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### **Abstract**

Critical appraisals of Olive Senior's fiction seldom fail to highlight its preoccupation with childhood as a powerful trope through which to express the personal and social legacies of Jamaica's colonial history. This is to be expected given that over two-thirds of the stories in her three published collections, *Summer Lightning* (1986), *Arrival of the Snake-Woman* (1989) and *Discerner of Hearts* (1995), focus on a child's experience or perspective, or both, with a significant number of these being told, in whole or in part, by child narrators.

HELEN GILBERT

## ‘Let them know you have brought uptycy’: Childhood and Child-Subjects in Olive Senior’s Short Stories

Critical appraisals of Olive Senior’s fiction seldom fail to highlight its preoccupation with childhood as a powerful trope through which to express the personal and social legacies of Jamaica’s colonial history. This is to be expected given that over two-thirds of the stories in her three published collections, *Summer Lightning* (1986), *Arrival of the Snake-Woman* (1989) and *Discerner of Hearts* (1995), focus on a child’s experience or perspective, or both, with a significant number of these being told, in whole or in part, by child narrators. Senior’s particular interest in the vicissitudes of childhood is most readily interpreted in terms of identity politics. Scholars argue, for example, that her evocative portraits of marginalised and displaced children exemplify the alienated subjects of creolisation (see Barratt 270–73; Patteson 19–21); that her child characters typically face crises of identification that impel choices between different adult role models representing the apparently separate worlds of Jamaica’s middle-class and folk cultures (Thieme 90–93); or that her fiction participates in a more broadly practised, Caribbean literary model in which the ‘omnipresence of the child narrator or protagonist points to the difficulties of establishing one’s own voice’ (Misrahi-Barak 71). Autobiographical aspects of Senior’s writing are often referenced in support of this identity motif as critics note rough parallels between the author’s Jamaican girlhood and her (female) characters’ specific situations. These interpretive paradigms are undoubtedly useful, not only because they illuminate what Senior herself has described in interviews as a key issue in her work — ‘the struggle of individuals to affirm themselves’, to create a sense of self amid ‘chaotic personal and social history’ (1988 482) — but also because they connect her fiction to an important body of Caribbean writing which has examined childhood experience as part of the imperative of postcolonial self-definition.<sup>1</sup> I wonder, however, if the identity politics approach, with its ultimate referent being the adult subject who develops — or will develop — from the child depicted, obscures a more complex picture of what Senior’s representations of children/childhood potentially do; what kinds of symbolic management they reveal as operative in Jamaican society, and what modes of social critique they enact.

In this essay, I will consider the ways in which children — as the foci of race, class and gender specific processes in the family, as objects of regulation and

development in school, as targets of religious indoctrination, as sites of social and sexual anxiety, and as symbols of the future and what is at stake in ongoing negotiations of cultural (rather than individual) identity<sup>2</sup> — are pivotal in structuring the communities that Senior sketches. In skewing the focus away from representations of individual subjectivity, I am inspired by Senior's stated sense of childhood as a time/space for making connections to a much larger system: 'The kind of existence I lived as a child also made me aware that ... individual life was infinitesimally small in a larger and incomprehensible universe, in the pull and push of history' (1988 482). That larger context is recorded in clinical detail in *Working Miracles* (1991), Senior's sociological survey of women's lives in the English-speaking Caribbean, whereas her stories proffer a deliberately partial (in the sense of incomplete and biased) vision of Jamaican culture. My reading of these texts takes a lead from an article by Alison Donnell that explores the interface between the material bodies and cultural practices imaged in Senior's fiction. Donnell is somewhat wary of analytical models that stress a celebratory rhetoric of plural, provisional, syncretic identities in constructing notions of Caribbeanness. She argues that Senior's achievement is to show the cultural tensions and values which 'remain unresolved' at the level of the body 'in theories of creolisation and hybridity' (1996 40). This critical focus on corporeality has important implications for a discussion of childhood and the child-subject, which are categories almost always marked by some notion of physical or behavioural difference from an adult norm. As I will suggest, it is through the body of the child as a particularly malleable subject-in-formation that so many forms of social desire are tacitly negotiated. Senior's child-centred stories collectively register and critique these negotiations while simultaneously raising questions about (Western) models of development, and how they might relate to narrativity itself in postcolonial contexts.

Some working definitions and a brief sense of the theoretical concepts underpinning my argument are necessary at this point. Following Jo-Ann Wallace, I treat 'the child' as a mobile subject-position rather than an identity determined by biological (im)maturity (1995 286). In working towards a theory of the child-subject Wallace postulates that the 'category of "the child" remains caught in tension between what one might call the empty and the full, between lack (of personality, attributes, history) and excess (full natural presence)' (1995 291). Such a subject-position has been historically useful to a range of hegemonic discourses — evolutionary theory, humanism, rationalism and universalism, to name just a few — imbricated in Western imperial modernity. This is not to discount the materiality of real children, but to acknowledge the ideological aspects of the concept itself. It is important to note, in this respect, that the child as conceived in European post-enlightenment thought<sup>3</sup> 'has never been a subject-position available to all, or even most, children [though] it has frequently been a subject-position imposed upon colonized adults' (Wallace 1995 286). The rhetoric of development comes into play here, with futurity being one of the key markers

of childhood's value since the child is assumed to have the potential for progressive change — and to express that change in bodily ways.

Wallace's work, which cannot be adequately summarised here, includes research into the ways in which historical representations of childhood — and particular types of (unruly) children — in anthropology, philosophy and British literature were linked to imperialism through mid-Victorian discourses of development. With reference to widely-disseminated treatises on education and to texts used in the British school system, she demonstrates that 'the child' was an immensely flexible category, and one 'which could be deployed to justify both the paternalistic subjection of women and working men at home and a specifically colonialist expansion abroad' (1992 66). This kind of discursive freight, epitomised in Rousseau's equation of the child with the 'noble primitive', forms part of the broad context in which Olive Senior's fiction has been written and circulated. Working against colonial and neo-imperial concepts of childhood, her stories convey its ideological parameters in particular places at specific times. Ultimately, this insistence on specificity unsettles humanist conceptions of the child while also illuminating some of the processes by which this highly semiotised figure has been produced as transhistorical.

On reading Senior's work, we are instantly made aware of the symbolic value attached to children in Jamaican culture and how this shapes gender norms and expectations. Stories such as 'Discerner of Hearts' (1995), 'Zig-Zag' (1995) and 'Arrival of the Snake-Woman' illustrate that fathering a child operates as one marker of 'reputation'<sup>4</sup> (or social recognition) among men and that child-bearing adds significantly to a woman's ascribed worth and status, even to the extent that it can sometimes mitigate the shame of teenage pregnancy. By registering the values attached to procreation, Senior shows how children, as assets, are harnessed in the instrumental management of women and their containment within roles that stress their biological function as mothers. This comes through most strongly in the author's exposé of the intense social anxieties surrounding women who have no biological offspring. Such women, categorised as 'mules' and misfits by the gossips, are denied a space in the imagined community unless they take in relatives, orphans or 'outside' children to raise as their own. The stigma of childlessness cuts across social categories, though responses are shown to differ according to class affiliations. The (would-be) upper-class Mrs DaSilva in 'Lily, Lily' (1989) manages to mask her infertility by feigning pregnancy as part of an elaborate fiction by which she claims her niece, Lily, as her own child. While the townspeople never learn the truth about the child's parentage, there remains a collective whiff of suspicion surrounding Mrs DaSilva, whose entrée into motherhood comes a little too late to normalise her maternal role. By contrast, Miss Rilla in 'Ballad' (1986a) chooses to accept her situation, reasoning that God wills her childlessness because 'there is too much suffering children in the world already' (1986a 113); yet, she cannot avoid being marginalised by the narrow-minded community in which she lives. Without any children or class

capital, she becomes the butt of malicious gossip that paints her as scandalous, sexually predatory and amoral, and she is easily cast as the scapegoat when one of her lovers, a well-liked young man, murders his rival with a machete. While Senior clearly has more sympathy for Miss Rilla than for Mrs DaSilva, both stories take pains to demonstrate that the valorisation of child-bearing has potentially deleterious effects on women because it sets up hierarchical relations between women and men, and among women themselves. Each story also presents female role models whose worth is not tied to child-bearing per se. Lily's biological mother, the elder Lily, chooses not to reclaim her daughter when the opportunity arises but rather remains the worldly, unmarried 'aunt' — a suspiciously independent woman in Mr DaSilva's eyes — who safeguards the child's welfare; and Miss Rilla, despite her notoriety, emerges as a more caring 'parent' for the child narrator, Lenora, than either her biological mother or her stepmother, MeMa.

Many of Senior's stories also suggest the ways in which children function as community capital in a narrative of futurity and modernisation in which the abstract idea of a child's potentiality, consistently framed as normative (Castañeda 4), constitutes his/her premium value. In 'Arrival of the Snake-Woman' (1989), Biya, first-born child of the 'exotic' outsider, Miss Coolie, becomes a 'natural' conduit for change/progress and the mechanism by which his Indian mother can be (partly) integrated into the Afro-Caribbean community. As soon as Biya is born, the villagers begin to draw the so-called 'snake-woman' into their communal life in subtle but significant ways and their prejudices against her soften even further after Parson Bedlow, the colonial missionary, refuses the boy's desperately needed medical aid because he has not been baptised. This specific incident causes a moral crisis among the village's largely Christian population because Biya's inherent value as a child directly contradicts his ascribed status, in the parson's moral schema, as an expendable 'heathen'. Parson Bedlow's failure to recognise the symbolic currency of childhood in this instance proves to be his undoing as it precipitates his loss of authority among his parishioners and sets in motion their increasing secularisation. Much later, Biya's worth as a community asset is affirmed when he becomes a lawyer and secures land titles for the villagers historically disenfranchised by the colonial system. By comparison, Ishmael, the story's narrator, is haunted by his own failure to return the investment that his people made in him as a child by supporting his education and encouraging his aspirations towards a professional career. The teleological model of the child-subject in this text meshes with a narrative about cultural development, though the narrator remains ambivalent in his assessment of the benefits that modernisation has brought to his natal community, as indicated by the elegiac tone of his reminiscences.

Senior's portraits of children positioned as material (and political) investments within societies on the cusp of change illustrate Sharon Stephens's point that the

child-subject frequently ‘stand[s] at the crossroads of divergent cultural projects’ (23). In ‘The Two Grandmothers’ (1989), for instance, the conflicting imperatives for Caribbean communities to modernise (read Westernise) and maintain traditional practices are played out across the body of the unnamed girl narrator whose behaviour, speech, interests, choice of clothing and self-image progressively register the power of American hegemony. In a different but related context, Sadie, the main child character in ‘Zig-Zag’, functions as a highly charged site for the inscription of contesting value systems represented by her (not quite) white mother and her black nanny, Desrine. At the end of the story, Sadie’s recurring ‘black and white’ dream, in which she leaves her mother and tries to follow Desrine but becomes bogged in water hyacinths with their ‘invasive rootstalk and floating bladder-like stems’ (1995 218), crystallises a broader social conflict between the submerged energies of black culture and the privileges of whiteness.

If ‘Zig-Zag’ and ‘The Two Grandmothers’ dramatise the successful socialisation of the child-subject, they also portray relationships that suggest the radical instability of family structures conceived in the colonial mould. This characteristic is typical of Senior’s oeuvre, which encompasses numerous stories featuring children being reared by nannies, grandmothers, stepmothers, distant relatives, or admired adults while the biological mother (and/or father) is confined to the margins of the narrative or registered only as an absence. Such texts accurately depict the widespread child-shifting practices in the Caribbean region (see Senior 1991 12-18) but they aim to achieve more than simply a realist reflection. The shifted child (or outside child) does not merely present as an especially vulnerable figure in Senior’s fiction but also, in many cases, as a subject empowered to make or deny bonds with specific adults. Lenora in ‘Ballad’, Bekkha in ‘Do Angels Wear Brassieres?’ (1986a) and the boy protagonist in ‘Summer Lightning’ (1986a) are cases in point. What the trope of the shifted child does in these stories is show a family constituted more by a process of affiliation than filiation. This is an important concept in ideological terms since it challenges the primacy of the nuclear family as the structural unit in homogenised models of a culture’s social matrix. In turn, recognition of affiliative family structures prompts us to interpret child dispersal in Senior’s work as more than simply an index of colonial alienation.

Senior’s focus on the child’s experience within the family, however that social entity is constituted, also opens a window on the intricate connections between class mobility in the Caribbean and racial traits such as skin pigmentation and hair texture. Donnell delivers a comprehensive analysis of these connections, arguing that in the racist societies depicted, ‘the body as assumed racial artefact remains the priority marker through which identities are delineated’ (1996 41). What she neglects to fully consider is the astonishing purchase of childhood itself as a site for the projection (and frustration) of racial desire — the desire to become white, to resemble what Sylvia Wynter terms ‘the physiognomic other’

(359). In numerous Senior stories, the (girl) child is the repository of the mother's hope to 'raise colour' and/or her fear of 'turning down'. 'Bright Thursdays' (1986a) best illustrates the ways in which racial desire can be harnessed to the processual nature of the child-subject's embodiment, and its imaginative potency as a means of change (see Castañeda 9). The racially mixed Laura, whose straight hair, soft skin and aquiline nose signal incipient whiteness to her mother, is carefully groomed from early childhood to enter the upper-class world of her paternal grandparents. To persuade them to adopt the child, her mother sends a photo designed to emphasise Laura's rightful place in the racial/social hierarchy:

The child was dressed in a frilly white dress trimmed with ribbons, much too long for her age. She wore long white nylon socks and white T-strap shoes. Her hair was done in perfect drop curls, with a part to the side and two front curls caught up with a large white bow. In the photograph, she stood quite straight with her feet together and her right hand stiffly bent to touch an artificial rose in a vase on a rattan table beside her. (1986a 42)

As Donnell argues, this image presents a body 'constructed as a reflection of whiteness and as a cipher for eurocentric femininity' (1996 43); yet Miss Christie, Laura's grandmother, is scarcely fooled by the substitute identity packaged in the photograph. Rather, she seizes on the image of childhood, with its apparently infinite malleability, taking Laura into her home because she sees the child as 'a lump of clay which held every promise of being moulded into something satisfactory' (1986a 44).

The malleability of the child-subject equally undergirds fears that she/he is particularly susceptible to racial taint. In 'Zig-Zag', Senior communicates the pervasive anxiety that shadows middle/upper-class children whose observable physical features betray markers of blackness. Of the two sisters, Sadie is identified by her family as the one likely to 'turn down' since her hair is not straight like Muffet's and her skin is a shade darker. Having internalised this anxiety herself, Sadie is initially ambivalent about her attachment to the servant's daughter, Manuela, and then appalled by her own behaviour when she slaps Manuela for making fun of her 'bad' hair. Significantly, no adult is present to admonish Sadie for her actions at this climactic moment in the story; the reprimand comes from her sister and is all the more humiliating for that:

'Sadie! You should be ashamed of yourself', she hissed. 'Behaving so common. Behaving like a marketwoman. Letting this little black girl drag you down. As if you don't know any better. You're just as bad as she is.'

Sadie dropped her eyes and felt shame shoot right through her down to her toes. Down to her very footbottom. Muffet had said it. Said it was Manuela bringing out the badness in her. Bringing out the badness and causing her to act like *cuffee*. Like *bungo*. Like *quashie*. Like *nayga*. Like *boogooyaga*. Causing her to turn down. She stood up straight and cut her eye at that Manuela and vowed she would never, ever speak to her again. (1995 213)

This scene suggests very powerfully the ways in which children are interpellated by the racial ideologies of their society and, in turn, how they perpetuate its prejudices. Like Laura in 'Bright Thursdays', all three girls in 'Zig-Zag' understand the politics of the racial hierarchy, even if they are not always certain of their place within it. Both stories reveal that the child-subject functions as a potential site of evolving whiteness — and repressed blackness — precisely because it is always already embedded in a narrative of development, in this case from black origins to a whiter future. Such a trajectory exemplifies Wallace's theoretical formulation of the child in Western discourse as both 'the subject to come' (and therefore not yet fully agential) and 'the subject before now', the primitive in need of reform (1995 297–98). Senior has many other ways of critiquing this desire for whiteness. One potent technique is to have an uncomprehending child narrator describe, in minute detail, the bodily rituals to which she is subjected to lighten her skin colour or straighten her natty hair. When these rituals fail, as they generally do, the stories remind us that theories about hybridity, as an enabling model for personal and cultural identity in the Caribbean, often 'neglect the lived reality of certain individuals for whom subject positions are not voluntarily assumed but assigned by nature of their perceived bodily difference' (Donnell 1996 47). Senior's focus on the child-subject heightens awareness of this theoretical problem as children are less adept at moving between subject positions and more vulnerable to ascription by others.

In Senior's fictional world, adult efforts to erase physical signifiers of blackness in their children go hand in hand with a determination to inculcate good manners as part of an aura of respectability. The author speaks candidly about this issue in interviews and cites the imperative to be respectable as distinctly gendered, a 'crushing weight' for girls of her era (1996 17). With its origins in a transported Victorian culture, respectability registered via external manifestations of dress, deportment and speech as well as by behaviour such as obedience and helpfulness. Its presence (or lack) in children was seen to reflect on their upbringing, thereby affecting their mother's or minder's social position, especially in lower-class communities where raising 'good' children was (and still is) one of the few avenues to higher status for women (see Senior 1991 32). Laura in 'Bright Thursdays' typifies the child weighed down by the forces of respectability. As she prepares to move to her grandmother's elegant house, her mother exhorts her, 'Don't give Miss Christie no cause for complain and most of all, let them know you have broughtuptcy' (1986a 36). Laura recalls this directive on a number of occasions as her grandmother inducts her into the behavioural patterns of the upper classes — correcting her speech, hygiene, clothes, table manners, posture and general conduct — and worries that her failure to be the model child will diminish her mother's standing. The story's memorable depiction of meal times in the 'big house' conveys the child's anxiety as she muddles through the excruciating rituals that seem only tangentially to do with eating. For her part,

Miss Christie relishes the opportunity to 'civilise' her charge. Like Mrs Da Silva in 'Lily, Lily', whose self-appointed job is to regulate the 'domestic manners and morals' of young girls in her town (1989 113), she derives considerable symbolic capital from the trade in respectability.

Senior's satirical portraits of these two women as social reformers highlight not only the arbitrariness (and emptiness) of the bourgeois code of etiquette they espouse but also its insidious application. Their efforts to discipline the female body through particular child-rearing practices can be considered in terms of Bourdieu's analysis of the ideological work done by regulations of seemingly insignificant details of bodily behaviour such as bearing, dress, and physical and verbal manners. In his formulation, this is to treat the body as memory, to 'entrust to it in abbreviated and practical, ie mnemonic, form the fundamental principals of the arbitrary content of the culture'. Bourdieu maintains that 'principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit' (94). Senior stresses the ways in which the child-subject is conditioned to embody her culture's norms, but she uses the concept of 'broughtuptcy' (being brought up properly) to imply (contra Bourdieu) an acute cognisance of the relationship between manners and ideology. Laura follows the behavioural imperatives she is given precisely because she understands their ideological significance, if not in adult terms. She also realises that broughtuptcy is the only capital she can accrue in the big house, where she is acutely aware that she lacks the requisite signs of whiteness. Thus, at the end of the story, when she 'orphans' herself after her father makes it clear he will not acknowledge her as his (illegitimate) child, she is rejecting the racist value system inculcated in her by both sides of her family, albeit in different ways.

Whereas Laura mentally emancipates herself from the strictures of her upbringing, Bekkha in 'Do Angels Wear Brassieres?' appropriates broughtuptcy to serve mischievous ends, performing the perfect semblance of good manners in order to get an audience with the Archdeacon so that she can 'best' him with her knowledge of the Bible. In this story, Senior pits Christian respectability against the wily tricks of an eleven-year-old who, in bold Anancy style, unsettles the English church-man with her witty quiz on Biblical trivia, and then fatally disrupts Aunt Mary's genteel tea party by asking the provocative question of what Angels wear. This exchange positions Bekkha as a knowing subject with agency to question — and ridicule — the doctrines she is taught, not as a passive vessel through which Christian beliefs and behaviours might be perpetuated. In effect, the entire story stages the spectacular failure of the adults' version of broughtuptcy to elicit the wanted behaviour in the child, at the same time imbuing the creole term with some of the subversiveness it seems to suggest as a creative corruption of 'upbringing'. When Bekkha asks her prudish aunt how worms reproduce, or when she dresses up and mimes doing the three 'wickedest' things

a woman can do — going into a nightclub, taking a drink and dancing all night — she again flaunts her disregard for the dictates of respectability. That the town gossip, Miss Katie, reads Bekkha's various acts of mischief as signs that she is 'force-ripe' suggests the anxiety surrounding childhood as a site where sexuality, and the sins it supposedly entails, threatens to surface prematurely.

In her detailed analysis of the ways in which sexuality and desire have functioned within European colonialism, Ann Laura Stoler argues that children's sexuality was constructed as both 'endangered' and 'dangerous', at risk from exposure to the taint of adult sexuality (particularly of the racial and class Other) and dangerous by virtue of being unrestrained, savage, not yet sufficiently tutored by bourgeois morality (141). This observation can be brought to bear on several Senior stories that show parental, social, and religious anxieties intersecting on the terrain of the (female) child's sexuality. 'Lily, Lily' amplifies the idea, set up in 'Do Angels Wear Brassieres?' and reiterated in 'Ballad' and 'Zig-Zag', that the myth of sexual innocence underpinning normative notions of the female child-subject functions instrumentally to position girls' bodies as sites of surveillance. Ironically, it is precisely the lack of sexual knowledge (arising from prohibitions linked to ideas about children's endangered sexuality) that leads to the elder Lily's teenage pregnancy, despite Aunt Mercy's vigilance in scrutinising her every move. For the younger Lily, innocence can offer no protection against sexual abuse; she is vulnerable to her father's lascivious attentions until she understands enough about sex to communicate her trauma to a responsive adult. Both girls, in their respective times, also function within their families/communities as sites of dangerous sexuality. The first Lily produces a miscegenetic child, thereby signalling the permeability of the sexual and social barriers instigated by British colonialism in the Caribbean, while her daughter, the young Lily, threatens the integrity of the family (as a unit of social organisation) by dint of her allegations against her adoptive father. That Mrs DaSilva refuses to believe Lily's accusations, rationalising her sullen behaviour as a symptom of early sexual maturity, hints at the extent to which prohibited adult desires can be mediated through the child-subject's contradictory sexuality. Overall, the two Lily characters trouble hegemonic theories of psychosexual development that posit a natural schism between childhood and adulthood,<sup>5</sup> showing instead the individual and social investments that shape children's positions as (a)sexual subjects.

The positioning of the child as a site of bodily interdictions vis-à-vis sexuality is fortified by his/her a priori status as an inherently unruly subject. Several of Senior's stories reveal that the discursive construction of childhood as governed by irrational and pre-social urges has played a central role in the promulgation of a range of spiritual and occult beliefs and practices in Jamaican culture. Within Christianity, the author suggests, the myth of original sin works to situate the (black/coloured) child's body as always already tainted with evil and,

consequently, as a target for strategic reform. 'Arrival of the Snake-Woman' illustrates this process when Parson Bedlow, projecting Miss Coolie's apparent sexual deviance onto her child, demands that Biya be baptised to cleanse his body of sin. In a related manoeuvre, Miss Katie suspects the precocious Bekkha of being the devil's own 'pickney' and therefore determines that the child should have been beaten from birth to correct her errant tendencies, especially her impertinence in asking questions about sexual matters. Senior likewise scrutinises folk religions in the Caribbean region, showing the ways in which they too instrumentalise the child's body as a space in/through which forces of evil readily manifest. A number of her stories make reference to babies believed to be possessed by duppies or susceptible to illnesses caused by passing evil spirits who might suck their infant blood. By implying parallels between various practices or beliefs in African and European derived religions — these are quite explicit in the characterisation of Father Burnham, the Blackartman/priest in 'Discerner of Hearts', and in descriptions of the similar spiritual work performed by Parson Bedlow, Mother Miracle, and Papa Dias in 'Arrival of the Snake-Woman' — Senior's work emphasises that an investment in childhood as a 'primitive' and therefore amoral state cuts across cultural boundaries.

As a creative antidote to this kind of structural disempowerment, Senior forges child characters who consciously question, evade or resist the religious rituals and doctrines to which they are subjected. Whereas Bekkha subverts the textual authority of the Bible by asking if angels wear brassieres, Lenora, in 'Ballad', continually queries its doctrinal logic, reasoning that her beloved Miss Rilla won't burn in the hell fires for unrepentant sinners because Saint Peter would 'take her in just to brighten up Heaven' (1986a 134). Even the timid child narrator of 'Confirmation Day' (1986a) manages to mediate the religious rites in which she unwillingly participates. Despite feeling oppressed by the clothes she must wear, the solemn liturgy and the dank, forbidding church, she gains agency through the ritual because she is able to see it as inconsequential, an ironic 'confirmation' that God no longer has the power to frighten her. Some of Senior's fictional children are also able to critically examine beliefs and practices associated with folk religions. Theresa in 'Discerner of Hearts' is the paradigmatic example here: on visiting the feared Blackartman, she discerns that his magic works partly by suggestion, by the customer's belief in his cures. Thus the child colludes in the myth of the man's power in order to persuade Cissy, her nanny, to seek his treatment for the curse that seems to be paralysing her. At the same time, Theresa ignores Cissy's more mundane superstitions and her injunctions not to upset the many and various spirits that might be lurking in their world. The story thus demystifies obeah by making its processes partly transparent to a shy child who gains in confidence through her role as go-between.

Alongside religion, formal education figures in Senior's work as a mechanism by which the (resisting) child-subject is institutionally produced as a social being,

although the author is more equivocal in her critique of the school system than of the church and its proselytisers. Surprisingly, given her sustained interest in childhood, Senior rarely focuses on children's experiences in the classroom or the playground, unlike writers such as Kincaid, whose withering accounts of colonial education and its particular forms of pedagogy in the Caribbean are well known. Senior's fiction consistently references school as part of the child's social matrix but generally in relation to issues arising at home or in the community. A number of her stories suggest that the race/class hierarchies operative in the family are extended by a process of gate-keeping, based on skin colour rather than scholastic ability, that streams children into specific schools where their development is tailored to fit their social expectations. 'Zig-Zag' is most explicit in its satire of this process as it affects young girls:

They were busily preparing to go to high school where their fathers would pay large fees so they could be turned into ladies who would straighten their hair and rub Ponds Vanishing Cream into their faces every night and wear 4711 toilet water and learn to squeeze their bodies into corsets and their feet into tiny shoes so they would have bunions for the rest of their lives. All the real ladies Sadie knew — like Mother Dear and her friends — had bunions, and she assumed it was a badge that came from their having attended The Best Schools. (1995 161)

Here, school is clearly another marker of broughtupness, both in terms of the disciplinary work it does and its power to signify, in shorthand, a person's social status.<sup>6</sup> Yet, Senior's child protagonists are never merely objects of the system. They understand its processes, at least in rudimentary terms, and are often able to mediate its effects. Ish, in 'Arival of the Snake-Woman', for instance, recognises that religion and schooling are tradeable commodities in Parson Bedlow's moral world; thus, he convinces Miss Coolie to have Biya baptised so the child will be allowed to attend school. Ish also learns to filter out the minister's religious dogma and selectively absorb those parts of the curriculum germane to his career ambitions. Similarly, the young narrator of 'The Case Against the Queen' (1995) negotiates her way through various levels of the colonial education system but determines, from the outset, that she will never let it steal her heart as it has stolen her uncle's. Bekkha, meanwhile, warms to the idea of being sent away to school because it will give her the opportunity to enthrall a bigger audience with her trickster antics, whereas Lily looks to boarding school as a way of escaping her father's sexual overtures. Such stories imply that education, as a (neo)colonial process, is redolent with contradictions; for the child concerned, school can invoke an emancipatory promise as well as a disciplinary threat.

All these texts position children as consciously pragmatic, often more so than their adult counterparts. Against Western modernity's view of childhood as 'based on *not-knowing*' (McDonnell 28), Senior posits a knowing child-subject with the agency to act in reasoned and even moral ways. Her images of children as agents through whom a different social order might be imagined destabilises

conventional lines of authority, as embedded in the prerogatives of adult power-knowledge. This is especially the case when a child narrator tells his/her own story. Nevertheless if, as Wallace claims, “‘the child’ is everywhere in representation ... but almost nowhere in public *self*-representation’ (1995 293–94), the first-person narrative technique also poses a penetrating question: ‘What does it mean to speak for the child, through the voice of the child, as the child?’ (Wallace 1994 171).

To demonstrate that Senior’s fiction supplies its own answer to this question, I will conclude by looking briefly at narrative voice in two of her longer stories: ‘Arrival of the Snake-Woman’ and ‘Ballad’. Each focuses on a woman, an outcast in her village, who comes to feature prominently in the narrator’s childhood as a much-admired friend and confidante. Both tales are told in several parts, cover different points in time and sketch their adult characters from the perspectives of prepubescent children who do not fully understand their communities’ prejudices. The crucial difference in terms of narrative voice is that Ish’s account of the snake-woman, though it registers his perceptions as a child, is always filtered through the consciousness of the adult he has become, whereas Lenora’s ballad to/for Miss Rilla communicates directly as a child’s story. By combining the child’s perspective with that of the adult looking back, Senior gives ‘Arrival of the Snake-Woman’ a teleological structure; Ish (as child) supplies the raw material while the adult Ishmael organises the details chronologically, fills in some of the missing pieces and editorialises about his gradual maturation. The emphasis on development, with its correlative valorisation of ‘progress’, becomes explicit towards the end of the text when Ishmael explains what drives his narrative: ‘I sometimes sit and write down the things that happened in the old days, so that my children will be able to see clearly where we are coming from, should they ever need signposts’ (1989 45). In this story, told in standard English, Senior subtly criticises her raconteur for his nostalgic construction of childhood in a narrative of modernisation that explains and contains the disruptive energies of the child’s voice.

By contrast, there is no sense of futurity or progress in Lenora’s story about Miss Rilla; the details are conveyed as the child makes sense of them, in the moment of narration, after the teacher tears up her written work because he deems Miss Rilla an unfit subject for a composition. As she constructs her ballad, Lenora assesses the available evidence on her friend’s character, incorporating into the story particulars she has observed directly, gossip she has heard while eavesdropping and snippets from conversations with Miss Rilla herself. The ballad is narrated in creole as an oral text<sup>7</sup> and addressed to an audience comprised of listeners not readers. Lenora remains conscious of the gaps and absences in her account, attributing them to the fact that ‘big people have a habit of not telling children anything’ (1986a 129), and she is aware that her story evades the expected chronological structure. Notwithstanding Senior’s craft as the adult

author who has written this text, 'Ballad' communicates in the child's voice as her story, even while it gives space to the words of the (adult) tale-bearers whose opinions she relays. Effectively, this strategy eschews the teleology of development as the master narrative of childhood; like Lenora's ballad, the child-subject is (re)constructed as 'in process' but without a clear beginning or end. In the broader field of Caribbean self-representation, this is an important tactic since 'the image of development, with its hierarchy, directionality, purposiveness, and goal-orientation, not only emplots individual lives into different stages but cultures and nations as well' into primitive, developing or advanced (Gupta 50).

Read in tandem, these two stories also comment on the idea of (good) manners in relation to narrativity. Ishmael's constrained (masculinist) chronicle allows the reader to follow the innocent gaze of the young boy in parallel with the explanatory gaze of the adult storyteller, whereas Lenora's chaotic (feminist) sketch, with its accusation that adults censor information crucial to the story, shows deliberate signs of a lack of broughtuptcy. Crucially, it is this radical, 'unmannered' voice that best reveals childhood as a richly imaginative period, not just a site of social engineering, and that gives historical specificity to a category often ignored in theories of the subject. As Donnell argues, Senior's major accomplishment is to treat the child's perspective seriously so that it 'does not merely function as an allegory of the national, or as a strategic domain through which the more blatantly politicised issues expected of postcolonial writing can be made digestible for the general reading public' (1999 122). Without the burden of being representative, childhood becomes a more complex domain of practice, and one that presents greater opportunities for a politicised analysis.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Texts that come to mind include V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Sreet*, Michael Anthony's *The Year in San Fernando*, Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey*, George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*.
- <sup>2</sup> Some of the particular areas of inquiry listed here derive in part from questions Sharon Stephens asks in her discussion of children and the politics of late capitalism (6).
- <sup>3</sup> Western conceptions of childhood, as a number of theorists have noted, are predicated upon ideas about dependence, segregation, delayed responsibility and (temporary) physical, moral and social incompetence (see Wallace 1992 75).
- <sup>4</sup> See Besson for a discussion of the ways in which 'reputation' (as examined by ethnologist Peter Wilson) structures male gender roles in Afro-Caribbean societies (352).
- <sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the elder Lily is infantilised by sexual ignorance that lasts well beyond her physical maturity, whereas the younger Lily is traumatically initiated into sexual activity while she is still a child by physical definitions of the term.
- <sup>6</sup> See Tiffin (1993) for extended analysis of the interpellative and disciplinary functions of the colonial education practices — notably oral recitation — by which Caribbean girls have been socialised.
- <sup>7</sup> Senior comments in interviews about the ways in which Caribbean oral traditions she experienced during her childhood have profoundly influenced her work and she

links this to her use of the first person narrative voice (1986b 19; 1988 480). This unmediated voice, she adds, allows a particular kind of language and rhythm to emerge (1996 22).

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