Artful (Un)belonging Interviews

Olive Senior

Preamble: The interview between Veronica Austen and Olive Senior was conducted on Friday, November 4th, 2022, over Zoom. Lara El Mekaui assisted with the interview and the preparation of this transcript. The transcript has been edited for ease of reading. We expect that this intellectual property will be respected and not be reproduced/redistributed without permission.

Biography (from http://olivesenior.com/)**:** Olive Senior is the award-winning author of 20 books of fiction, non-fiction, poetry and children's literature and other published work. Her many awards include Canada's Writers Trust Matt Cohen Award for Lifetime Achievement, the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature, the Commonwealth Writers Prize, honorary doctorates from the University of the West Indies and York University and the Gold Medal of the Institute of Jamaica. Her work has been taught internationally and is widely translated. Olive Senior is from Jamaica and lives in Toronto, Canada, but returns frequently to the Caribbean which remains central to her work. She is the Poet Laureate of Jamaica 2021-2024.

Veronica: *I'll let Lara get going because the first question is one she created.*

Lara: *How do our histories shape our realities and who we are today? By extension, how does a sense of history contribute to a sense of belonging? Or more directly, how have you explored belonging and how do you understand its opposite, unbelonging?*

Olive: Wow, that's a lot. I'll start off by saying that all of us, as human beings, are absolutely shaped by our histories, whether the big History or the small, that is, the personal history. So, we are a representation of our history, our own personal history. To me, there's no question that we are who we are because of where we're coming from and because of the forces that have acted on us.

On the question of how does a sense of history contribute to a sense of belonging, well, for me, to have a sense of history is to feel that you're rooted to a place. And that means knowing where you're coming from. If you don't have a sense of history, then you're rootless. You have no sense of belonging because you have no sense of who you are and where your roots are.

Veronica: *And even with all the complexities that that involves, histories aren't always easy to take into oneself.*

Olive: But we live in history; I don't see history as something separate from the lives we live. There's history in the history books. There's the history which is the experience of our lives. I've been talking

about this as ground truth, as opposed to book truth. Ground truth is what you absorb from childhood, from the people around you, from personally acquired knowledge. That's history. There is a problem where, as a people, we are told only part of our history. For instance, I grew up in a colonial society, where people had been enslaved for hundreds of years, but people never talked about it. It's something Kamau Brathwaite calls the subterranean, that history hidden beneath the surface, but it's still there. This is why I love to talk about ground as a repository of history, because then it's up to us to dig and unearth what's been hidden. And so, I see history not as just one line, or words in a book, but as also lived in this moment we're sharing right now.

Veronica: *Yes, that sounds really interesting because that's part of what I'm thinking about too; particularly, the distinction that you've made between ground versus book history. When it is ground history, it also becomes multimodal. It is words, it is what you see, it is your body, it is the objects around you, all of that. So, there's a certain way in which it does take it away just from language right into something that is more lived.*

Olive: Yes, absolutely. It's the music, it's the stories, it's work, it's play, it's everything. It's land and landscape.

Lara: *What I'm also hearing is that it's beyond place because when you talk about having roots, I thought about Dionne Brand's A Map to the Door of No Return. There are people who do not know their roots or where they come from. This dynamic sense of history or what compiles one's experience in history, that opens up the question of what makes up our roots.*

Olive: We all have roots; it's just that some people's roots get cut off. In the world today, with so many people in motion, as refugees, victims of war or natural disasters and so on, you can get cut off. But I also think that there is a part of you that is embedded in that past and it can be retrieved and reclaimed. As Veronica just said, it's in everything, it's embodied, and that's not something you ever lose. So, it's a question of trying to get back to finding out where your roots are buried.

Veronica: *The metaphor of roots is interesting too, because roots sometimes are not ready-made right there. They are something that you can nurture. So, I'm thinking, right now, I have a plant sitting in front of me that needs repotting, that might need cutting. You can grow roots too, right?*

Olive: And people do! Especially when you move to another country. In terms of belonging, though, what I have found is that all of us can claim more than one land, but we can have only one motherland. No matter where you relocate, the call to you is from that original place that you come from. So, you can find new roots, but there's always that call of origin.

Veronica: *The next question has to do with the images you put to use in your poetry. I'm particularly curious about your use of public domain images in Pandemic Poems (2021). Although you did something similar in Shell (2007), in Pandemic Poems, the public domain imagery seems to take on even more significance, perhaps in part because you've offered the full citations for the images and, thus, readers get to contemplate how the images are located in time/place. As well, perhaps there's*

significance in the fact that you're drawing on something "public" precisely at a time when our vision of the "public" came into question. Could you speak to your process of selecting images and/or to what you hope to convey by creating a collection where text is combined with image?

Olive: I did want to put public domain images in *Pandemic Poems*. I'm intrigued with what you had to say about doing this at a time when we were not in public, when we were locked in. I love images. I'm extremely visual. And the whole process of going and finding these images I really enjoyed. I looked through thousands of them. I was searching for images that would reflect or comment on or have some relationship to the poems. I also wanted to bring a bit of levity to what was essentially a serious time. So, some of the images I think are entertaining and amusing, like the first one that is from "Punch." It's a forecast for 1907 in a cartoon looking at the introduction of "telegraphy," and it's predicting what happens when technology creates this distance between us, but I thought it was also an interesting commentary on social distancing. I wrote the book first, and then I selected the images to reflect and reinforce the content.

In terms of text and image, more generally, this is something I have engaged with in a number of essays because text is only one representation of reality and I'm interested in finding other ways of communicating. Using images enables people who might not be text-oriented to relate. But also, we react to images differently than we react to text; the reaction to the image is an instant one, whereas text, first of all, requires literacy and the desire to read. In some cases, I just wanted to put in images that would strike the reader and alert them to the content. Like putting up a flag.

Part of it too is my way of further interrogating the subject matter. In the book *Shell*, I'm using images, say, of decayed housing or what have you to convey the remnants of slavery and enslavement and the fact that the riches flowed north from the plantations to enrich other places. The book was inspired by going to see what was once the biggest house in Europe, built by "England's richest son" – William Beckford Jr. – whose fortune came from the Jamaican plantations he never saw. And yet when I went to look at this house – Fonthill – that was so famous in its time, there was nothing left of it. To me, that became a metaphor for certain artefacts of the past that are built on vanity, and yet the hollowness is all that remains.

That particular book *Shell* ends on the note that if you want the conch shell to sound (as it once did on the plantations to mark time or call people together), you have to first empty it of its detritus. And that's what people of my generation are doing, we're taking that emptiness and filling it with our sound/words. So, to me, the images are working in several different dimensions. Like my image of the gourd (in the poem "Gourd"): the shape of the gourd is important, as important as the words that are in it. But to make it resonate, it first has to be emptied, then filled with something that turns it into a spiritual or musical instrument, a bearer of history and mythology. I found the visual shape is a sound way of conveying all the permutations around these very humble objects.

Veronica: *I was just looking back to* <u>*Shell*</u> *to try to get my head around that last line: "And none can shackle / passing time that is excavating from within, the / promise of the silenced voices: the resonance*

of / emptied shell" (p. 92). That last image, it's the resonance of the empty shell; it's the sound that it makes.

There's a way in which we're hearing something that's akin with our current focus on Indigenous relations in Canada: the idea that you need the truth before you can move towards reconciliation, and you need to know the history and be able to manage it before you can move towards a future.

Olive: I wrote a poem ("Engraved") based on a quotation by Marie Wilson, one of the Truth and Reconciliation commissioners, that really resonated with me, that "we can't un-know what we have learned". We can't unlearn the past. We need to take it into ourselves and deal with it.

Veronica: *On that note of history, can I ask one other thing about the use of the public domain images? One of the interesting differences between Shell and Pandemic Poems was that Pandemic Poems names the sources whereas Shell just acknowledges that they're from the public domain. So, what I found interesting about Pandemic Poems was that it gave a further layer of communication because the titles of some of those public images were also meaning making.*

Olive: I must say in *Hurricane Watch: New and Collected Poems*, the sources are named in the selections from *Shell*. I think they were named in *Shell* too, but maybe not in such detail.

Veronica: *The Wentworth Bowen photograph is named as a source but then it says all other images are public domain (Shell 99). And I don't think titles of the images are offered in the original Shell.*

Olive: Perhaps not. Different times. Different publishing decisions. One of the things that intrigued me going into the public domain images is how things recur. I was struck by the fact that so much in the images of the past reflected what we were experiencing in the present. Accompanying my poem "T for Touch," for instance, is an image of a man and a woman sitting in a room distanced from each other (*Pandemic Poems* 14). It came from a set of images about something else entirely, but it seemed to perfectly reflect our situation during the pandemic.

Lara: *So, the next question is about your children's literature. In your conversation with The National Library of Jamaica, you mention sensitizing young people and helping them understand their responsibility towards Jamaica and the land: I wonder how that comes across in your children's books. How are you able through children's literature, utilizing illustration specifically, to inform and educate youth? What is the process like working with an illustrator? What do the merged modalities of language and illustration provide in this context?*

Olive: In my children's books, which so far are picture books, the purpose is not didactic because first of all, you have to entertain. But I'm conscious of the importance of images in which children can see themselves. I grew up in a world where our picture books didn't show anybody that looked like us or looked like a Jamaican. We were reading Enid Blyton and English children's books.

As for the process, in most cases, your contract with your publisher gives the publisher the right to determine the illustrations and hire the illustrator. But I have always insisted that I have to have a say in

the illustrations, because representation matters. I'm very sensitive to how people are portrayed. I've had really good, understanding publishers that way, and wonderful illustrators.

Although my intention is not explicitly didactic, you do want to give children a story that's uplifting. For instance, my book *Anna Carries Water* is about a small child wanting to master a skill like her older siblings and carry a bucket of water on her head. And because poor people are often portrayed in a very negative kind of way, I wanted to show people who were not wealthy, but a family in which there was a lot of love and support of each other. The illustrator (Laura James) not only portrayed this but also did a wonderful job of showing the land and the landscape. The fact that children are engaged in a hard task – that of carrying water daily for the family's needs – is important and provides a way to teach others that not all families are privileged to have water on tap. When I read this book to children, I say "Can you imagine what it's like, if the water doesn't come to you, you have to go to fetch the water?" So, a story that's an enjoyable read also becomes a teaching tool.

Overall, I'm very conscious that whatever I do should be representative of my culture and my world view. As well, in the wider sense, whether it's my children's books or my adult books, I feel that I have a duty to negate stereotypes. And of course, illustrations are part of that.

Veronica: *I was interested that there were certain things you would like to have in the illustration, but then you mentioned that your illustrator also did some representation of the land as well. So, the fact that it's not just a seeing of oneself represented, but it's also seeing one's place represented. . .*

Olive: The illustrator doesn't have any guidance as to what she chooses to do. I had nothing to do with that. Children's books are really produced by two people. I'm just absolutely thrilled with the way she projected the landscape. And this particular book (*Anna Carries Water*) has been published in South Africa and translated into four South African languages. And what intrigued me is that the only thing they changed in this book in terms of the illustration is the flag. There's a little shop with a Jamaican flag, and that was changed to the South African flag. So in a way, the landscape was speaking a universal language in another tropical country. That was nice.

Veronica: *Because then the representation that you're offering grows, right?*

Olive: And it spoke to them.

Veronica: *Let's move on. What do "acts of vision" do? I'm borrowing Mary Lou Emery's words there from Modernism, the Visual, and Caribbean Literature; Emery is in part interested in decolonization as involving a need "to claim authority of [one's] own perceptions" (2). Do literary texts allow us to see in ways similar or different from images?*

Olive: Let me answer this by giving you an idea of where I'm coming from. At the time of Independence in Jamaica, there was a lot of text unleashed on us because, of course, a time of Independence is a time for looking at ourselves. We're going to decolonize; this is a moment. And so there was an army of researchers out there: the historians, the political scientists, the archaeologists, the

musicologists; everybody was out doing research and writing these fabulous books. They were doing the work Kamau Brathwaite said should be done, work that means going subterranean and bringing up stuff. And of course, there was Frederic Cassidy's [and R.B. LePage's] *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, looking at the language. So, there was text and there were lectures, all of this stuff. And people like me, I was very excited by all of this; I was just at the right age.

But I think what really resonated with people was happening outside of text. One was a new kind of art. So far, most of our trained artists had started in the academy. So, even if it was a Jamaican landscape, it was in the style of whatever the artist had learnt in the art schools overseas. Suddenly – and this was pushed by Rastafari, which was a new African-centered religion – untrained, often uneducated people were painting, carving, and expressing themselves in a new style as they were also doing in music. The art was called, at the time, Intuitive (as opposed to Primitive, which is a loaded word). These forms of artistic expression struck a chord with the population as a whole; we all felt something exciting was happening. We were seeing ourselves in these different ways through art, hearing a different drum beat and musical styles. The intuitive art was based in Africa, but we had never talked about Africa. The artists were going inside themselves and recovering that sort of lost consciousness going way, way, way back. And the Rastas were influenced by the Bible and biblical images. And so everything about these paintings was striking, and new and fresh and yet somehow familiar. And the same with the music that was happening. This was when what is now reggae started.

So, to people of my generation all these things came together at the same time. There were those of us who were into text, and it was a small number compared to the total, but we were also into the music and images. And there was dance; dance was suddenly acknowledging that although people were still teaching ballet, "Our bodies are different. So, our dance is going to be different." Some of that difference was based on traditional dance forms related to indigenous religious and celebratory practices. The National Dance Theatre Company which was founded then to express dance rooted in the Jamaican tradition is still going strong.

So it was a mining of history and the past, and all the things that had been hidden before, for a new matrix to emerge. These are the things that have shaped my consciousness as a communicator, which is what I consider myself. The cadences and rhythms of our speech and body language, the visuals and sounds of the land and landscape, these are very much a part of my practice, even when I'm writing text.

Veronica: *That's one of the things that text gives us too. The ability to take on other forms, right? Because the text can have music; the text can have image.*

Olive:. I'm very much into acknowledging the need for all of these things.

Veronica: *Yes, because they all communicate in different ways. In your essay in Crosstalk: Canadian and Global Imaginaries in Dialogue (eds. Diana Brydon and Marta Dvorak), when you're using image or referring to image, you use the term "'speak' graphically" (30) which distinguishes it from the other ways of speaking.*

Let's move on to the next question. In Shell, you seemed to demonstrate a bit of an ekphrastic instinct. In particular, you have the poem "A Superficial Reading," which explores an 18th century painting, but you also have various other poems in that collection that address the visual arts in some way (e.g., "Skin"; "The Skin of the Earth"; "Picture"; and perhaps "S(h)ift" too). Could you speak to your engagement with the visual arts through your writing (or just more generally)?

Olive: I wanted to be an artist. I was very visual as a child. I was never encouraged to go and study art. But I did it all through high school. And I think my writing is very visual. I wake up, and I take in the world around me. I'm very 'in the moment' in terms of my surroundings, always.

Veronica: *One of the things you had said in your essay in Crosstalk was about the visual being "deceptive and untrustworthy" (33), like showing a plantation "with bucolic, lying, pastoral images" (33) and one of the terms you used was that you could use the visual as a means of "enquiry" (33) into what's being represented.*

Olive: That's a difference between questioning the pastoral (in 18th century paintings of the plantations) and graphically representing the gourd in a poem, a humble object of everyday plantation life. The two things are totally distinct ways of looking at the visual. In a blog I wrote for *Carcanet* after my collected poems *Hurricane Watch* came out, I noted that each poem that I write has a visual footprint. I consider how it sits on the page, which is unlike the practice of most poets; I spend more time figuring out how the poem looks. Perhaps the words might come easily, but the hard part for me is to create visual images on the page that either reinforce a poem or challenge it. It might be subliminal; it might not be immediately visible to the viewer, to the reader. But that graphic image, or thinking of poetry in graphic terms, is an intuitive part of my practice. And also, part of the way I handle the graphic in the poem is to do things with line breaks, punctuation, etc. Some of my poems are very long and narrow and some are very dense; some are broken into stanzas and some are not. And all of this is not accidental. It's carefully considered, because it's my way of forcing a reading of the poem on the reader, which you might not even be aware of. I'm also vocalizing in the poems; that is an important element of my craft as well. And so, I'm using the way I break lines to reinforce the way I would read the poem, to reinforce the notion of voice because a lot of my poems I'm writing, either implicitly or explicitly, as spoken. There is a speaker; there is a voice behind it. And in some cases, I use a lot of punctuation. In some cases, there's no punctuation, etc. That's not accidental. I very carefully consider these elements for every single point: how I'm going to do it? Am I going to use initial caps? To me, the two things go together: the visual and the language of texts.

Veronica: *I was thinking about one of the poems I just read today from Hurricane Watch: "'Warning: Keep Away from the Cliffs.'" I really liked that one. You've used slashes in it. And the poem ends up being in a block, but the slashes to me read like, where there might have been a line break. But now you've avoided the cliff.*

Olive: Yes, the slashes stand for line breaks.

In *Gardening in the Tropics,* I have two poems about stowaways ("Illegal Immigrant" and "Stowaway"). Normally, you'd indent a carry-over line on the left-hand side. In these poems, the second line is indented from the right. So, there's a movement that mimics the ocean waves but you're also getting a back-and-forth movement of somebody trying to escape and always being brought back. So that is an example of using these strategies to reinforce or to impose a kind of reading. For instance, there are the graphic poems or the concrete poems like "Gourd," which is in the shape of a gourd, or "Sweet Bwoy," which is in the shape of a sugar cane stalk. There are other poems that look conventional on the page and then in the middle of it, I break into another form to signal a shift of narrative voice or consciousness, for instance "Hook" in *Hurricane Watch*. So, all of this is really signaling various things to the reader. I don't know if it works. But that's my intention; in a way, I'm forcing a way of reading on you.

Veronica: *I also remember you talking about the idea that part of what you're doing is giving voice to the object.*

Olive: I think I spoke about this in the *Crosstalk* essay. I truly believe that plants are like humans. They have capability to move, to communicate, and they're going to be here long after we're gone. And so why shouldn't they speak? So, part of this strategy is enabling inanimate objects to speak, like gourd in terms of the shape. But again, this is part of how I view nature: that we are part of nature. So, we have text, but plants are much better at communicating and talking in so many different ways. I have a poem called "Plants," which looks at all these ways. If you think of flowers, you think they're there for us? No. All of it is to ensure that plants propagate and continue their line. So, I want to pay respect to the things that we consider inanimate, objects which in fact are full of life and energy and were there long before us.

Veronica: *And in a way then, they're not objects. They're also subjects.*

Olive: I'd like to say too that sometimes the graphic elements in a poem arise unconsciously. For instance, I have several poems about Columbus, one about the three ships arriving in the Caribbean ("The Pull of Birds"). And a newer poem, "Cruise Ship Leaving Port at Night." We don't realize Columbus was guided to land by the birds flying south for the winter. And so that older poem is in the shape of three ships, with the birds outdistancing them in the last line. And when I came to write the more recent poem, which is about a cruise ship but also about Columbus landing in that part of Jamaica on his third voyage, the poem takes the shape of the hulls of a cruise ship. So there's a way in which, even without thinking, these graphic elements are there in my mind, in my unconscious, and they come out in these various ways.

Veronica: *And in ways that then draw parallels between the poems. Isn't that interesting that you could put the two poems in relationship with one another then?*

Olive: I think it also shows how important the graphic footprint of a poem can be.

Veronica: *Well, and then that's a way your work itself is embodying the history of your work. There's something that the reader of the new poem would have to uncover in order to really know that new poem.*

Olive: If you know the earlier poem and the shape of it, then it adds a dimension to the later poem. This is what the graphics do. They don't exist on their own. They either add a dimension to the text or they challenge the text.

Veronica: *When I think about your shaped poems, I think more about the ones that end up being like a concrete poem. But some of the ones that you've been talking about that are shaped, they're shaped in other ways that I might not have recognized as visual in the same way. So, the way that you talked about the lines being broken on either side so that you get the movement of water, I wouldn't have thought about that as concrete poetry per se, but there's a way in which it represents less an object but more a movement.*

Olive: I don't even use the term concrete, but there are some poems that I guess would qualify. For me, it's more about using graphics to give the shape that reinforces the content. One of the poems in *Over the Roofs of the World* called "Penny Reel" is a good example of what I'm trying to capture with the shape – the musicality and the voice and the storytelling.

A penny reel was dancing around the maypole. It's a European, phallic, May Day tradition, where you plait ribbons down the pole and unplait them. It used to be very popular, even when I was in school. In Kingston, in the 1920s, working class people would go to a maypole dance, and pay a penny (an old British coin) to dance a reel. So my poem is called "Penny Reel." It is made up of four-line stanzas that move back and forth alternately all the way to the right and to the left like weaving a maypole dance. But it's also a story about a little dressmaker. While the other girls are dancing, she is stuck at home with the kids, and she's sewing in order to earn money. And so, it's also reflecting the back and forth of the sewing machine, as her movement mirrors the dancers'. And it's also mirroring the activity inside and outside. The original version actually showed it off more, because there was no space between the stanzas. This was my way of conveying all of this movement that's going on in the poem, but also, of course, conveying the idea of dancing a reel.

Veronica: *I just found it in Over the Roofs of the World. And even your margins are different in that poem as compared to other poems in the collection and as compared to how it appears in Hurricane Watch; you're right to the edge in it. It's interesting because like you said, it shows off the movement even more. And to do that you've eliminated the margins in order to accomplish some of that.*

Olive: I knew it was going to be four-line stanzas, and it has a certain musicality, but how do you convey this movement? A lot of the poems are like that. "The Dance of Cranes" shows words breaking out to convey the flight and the movement of the birds.

Veronica: *Can we talk about your postcard poems? I have a lovely postcard (copyright 2007) that you gave me when you were part of the St. Jerome's Reading Series in 2014. It's a four-line poem "Net" and these lines appear as part of a photograph of a spider's web.*

Olive: I've always taken photographs. But I got a digital camera when they came out, and it made such a difference. I happened to be in the country, a beautiful part of Jamaica, and I was supposed to be writing but I spent all my days taking pictures. I decided that I was going to choose an image and write a poem. Part of it was to force myself to write very short poems because you can only fit a certain amount of lines on a postcard. And I allowed the image to pick itself. I didn't force it; I just let each one speak to me and I'd choose one and write the poem. I printed the original postcards myself. Later on, I got them printed commercially, because I gave them out at my readings. I did the graphic design, everything. So, it was my work, from start to finish.

Those poems were a good exercise in terms of writing. But it was also a way of allowing the picture to speak. What I was trying to do in words was to capture the spirit and the essence of each picture.

Veronica: *It was interesting to me for a number of reasons. Claire Harris did a series of postcard poems that didn't have images to them. They were part of "Towards the Color of Summer," a series from The Conception of Winter. The tops of the pages where they appear feature the label "Postcards." And in her collection, you get the outline of a postcard, but there is no image to them, just a few short lines of text. So, I was thinking about your postcard poems in relation to Harris's version.*

Olive: Yeah, but Claire was also a very graphic writer in how she set out her poems [e.g., the novel-in-verse *She*].

Veronica: *Have you done any other literary art objects like this? And what was it like to be putting together your poetry with the photographic image, both of which you created? Does one art form describe/illustrate the other? Does one art form limit the other or can they extend each other's meaning?*

Olive: They can extend the meaning. I have one of these spider web photos where the web looks like a hammock which is an Indigenous invention. And my poem is in the voice of a Taino, an Indigenous person resting in that hammock slung between the trees. The poem is just three or four lines.

Veronica: *And if the poems are really short and condensed, then there's a way in which the image itself speaks.*

Olive: Yes. The image is what is giving me the words. So, images also forced me to think and to speak.

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