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EDITOR'S NOTE

Interviewed by Dominique Dubois, and Jeanne Devoize., Caribbean Short Story Conference, January 19, 1996. First published in *JSSE* n°26, 1996.

Dominique DUBOIS: Would you regard yourself as a feminist writer?

Olive SENIOR: When I started to write, I wasn't conscious about feminism and those issues. I think basically my writing reflects my society and how it functions. Obviously, one of my concerns is gender. I tend to avoid labels.

Jeanne DEVOIZE: How can you explain that there are so many women writers in Jamaica, particularly as far as the short story is concerned.

O.S.: I think there are a number of reasons. One is that it reflects what happened historically in terms of education: that a lot more women were, at a particular point in time, being educated through high school, through university and so on. But I also think that we benefitted from the feminist movement and the whole notion of women being freer to pursue their interests. Women began to take their work out of the cupboard and show it to people. A lot of the women I know got a lot of encouragement from men in the Caribbean, both scholars and other writers, and so on, as well as from each other.

D.D.: In a lot of your short stories, the characters speak in creole. Did you learn it yourself? Did you speak it? Is there a certain unity in terms of creole in Jamaica or is it different from village to village?

O.S.: I grew up speaking creole and English. When I went to high school, we were punished for not speaking English, proper English, you know. I consider myself bilingual. When I'm with my friends, I switch to creole, if necessary. So I have no problem writing it. My characters arrive with their language, whether it's English or creole. In answer to the second part of your question, I think the creole that is spoken in Jamaica is all one but what you will find is that people in the city might speak a bit

differently front people who are deep rural, who are from the country. And of course the creole is changing. I can't speak authoritatively about it, but it's a language that is constantly changing. Young people are coining words all the time. They are making up new phrases. And of course the Rastafarians have also influenced creole. So I think the distinction might not nowadays be so great between city and town because they have come closer together but changes will be observable over time. The way our grandparents spoke creole was very different from the way we were speaking it, which is different from the way young people speak today.

D.D.: On the same topic, I have got a quotation from Sam Selvon who said: "You become creolized, you are not Indian, you are not Black, you are not even White. You assimilate all these cultures and you turn out to be a different man who is the Caribbean man." Is it a view that you share?

O.S.: Well, the term "Creole" too is very confusing, the way it's used in the Caribbean. So there is the Creole language and then there is the word "Creole" which in itself has different meanings because historically it meant a white person born in the Caribbean; now it's being used to reflect the kind of fusion of cultures that Selvon is talking about. In that sense, I do agree that what makes the Caribbean unique is the blending of many different cultures. And there are those of us who regard ourselves as creolized in that sense, in that we are reflecting all these different cultures coming together. So I definitely would agree with that. Not everyone agrees. There is a big intellectual debate actually about how to define Caribbean society. So the notion of defining it as a Creole society is only one of the approaches.

J.D.: Talking about this idea of the melting-pot, and all the different cultures and different races and different religions in the Caribbean, do you still feel that there is a real unity somewhere within the Caribbean?

O.S.: I think there is at a deep level, because we share a common history, and all Caribbean societies are mixed, you know, racially and culturally and so on. Unfortunately, because we are so fragmented geographically and linguistically, there are no mechanisms for really bringing us all together. So I think the whole notion of the Caribbean being one is an ideal that intellectuals share. But in practice I don't know that it will ever be realized because you'll find that the Caribbean is no longer in the Caribbean now; it's in Brooklyn, it's in London, it's in Toronto, it's in Amsterdam, in Paris and so on. But there is a level at which I would say yes, we do have a lot in common and we always will.

J.D.: What do you think of this diaspora of Caribbean people and how do you think it's going to affect the Caribbean in the future?

O.S.: It's unfortunate in a way. Obviously it has its down side. It's a drain on all these countries. But I guess it's inevitable. And it's nothing new. People have been migrating from Jamaica from the mid-19th century. So it's good and bad. I'm personally concerned about the effects that it has on people back home, particularly when nowadays, a lot of people who are migrating are women who leave their children behind and I think it has a very negative effect, socially, on these societies. But obviously it also has beneficial effects. So we can't escape it. I think we are going to see a lot of interesting writing coming from the diaspora. We are seeing it now. Caribbean literature is no longer just in the Caribbean; it's all over the world.

J.D.: Don't you think, though, it affects the writing in as much as perhaps you forget some things or you put more emphasis on other things?

O.S.: Yes. I think one of the dangers is with language. I found that some of the stuff has language which seems to me not quite authentic. But I think it's because the people writing it left a long time ago. And they don't keep going back. So that can be problematic. But I think the writers who were born or brought up abroad are bringing a whole different approach to the literature.

J.D.: If you compare a writer like Michael Anthony who writes about the enchantment of the isles and somebody who is abroad who has perhaps come to see things differently, the outlook must be different though.

O.S.: Yes, I think the eye is quite different. People like Jamaica Kincaid or Michelle Cliff have an approach that would be very different from that of Michael Anthony. I think it's inevitable. And what's also interesting is that it is in the diaspora that there is a sense in which you can talk about 'Caribbean literature', because a lot of the young writers of Spanish and French and Dutch backgrounds are now writing in English. So I now have access to it in a way I never had before. Not all are in favor of this trend but it is certainly transformative.

D.D.: You said in an interview by Binder which has just been published in a journal in France, that when you left Jamaica, this was a choice, this was not exile. Was your literary expectation part of the reasons why you left or were there other reasons?

O.S.: Well, it's kind of peculiar because I left Jamaica, but I didn't plan to leave. In other words, I really left for a year. I said: "I'm going to take a year off and write." And then the year became two and three and four. And then I suppose my literary expectations became bound up in it because I had to make a decision. I was going to spend all my life working at other things and writing on the sidelines or I was going to try and make writing my main activity. One of the reasons I'm living in Toronto is because the Caribbean live in Toronto. There is nothing I want that I can't get. It's also very close to Jamaica. I suppose what I have sought and I am trying to find is the best of both worlds.

D.D.: So you meet other writers. Is Austin Clarke for instance in Toronto?

O.S.: Yes. Austin Clarke has been there for a very long time. I just met him recently, actually. A very delightful man! Actually, there are a lot of Caribbean writers who have been in Toronto for a long time: Dionne Brand, Norbese Philip, for example.

J.D.: All Caribbean writers speak about the hierarchical structure of Caribbean society. Could you give us a bit of the background on this?

O.S.: I think it's an integral part of colonial society; hierarchy based on race. Race and class were identical and the social structure was a pyramid: white, brown, black. To a great extent this has been changed but not in any absolute sense. We haven't yet really freed ourselves from mental slavery and so the mentalities are still with us. Slavery ended in 1838 but that hierarchical structure still remains in our social relationships, in the way we deal with each other. Some people still have the sense of hierarchy and of privilege.

J.D.: There seem to be other sorts of hierarchies as between country and town, people who have been abroad and people who haven't, between the rich and the poor, and so on.

O.S.: Well, some of those have broken down. For instance, the difference between town and country has broken down because of communication. Travelling has become commonplace. So in a sense the society is now more integrated whereas when I was growing up, there was a very clear distinction between urban and rural life. There have

also been enormous changes as far as race and racial relationships are concerned. I think now class is based not so much on race as on money, wealth... Then there are other changes in the society but I don't think they are as deep rooted. We don't talk about White and Black in the sense the Americans do. We are very conscious of shade of skin, of facial features, of hair. These things are still very much with us, you know.

D.D.: Is lightness of skin still an advantage?

O.S.: Some people would say yes. It's not the advantage that it used to be. There was a time when that was it. The lighter you were, the more privileged you were. Now, I think, people are privileged by other things such as education. Education has worked in reverse, has undercut that hierarchy. The old wealth in all of these countries in the Caribbean is still in the hands of a light-skinned oligarchy. But it is changing. I know a lot of young entrepreneurs who are darkskinned, who come from groups who in the past never had these opportunities.

J.D.: In many stories, there is always this very great emphasis on the notion of respectability. Do you feel this is disappearing or what?

O.S.: Yes. These societies have been so transformed in the last 20-30 years. Respectability is still important but it is now regarded as an old-fashioned virtue and other things count for more. These societies have now become very materialistic. So what really counts now is wealth and the visible signs of wealth and the signs that you have travelled and so on. But when I was growing up, respectability was everything; it was a crushing sort of weight, especially for girls. Middle-class girls were brought up really according to Victorian standards. So it was a very restrictive kind of upbringing. For a lot of us, it's almost like a straight jacket. Still I would say the society has manifestly changed and a lot of the change has to do with what started to happen in the sixties at Independence beginning with the music. The music is one of the expressions that enabled people to break out of the mould. Music has also been the route to the acquisition of wealth and status for a lot of poor, underprivileged, uneducated people who would never have had any chance in life except for this talent. With the music came other forms like art and so on where the formerly unheard underclass were able to express themselves. And that has transformed the society. It wasn't just the singing or the art. It's a whole style of behaviour, dress and everything, which has filtered upwards. A sort of reversal of things. A very interesting phenomenon.

D.D.: You mentioned the Rastafarians. Obviously, everybody knows about the movement. But is it still a strong movement nowadays?

O.S.: Rastafarianism is now an international movement. But I think it has lost its religious center. It started out as a politico-religious movement. Now I think a lot of it is just fashion. Who is a rasta? Anybody. You could become a rasta tomorrow if you did up your hair. It has contributed to a lot of the creativity in these islands. But I would say it's lost its momentum as a social force because Rastafarianism started out as the religion of the oppressed. It was the poorest people in the society who were Rastas, outcasts. But that's not so today. Rastas are the trendiest people. So Rastafarianism has changed. It's still a powerful force. But it's changed its nature.

J.D.: Several critics said that the notion of exclusion was a very frequent ingredient of the short story. Would you say this is the case with the Caribbean short story and how does it work? You yourself have very often dealt with this notion of exclusion?

O.S.: I am not quite sure about the world exclusion.

J.D.: They tend to say that the short story prevails as a genre in societies in which exclusion is a basis of the society.

O.S.: Oh! I never heard that. That's quite interesting actually. I am not sure I can comment on that because I have never thought about it. Your question is "Is that why the short story is so privileged in the Caribbean?"

D.D.: I think, up to a point, you started giving an answer to that question when you explained, for instance, why you started writing short stories rather than novels. And you said that a lot of the women writers were the same.

O.S.: I think one of the reasons that so many of us are writing short stories, particularly women, is that we don't have the time or the space to write novels. To have that kind of space is a privilege which I, for a fact, have never been able to afford. That's part of it, I think. But I know that some people feel too that there's something about the way we tell stories: we all come out of a society in which story-telling is very important or has been in the past. And that also might be influential. I know I grew up hearing stories and of course these are short stories. So we tend to tell stories. When I started to write, I didn't consciously think of why I wrote in this way: the stories just came in that form.

D.D.: And yet the people who started to be well-known as Caribbean writers, I mean, like George Lamming, actually wrote novels.

O.S.: Yes. My take on it is that virtually all of those writers were men, except for, I think, Sylvia Winter. She was the only woman novelist of that period I can think of, and in those days you didn't call yourself a writer. You called yourself a novelist or a poet because those were the two forms that were recognized and those people like Lamming and Naipaul and so on, they had to get validated by the metropole, and therefore they had to write novels. Most Caribbean women I know are writing in all genres, which I think is unusual. We don't feel constrained to produce the grand novel but at the same time we don't feel we must be boxed in by the story we write. We write all kinds of things. I don't know whether it's a function of gender or not. But also, I think, the women just don't have time. You see, the men have wives. If you have a wife, you can sit and write a novel because the wife is taking care of the housework and the kids.

D.D.: I suppose you're right and that it's easier to be an academic if you are a man than if you are a woman.

O.S.: I know what I am talking about in terms of the help and the support men get, even for people to type their stuff.

D.D.: Computers have changed that!

J.D.: In that interview we mentioned earlier, you suggested you couldn't really think of any writers who truly influenced you in your writing. Do you really feel you have never been influenced by anyone.

O.S.: Oh no! It is just that I am not conscious of who influenced me. I think it's for the critics to look at my work and discern influences if they consider that important. When I was young, I read so much -- I read everything -- that I cannot point to any one writer and say: "that's what influenced me." I am very conscious that I was influenced by the whole canon of English literature because, growing up in a colonial society, I was exposed to it. I was also influenced by the oral tradition. But I am not conscious of any one influence. I mean, I am sure I was influenced by the Bible because my mother was a great Christian and when I was young, we read the Bible; influenced by Church hymns and the rhythms. So I would think I am creolized in that sense, in terms of influences. I am not denying influences. I am just saying that, unlike other writers who might feel

'this is the person who influenced me', I don't feel that way because my reading has been so eclectic and I didn't know any writers or anything like that when I was growing up. But I will say that, at a critical point, I think in my early teens, I discovered American writers and particularly this school that's called the Southern Gothic, you know people like Truman Capote and Flannery O'Connor, and that made a very profound impression on me because I could identify with their work far more than I could with, say, the English writers culturally. I was very impressed by that school of writers at a very impressionable age. Recently, in the last 10-15 years, I have been very impressed by the South American novelists, in particular Jorge Amado of Brazil, Garcia Marquez. Amado has certainly opened my eyes to other ways of telling stories. But I shy away from "influence" because I feel that unless you are conscious of a particular influence, it's hard to talk about what influenced you. I feel I have been influenced by everything.

D.D: And is it by reading a lot that you gained that craftsmanship? Our students are interested in the narrative strategies you use and whether you are fully conscious of them and how you gained that knowledge.

O.S.: When I was at school, mastering the English language was very important. So I got a good educational grounding. I was a voracious reader. I tell all my writing students: "You learn to write by reading." So the fact that I read so much obviously contributed to my ability to write when I came to write. And I was trained as a journalist and I think that helped in shaping my style. I learnt a lot about story-telling, I truly feel, from hearing stories all throughout my childhood and even hearing Bible stories. I mean I hate religion as you probably know from my writing. But the Bible does provide a lot of good examples of story-telling. To answer your question more specifically, when I started to write, when I wrote the stories in *Summer Lightning*, which are my first adult stories -- and I make a distinction between that and stuff I wrote that is juvenile -- when I came to write *Summer Lightning*, I was not conscious of craft. The stories came, I told them, but I wasn't consciously crafting the stories. The craft, I guess, was there. But my consciousness of craft came after my first book. I'd like to think that the stories on my third collection are much more consciously crafted. In fact, one reviewer said they were too well crafted. I mean, you can't win! When I say I wasn't conscious, I mean of structure, I shouldn't say craft, because it's always been important to me how I write. I have always been very concerned with how I use language, from a very early age.

J.D.: Do you think that you have structuring metaphors which are basic to your work?

O.S.: Again, that's not something I am conscious of. But I work the stories out in my head before I go to my computer. Therefore I feel that they've been worked on by my unconscious a lot before I actually put them on paper. I believe that the work comes from a very deep part of myself, and I am respectful of that. So I suspect there are probably patterns and images there, but they are not conscious.

J.D.: Well, there are many from the Bible.

O.S.: I still read the Bible actually. What I hate is religion, I hate organized religion but I have nothing against the Bible: I think it's wonderful.

D.D.: You said that you were quite interested in mythology and there is one myth that, it seems to me, is not part of your work and it's the myth of the eldorado and yet most other writers cannot wait to include that in their writing.

O.S.: Actually there is a lot of mythology in my poetry, especially my book of poetry, *Gardening in the Tropics*. The eldorado myth is a South American myth. I remember as a

child it's something we were taught in school. But it's never admitted itself in my own consciousness. The people who write about it are Guianese because I think it's very much a part of their culture or Trinidadians who are closer to South America: it's a South American myth.

J.D.: Anyway, you very seldom speak about an Eden which would be something similar in a way.

O.S.: I don't write about myths in that conscious way. To me, it's more symbolism than myth. For instance, the symbolism of water is very strong in my last book. But I haven't been using mythology in the sense of myth except in my poetry.

J.D.: In the Caribbean short story, you often find the use of the historical perspective. Do you think this is likely to slowly disappear or is it an increasing tendency?

O.S.: This is an interesting question. I think it's part of the whole intellectual process where all of us have been engaged in a struggle to discover who we are, both individually and collectively. This is why we do have this talk of historical consciousness. I don't think it will ever go away because this is central to the Caribbean identity. I think we'll always be in the process of trying to decide who we are.

J. D.: Is this why you and many writers often use child narrators?

O.S.: No. People keep asking me about it. And again, you see, my stories arrive fully blown and they arrive in the form you get them. I didn't set out to use child narrators. Some of my stories are autobiographical in the sense that they draw heavily on my sensibility as a child. So I think it's only natural that my early stories did use the voice of a child. I'm basically interested in answering the question, Who am I? Who are we? To do that, we have to go back to the past.

J.D.: Do you feel that this process of writing you were describing, the fact that you get your stories in your head before writing them, might contribute to the rhythm your stories have?

O.S.: May be, but also when I get my stories down on paper, I also read them aloud just to get the rhythm right. I am very conscious of the rhythm of every sentence and I've always been. But I think the rhythm comes also from the fact that I do use the voice a lot. I like to write in the first person, I like to inhabit somebody else's body and tell the story through that person. In other words, what I am trying to do more and more is to take myself away and let people speak directly. And I think one of the reasons I want to do that is not just because you can get closer to the bone but also because I like the language that comes out of that process. If you are writing in the third person, your approach is different -- the rhythm is different -- than if you are writing in the first person. It's easier to get the rhythm if you are in the first person.

D.D.: In "The Two Grandmothers", what did you try to do? This is basically what we could even call a non-narrated story, not a first person narrative, is it? We were just wondering: is this girl having all these memories and putting all these memories together or in your mind, is the mother there?

O.S.: How I see it is, the little girl is talking to her mother. She is telling the mother these things over a period of years. She is just there chatting away.

D.D.: The mother is not answering. For you, was it a conscious way of saying that up to a point, the mother is not paying any attention to the little girl because she is a chatter-box, also because she is interested in other things? Was this conscious?

O.S.: No, that wasn't conscious. Though I suppose it does reinforce the notion of it. With "The Two Grandmothers," I wanted to project something about the society, but strictly

through the child's point of view. Everything is deliberately filtered through her consciousness.

D.D.: A lot of these children are lonely children. Why?

O.S.: What I drew on, particularly in my early stories, was how I felt as a child. I was a very lonely child myself, very alienated. So I think there's a lot of me in these children, even though their situations are not necessarily what my situation was. I think the emotional power in the stories comes from my use of my own emotions, how I felt.

D.D.: What struck me, in this respect, is that you changed the background. You were from a poor background and yet most of these children are in richer backgrounds, upper middle-class. Would you say that this is something that you were aware of doing?

O.S.: No. That is part of my own background. I come from a very poor family and I grew up in a village. But I was adopted -- not formally -- by my mother's relatives who were reasonably well-off. They had a big property and they were very European in their perspective whereas in my mother's village, the influences were very African. And when I went to live with my other family, the way of life was very different. So through that, I was very much exposed to that kind of privileged upbringing. One had to use the proper silver and all this, things that I sort of satirized, you know. And also, of course, I went to high school, which in Jamaica was very elitist at the time. To go to high school, you were either rich or white or bright. I got a scholarship. But you were privileged by education. And so I am very unusual as a Jamaican actually in that I've been exposed to sorts of extremes. And also I have had experience of a black culture and of a white culture. I am very unusual in that respect. When I write about any sort of household, I know what I'm talking about because I've lived this kind of life. And even in Jamaica today I have friends from the highest and the lowest. I can move very easily from one to the other, which is good for a writer. It was hell as a child but very good for a writer.

D.D.: You just mentioned something that I find very interesting and I would like to have your feeling. Because, if we read in *The Castle of My Skin* for instance by George Lamming, this is very autobiographical and in it he really regards his experience in high school as something which was almost unbearable. Really the child suffered. Clearly you didn't suffer or did you?

O.S.: No, not really. Not at school. I went to a girls' school. Things might have been different in the boys' schools. They had caning, hazing and so on. I think we all had a damned good education in terms of our schooling. We can't deny that. But I do think education displaced us because education was European, it was white. Some of the schools were quite racist. The privileges operated there too. The lighter skinned you were, the more you were favoured by the teachers and everybody.

J.D.: Listening to you and reading your work, I feel you have a great sense of humour. Yet I feel sometimes that your humour can get quite sarcastic, more pungent than that of other writers, even though some of them are perhaps more bitter than you are.

O.S.: I feel very strongly about certain things, for instance religion, respectability, and all of these things. I have rebelled against those things and therefore I do tend to satirize them. I do see things humorously. My stories reflect the way I deal with life. We do tend to laugh about lots of things. If I'm writing a story which happens to be humorous, I do go over the top sometimes. Sometimes, I really have to say: "No, no, no, cut back a bit." I enjoy myself so much. It's like getting revenge over all these adult people who, when I was a child, made me miserable. Not that I'm writing about real people, but those types who have annoyed me so much. All they were wanting was conformity. So, when I'm writing these things, sometimes, I do get carried away and I

laugh. I think it's so funny and these characters get out of control. But I bring them back.

D.D.: You would not subscribe to what Wilson Harris said in one of his conferences. He said that sometimes his characters do visit him and actually shape what he writes.

O. S.: He does. I have heard him speak of it. One of the things I regret is that I have never had enough time to really let myself go as a writer because I do feel there is a level at which I am not writing and that I'd like to be at. Where things get out of control and you just let it happen.

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