reduction by apocope; «the term would have been particularly current in the early Portuguese control of slaving on the Slave Coast, and brought to the Caribbean by the slaves themselves» (ALLSOPP 1996: 438). It is interesting to notice how this term survives in Nigerian Pidgin as well: «dis pikin go spuel» (ELUGBE, OMAMOR 1991: 99) meaning «this child will be spoilt». «Facety» («impudent») belongs exclusively to Jamaican Creole, while «force-ripe», more generally Caribbean, refers to a prematurely ripened fruit, and by extension to someone whose behaviour is precocious and offensive. Another typical Jamaican phrase is «Beccca normally please like puss with every new thing» (SL 76), which is referred to the self-satisfied look of the cat («puss») that has got at the food.

«Ballad», as the title suggests, is an example of a story «designed to be heard» (SIMPSON 2004: 831), the most evident instance in this collection of the extent to which the African tradition of storytelling influences Senior's narrative technique. Writing and speech are juxtaposed from the outset: «Teacher ask me to write composition about The Most Unforgettable Character I Ever Meet and I write three page about Miss Rilla and Teacher tear it up and say that Miss Rilla not fit person to

---

write composition about and right away I feel bad» (SL 100). Miss Rilla embodies the indigenous culture rooted in tradition and folk values, and is also the surrogate mother to Lenora, the parentless child who relates her story as a first-person Narrator. After the teacher forbids Lenora to write about Miss Rilla, who had been ostracized by the whole community for her “transgressive” and “sinful” behaviour, she decides to rely on orality and turns directly to the reader: «So I will just tell you the story of Miss Rilla and Poppa D, [...] and when we come to the sad part we can have something like a chorus because they have that in all the ballad song they sing but I dont think bout the chorus yet» (SL 100). There is actually a “chorus”: “Ballad” is in fact divided into eight parts, and each one ends with a sort of elegiac evocation, often signalled by double spacing, of beloved Miss Rilla: «O Lord. No more laughing. No more big gold earring» (SL 104); «Ai, no more laughing. No more Miss Rilla...» (SL 108); «No Miss Rilla to tell me what to do. No Blue Boy playing music» (SL 112); «I only know no more bake things, no more Miss Rilla, all the laughing done» (SL 115); «Poor poor Miss Rilla. Ai my child, poor Poppa D» (SL 118). Senior’s choice to tell the story of Miss Rilla – through Lenora’s viewpoint – committing to the page the storyteller’s craft can be read as an act of resistance against narrative forms inherited from colonial culture, in the same way as Lenora, like Beccka in the previous story, rebels against the society’s religious bigotry. Miss Rilla becomes an outcast simply because she does not correspond to the image of the “good woman” bolstered by biblical precepts: she has had more than one lover, and she is thus branded a harlot; she lives with Poppa D without being married, and above all, she has no children. In this regard MeMa, Lenora’s step-mother, swiftly jumps to conclusions: «God ordain all women to have children and if woman dont have children she no better than mule because God curse is on her» (SL 113). MeMa has undergone religious pressures and inherited puritanical hypocrisy from colonial education, which has also instilled the bias, paradoxical in a country which is over 90 per cent black, of a “Caucasian ideal”. She is proud of her children because «they come out with good colour and straight hair better than Chiney» (SL 109), while Lenora, she says, does not stand a chance of finding a husband, since nice men look for a «wife with good coloration so they can raise the colour» (SL 111). This tendency towards self-contempt, to denigrate one’s own people and skin colour, has been identified by V. S. Naipaul as a peculiar trait of the colonized. In *The Middle Passage* (1962), he acutely describes this attitude:

This was the greatest damage done to the Negro by slavery. It taught him self-contempt. It set him the ideals of white civilization and made him despise every other. Deprived as a slave of Christianity [that is, the liberating message of Christianity which would make nonsense of a slave society], education and family, he set himself after emancipation to acquire these things; and every step on the road to whiteness deepened the anomaly of his position and increased his vulnerability. (NAIPAUL 1969: 71)

Lenora is instinctively drawn by Miss Rilla’s vitality and free spirit, and even though at first she is conditioned by the codes of the middle-class society – «if I turn Teacher I could get me hair straighten just like Teacher Wife» (SL 111) – in the end she embraces the folk values represented by Miss Rilla, and pinpoints the cause of other people’s envy: «Miss Rilla free and easy and happy and like to laugh and tease people plenty and everybody else round here hard and miserable and thats why they hate her so» (SL 126). Moreover, all her doubts regarding her future are dispelled, and the vibrancy and deep-rooted honesty of Miss Rilla’s world have priority over the stultified religious precepts and materialism of the middle-class: «I dont care if I dont turn teacher with press hair and new dress. I believe it better to be someone that can laugh and make other people laugh and be happy too» (SL 134).

As regards the narrative technique, there are many indications of the influence of orality: Lenora often turns directly to the reader, as she were aware of an audience, in this case also brandishing one of the oldest narrative weapons (established in the 18th century, notably Fielding in *Tom Jones*), and the storyteller’s artlessness prevails over a traditional story-line: «Now it look like I gone and spoil this ballad story for this is not the way I want to tell it at all. The part about Miss Rilla dying is the end part and it really should start at the beginning» (SL 109). It is Senior’s deft use of Creole, however, which lends a fascinating “oral” flow to the written word and which is given full justice only if the story is read aloud. The polyphony and linguistic versatility are more emphasized than in “Do Angels Wear Brassieres?”; Senior alternates a stylized Caribbean Creole for the narrating voice, very similar to the previous story’s, with a rawer Jamaican Creole – with a wide use of phonetic spelling – for the characters’ speech, a strategy which allows for an intense verisimilitude of the narrative. One instance is MeMa’s speech: «Look at that wutless good-fe-nutten a gwan there nuh. [...] Is pure Coromantee nigger live over there like that bwoy Zackie that did tief Mass Curly goat yu no see how the lot of them redibo and have puss eye?» (SL 101). In this passage the author resorts to phonetic spelling to transcribe the Creole pronunciation: “wutless” (worthless), “good-fe-nutten” (good-for-nothing), “gwan” (go on), “nuh” (now), “bwoy” (boy), “tief” (thief), “yu” (you). The noun “tief” used as a verb and replacing “to steal” is also an example of functional shift, namely a grammatical device which multiplies considerably the coverage of Caribbean creoles vocabulary. In Nigerian Pidgin as well, “tif” is commonly used as a verb: «i tif di ticha buk» (ELUGBE, OMAMOR 1991: 105), meaning “he



stole the teacher's book". Another case of a noun functioning as a verb is "prison" with the meaning of "imprison": «is only because Miss Rilla offer to pay for damages that they dont prison him.» (SL 130) In the same way, an adjective can be used as a verb, for instance "fraid" (deriving from the predicative adjective "afraid") with the meaning of "to be afraid": «I would fraid what I see» (SL 108), or the other way around, with a verb ("to vex") functioning as an adjective: «I cant stay vex with Miss Rilla» (SL 122). Other Creole phrasing devices to be found in this story are reduplicated forms, to achieve intensity of expression. Here they affect both adjectives: «Mass Curly sell him cheap cheap a whole heap of cartridge» (SL 119), and adverbs: «is not a Christian death that at all at all» (SL 108). The process of reduplication is common in many West-African languages, although not necessarily with an increasing effect; Silvia Kouwenberg and Darlene Lacharité have demonstrated how, in the case of Ewe (Ghana), the primary purpose of morphological reduplication processes appears to be the formation of deverbal nouns: «flin» means "to remember" and «flin-flin» means "memory" (KOUWENBERG, LACHARITÉ 2004: 299). Similarly, in Nigerian Pidgin reduplications are widely exploited not only to express the idea of intensity, for example «wàkà-wáká» ("walk-walk") meaning "to wander perpetually", but also to form deverbal nouns, as in the case of «blò-bló» ("blow-blow") meaning "balloon", or as a modifier, when the reduplicated adjective becomes an adverb: «smol smol» meaning "little by little" (ELUGBE, OMAMOR 1991: 53-103). According to George Tucker Childs, reduplications can be considered the result of the creativity shown by speakers of pidgins. When such speakers had no morpheme which they could use as an intensifier, they simply repeated the one they had: reduplication used, thus, as «the most "natural" sort of morphology» (CHILDS 2003: 115). This claim could be confirmed by the fact that reduplications occur also in English-based creoles and pidgins which are beyond the influence of an African substratum, as in the case of those spoken in the Pacific islands. However, if one cannot claim that reduplications are a clear indication of an African substrate, at the same time they can hardly be considered a prerogative of speakers of pidgins or creoles, since they are frequent in African native languages such as Yoruba, Hausa or Ewe. We can notice a West-African substratum on the lexical plane as well; in the passage above, "redibo" is a derogatory term which indicates a lighter than usual complexion in the Afro-Caribbean person, and refers to the Ibo ethnic group from eastern Nigeria; "Coromantee nigger", here derogatory, is «a name used to identify a particular kind of slaves from the Gold Coast» (ALLSOPP 1996: 170); "su-su" ("to gossip") – «if they su-suing together as soon as you get near they stop» (SL 129) – is a calque from Twi (Ghana) «susuw kã», probably onomatopoeic, meaning "to utter a suspicion" (ALLSOPP 1996: 540); "kas-kas" – «Jiveman cursing her all kind of name and big kas-kas going on between them» (SL 132) – is also a calque from Twi «akasakasa», meaning "dispute, quarrel" (ALLSOPP 1996: 140); "duppy" ("ghost") derives from more than one African source, and is an instance of an African substratum which resurfaces not only in the language, but in the religious sphere as well: when Miss Rilla dies, everybody wants to make sure that she is buried very deep, lest her duppy should «come back like rolling calf which is bad duppy to haunt you» (SL 115). Proverbs are another indication of the influence of the oral folk culture: "dog nyam yu supper" ("your dog eats your supper", "you let yourself in for it") – «if is that class of people yu want to mix up wid dog nyam yu supper» (SL 102) – and «cockroach no business inna fowl roost» (SL 108), meaning that one should not find oneself involved in anything when one is unwelcome or out of place. Other Creole grammatical and syntactical features concern the possessive case, which does not depend on word inflections to signal case relationships in the noun phrase, for example "Mass Curly goat" in MeMa's speech quoted above – a feature that brings Caribbean Creole and Nigerian Pidgin into the same focus: «di man shu» (ELUGBE, OMAMOR 1991: 92), meaning "the man's shoes" – and «they had was to carry Miss Rilla away» (SL 133), a typical Creole locution meaning "had to" + "was going to".

The stories I have analyzed are a demonstration of Senior's sensitiveness towards the human condition, particularly that of the poor, rural segment of Jamaican society in the decade before Independence (1962), a society struggling to construct a new identity free from the colonial legacy and rooted in folk values and traditions. Her depictions – at times light or even genuinely hilarious – of family relationships are, as Richard F. Patteson observes, «actually subtle attacks on systems of power dynamics analogous to those underlying colonialism itself» (PATTESON 1993: 16). The "attacks" are launched by Senior on the linguistic plane as well, through her skilful use of Jamaican Creole. Her linguistic versatility is the result of the complex and fragmented world where she grew up and which moulded her sensibility and her talent; a society, as Senior herself has stated, fraught with contradictions inherent in «European values versus indigenous values rooted in Africa [...] in the spoken word versus the written, in Jamaican Creole versus the language of the Bible» (ROWELL 1988: 482).

#### Works cited

- R. ALLSOPP (ed.), *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996.  
 E. K. BRATHWAITE, *History of the Voice. The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, London, New Beacon Books, 1984.

- 
- P. L. CARRELL, *A Transformational Grammar of Igbo*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- G. T. CHILDS, *An Introduction to African Languages*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003.
- M. COLLINS, «Writing and Creole language politics: voice and story», in K. M. Balutansky, M. Sourieau (ed.), *Caribbean creolization. Reflections on the cultural dynamics of language, literature and identity*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1998, p. 89-95.
- A. DONNELL, «The short fiction of Olive Senior», in M. Condé, T. Lonsdale (ed.), *Caribbean women writers: fiction in English*, Basingstoke and London, MacMillan, 1999, p. 117-143.
- B. O. ELUGBE, A. P. OMAMOR, *Nigerian Pidgin. Background and Prospects*, Ibadan, Heinemann (Nigeria), 1991.
- E. IPPOLITO, *Caribbean Women Writers. Identity and Gender*, Rochester, Camden House, 2000.
- J. KINCAID, *A Small Place*, Harmondsworth, Plume Printing, 1989.
- S. KOUWENBERG, D. LACHARITÉ, «Reduplication in Caribbean Creole and Niger-Congo languages», *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages*, n. 2, 19, 2004, p. 285-331.
- B. LALLA, J. D'COSTA, *Language in Exile. Three Hundred Years of Jamaican Creole*, Tuscaloosa and London, The University of Alabama Press, 1990.
- J. H. MCWHORTER, *Defining Creole*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- V. S. NAIPPAUL, *The Middle Passage*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969.
- E. O'CALLAGHAN, «Review of *Summer Lightning and other stories*», *Journal of West Indian literature*, n. 1, 1, October 1986, p. 92-94.
- R. F. PATTESON, «The fiction of Olive Senior: traditional society and the wider world», *Ariel*, n. 1, 24, January 1993, p. 15-16.
- V. POLLARD, «An introduction to the poetry and fiction of Olive Senior», *Callaloo*, n. 3, 11, Summer 1988, p. 540-545.
- V. POLLARD, «Mothertongue voices in the writing of Olive Senior and Lorna Goodison», in S. Nasta (ed.), *Motherlands: black women's writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, London, The Women's Press Limited, 1991, p. 239-245.
- P. A. ROBERTS, *West Indians and their Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- C. H. ROWELL, «An interview with Olive Senior», *Callaloo*, n. 3, 11, Summer 1988, p. 480-490.
- O. SENIOR, *Summer Lightning and Other Stories*, Harlow, Longman, 1986.
- O. SENIOR, *Working Miracles. Women's Lives in the English-speaking Caribbean*, London, James Currey, 1991.
- H. M. SIMPSON, «'Voicing the text': the making of an oral poetics in Olive Senior's short fiction», *Callaloo*, n. 3, 27, Summer 2004, p. 829-843.
- M. G. SINDONI, *Creolizing Culture. A Study on Sam Selvon's Work*, New Delhi, Atlantic, 2006.
- J. THIEME, «'Mixed worlds': Olive Senior's *Summer Lightning*», *Kunapipi*, n. 2, 16, 1994, p. 90-95.
- 

Pour citer cet article :

Gianni TOMIOTTI, *The spoken and the written word: Jamaican Creole and the language of the Bible in Olive Senior's early fiction*, *Les Caraïbes: convergences et affinités*, Publifarum, n. 10, pubblicato il 2009, consultato il 15/06/2024, url: [http://www.farum.it/publifarum/ezine\\_pdf.php?id=95](http://www.farum.it/publifarum/ezine_pdf.php?id=95)