"A shared culture"

An Interview with Olive Senior
by Marlies Glaser


Marlies Glaser: Where do you as a writer position yourself as far as oral and scribal traditions are concerned?

Olive Senior: What I am trying to do in my work is to fuse the oral and the scribal traditions, because although I am obviously educated in a scribal tradition, I come out of an oral culture, in that I grew up in a small village in Jamaica, and this was before television. We did not have access to media or entertainment so we had to entertain ourselves – story-telling, for instance, was very important. For every single night of our lives we were told stories, and orality pervaded the culture, because song is also important. People sang as they worked, and there were special work songs for all activities. We grew up hearing these, and sometimes these songs were used to transmit information or jokes or gossip. Also in school – even our games were to a great extent verbal. So I grew up appreciating speech as a very important medium of communication; and in my writing, what I am trying to do is to write as if I am actually telling a story.
Were you influenced by the radio at that time?

Yes, but radio came later; as a young child – I am not sure we even had a radio. As a teenager, of course, radio was very important; but I was busily listening to WINZ in Miami for pop music. Certainly by the time you were a teenager you were becoming Americanized, although we were then a British colony.

You mentioned earlier that as schoolchildren you were not permitted to speak Creole even outside of class. How did you as children feel about that?

I should explain that the educational system was geared to transforming us into little Englishmen and -women – that is, high-school education; but even in primary schools the teachers were quite strict about speech. But because high-school education, when I went to school, was elitist, you were in a sense being socialized into European values, and anything that was not European – anything that was African – was regarded as bad or worthless or not worth cultivating your mind for. It was as if people had taken hold of your mind and you were being transformed into this other creature. But, of course, language is a most potent means of separating classes; so, once you got to high school, you were expected to speak standard English everywhere, including in the schoolyard, the playground and on the streets; and if the teachers or the prefects heard you using Creole you could get into trouble. It was that bad – or taken that seriously.

But how did you as children respond to that? Did you accept it?

Well, we did speak Creole among our friends, and so on; I suppose it's only in retrospect that we realize what was being done to us. While it was happening we just accepted it as the norm. This is what happened in our high schools; you went to high school, you wore a uniform, you behaved in a certain way.... And I suppose education was very important to us because it was the only route out of our poverty-stricken backgrounds. It was the only route to a life outside our villages, or whatever; so we just simply accepted it as part of the norm.

Was village life at that time regarded as something negative in regard to material conditions?

Yes – although, looking back, it was culturally very rich. But because we were brainwashed at that time we did not recognize the merit in what was in the village or in traditional culture. It was a culture of poor black people, and we were being socialized away from that, whether we were black or white or brown. Once you were taken out of the village and sent to high school, then you were, in a way, taught to despise your background and where you came from.