Denise deCaires Narain

*Olive Senior*. London: Northcote House, 2011. ix + 154 pp. (Cloth £34.00)

Although widely recognized and critiqued, Olive Senior’s work has largely been discussed through interviews or in essays on individual stories or poems, comparisons with other Caribbean woman writers, or discussions of genre. Denise deCaires Narain’s book, though compact, addresses the wide sweep of Senior’s concerns and technical versatility through short story, verse, and non-fiction. Unfortunately it missed *Dancing Lessons*, the novel published in the same year (2011).

Narain first locates Senior in her literary medium (for example, in relation to Louise Bennett), and focuses on authorial concerns such as gender socialization. In discussing story-telling, she notes how the voices of Senior’s ordinary people reflect social and racial profiles as her subjects—often children disconnected from their parents—discover their outer and inner landscapes. Intersections of gender and ethnicity in character formation are well-worn topics in critical debate, but Narain tracks contradictory expectations that inform constructions of femininity and masculinity in postcolonial societies to account for the way Senior renders ambiguous the futures of her young characters.

The first three chapters focus on Senior’s short fiction; the fourth and fifth address poetry, recognizing her engagement with the natural world as our primary resource, and her interrogation of its consumption and exploitation. The final chapter shows how Senior’s non-fictional works not only extend scholarship on Caribbean culture but integrate cultural and literary approaches to major themes like the contradictory circumstances of Caribbean women.

The study shows Senior unsettling assumptions (the Caribbean as happily creolized and stably hybrid, for example) and moving beyond binaries like Euro- or Afro-centeredness while nuancing tensions between the extremes. Narain notes how these forces relate to exploitation of race and culture in local politics (p. 63) and how intransigent racial hierarchy intertwines with class positions (p. 65). At the same time, she stresses Senior’s refusal to privilege any particular ethnicity or to project a Caribbean hybridity that denies the integrity of its composite elements. Nor does Senior convey seamless accommodation of difference, as Narain notes: aggressive rejection of homosexuality is laid bare in Senior’s portrayals of Jamaican life.

Senior’s discursive achievements have been widely acknowledged but little analyzed; Narain engages with Senior’s ability to manipulate both oral and scribal traditions, for example in the interface of Beccka’s performance traits with the Archdeacon’s strategies of reasoning (p. 23, and see Senior 1986). Although not engaging in technical linguistic analysis, Narain percep-
tively demonstrates Senior’s employment of Anglophone Creole in intertextual nuances like the echo of M.G. Smith’s “I saw my land in the morning” ([1938] 2004) in her representation of a creolized and rehearsed version for the tourist: “Come see my land, A-oh, / that she was fair,” where patriotic celebration is recast as sales pitch.

The enabling of ambivalence through manipulation of codeshifting has been discussed before (Lalla 2000), but Narain usefully investigates Senior’s employment of creolized space as unsynthesized and maintaining crucial and significant gaps. She evaluates Senior’s subtle manipulation of registers—contrasted, for example, with Kincaid’s direct attack on colonial discourse as “the language of the criminal” (1988:31–32)—as playful and deflationary (p. 92). Here and elsewhere the critic draws insightful contrasts between Senior’s codeshifting and that of poets Louise Bennett and Lorna Goodison whose Jamaican Creole Narain describes as (respectively) performed and poeticized (p. 112).

In discussing the genres in which Senior operates, Narain points to the historicizing of the Caribbean as itself an exploitative regime following on that of slavery—the sentence as coffle (p. 98, with specific reference to “Shell Blow” in Senior 2007:86):

And nothing
can stave off the relentless grinding down by
this new slavery: the collections, the recordings,
the writing of history.

Narain also categorizes some work by Senior as defined by migration, portrayals of journeys to Britain and disillusioned returns, the chaos of a suspended sense of place, of deferral and interruption and criss-crossing. She locates Senior as writing, like many of her contemporaries, “after the manifest failure of post-colonial Jamaican governments to deliver social justice” (p. 134), yet absolves her of writing on behalf of any group, including the nation. Narain’s study is not new in associating Senior’s writing specifically with the Caribbean rather than the diasporic experience, but it highlights Senior’s specificity regarding actual lived experience within communities in which individual history persists and in which the encounters between the multiple strands of Caribbean reality remain significant. In discussing stories of child maturation, Narain supports Helen Gilbert (2004:24) in associating Senior’s interest in the developmental narrative not so much with individual formation leading to adult identity as with the circumstances through which they must struggle to construct themselves (p. 27). Senior’s clearly visualized physical Caribbean is built on attributes not shared with metropolitan locations, a “lived landscape ...