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**Review of *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* By Constance Coiner & *Three Radical Women Writers: Class and Gender in Meridel Le Sueur, Tillie Olsen, and Josephine Herbst* By Nora Ruth Roberts**

Linda Ray Pratt

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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## REVIEW ESSAY

*Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur.* By Constance Coiner. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Photographs, notes, works cited, index. xii + 282 pp. \$52.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

*Three Radical Women Writers: Class and Gender in Meridel Le Sueur, Tillie Olsen, and Josephine Herbst.* By Nora Ruth Roberts. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996. Works cited, index. xi + 209 pp. \$33.00.

### HARVEST SONGS AND ELEGIAC NOTES

"Writing about living subjects, especially those with whom one feels political and personal solidarity, is a touchy, even painful business," begins Constance Coiner in the introduction to her book on Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur. Contemporary directions in scholarship have recognized that interaction and opened up the personal voice in the scholarly study. Putting aside the dream of disinterestedness, the scholar herself may become part of the subject. The traditions of an objective scholarship are especially hard to fulfill, even to honor, when the research is done in cooperation with a living author who offers feminist support and friendship along with unpublished manuscripts and personal interviews. Much of the scholarly study of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur reflects the personal relationship of the critic with the writer, a similar political commitment, and an enthusiasm for the writer's work. The scholar hopes to please the author because of friendship and because she wants to be able to continue talking with her for future research. The author, pleased with the scholarly attention to her work after long years of neglect, wants to respond positively to what interests the

scholar. The pull of personal and practical considerations can shape the project in unacknowledged ways.

This painful business of writing about living authors extends beyond the connection between artist and scholar to include the network of scholars who write about the same living authors. We know of each other, we know our subjects, and we know how our subjects work with us to reveal, release, and sometimes control what we can say and how much we can learn. In the cases of Le Sueur and Olsen, we are further bound by the gift of an extraordinary warmth and grace emanating from the authors, an affectionate interest in ourselves and our work that translates feminist ideals into friendship. In this network of associations, even a review partakes of the personal in ways that influence judgments about the work.

In the months after this review was commissioned, both Constance Coiner and Meridel Le Sueur died. Coiner was killed tragically, in the company of her young daughter, in the explosion of TWA Flight 800. Le Sueur died last winter at age 97, worn down at last by the adversities of her age, but within the circle

of her family and community around St. Paul, her home for so many years. I heard about her death in a way that closes this circle of connections around me. Sitting at my desk one winter morning, I answered the phone: it was Tillie Olsen. She was calling to tell me that Meridel had died. Tillie didn't want me to read it cold in the impersonality of a newspaper account. I knew that Tillie had been devastated a few months before by the news of the TWA disaster. From within this circle of rich associations where knowledge is conditioned by sorrow and affection, there remained the "painful business" of writing a review.

The two books under review take as their ground the political life of their subjects. Since that life centered on the Communist Party USA, the focus of their studies poses yet another related problem. Coiner and Roberts have different visions of the Party and what it meant to be a member, and neither is, of course, "objective." Both Coiner and Roberts deserve praise for the degree to which they marshal the evidence and attempt a balanced interpretation of the authors as women writers on the left. These works try to assess the influence of Party membership by a detailed critique of CP attitudes on women's issues. Not surprisingly, they find a patriarchal structure in which issues of labor value and the empowering of the proletariat displaced women's liberation and the value of domestic and maternal "work." If their conclusions about ideological priorities are similar, their judgments of how much each author bent her imaginative creation to Party rule differ significantly.

Coiner is more interested in the writer as feminist than as communist. Seeing a Party that was patriarchal in attitude, aligned with the Soviet Union in ideology, and at best indifferent and at worst oppressive in its attitudes toward women's issues, Coiner stresses the authors' "resistance" to the Party, arguing that Le Sueur and Olsen dissent from its orthodox Marxism. For her, their "texts subvert the Party's productivism and sexism, legitimating the point of reproduction. . . . They

implicitly question the Marxist theory of the primacy of production, which defines production as *the* distinctively human activity and encodes activities carried out in the home, to which women have historically been disproportionately consigned, as less valuable than men's outside it. Le Sueur's and Olsen's writings suggest that the 'new Communist woman' may be as worthy of our attention as the 'new Communist man'" (37). How their texts resisted the Party line is more important to Coiner than how they conformed to it.

Roberts, reared in the Trotskyist tradition, comes to the subject from a significantly different personal position. Her parents were active in the Socialist Workers Party, and in her teens she was "a leader in the Trotskyist youth organization which became the Young Socialist Alliance" (ix). From this perspective Roberts is less inclined to romanticize the Communist Party USA. For many feminists interested in Le Sueur and Olsen, the variations on a shade of red that exist for Coiner and Roberts may seem recondite and irrelevant to an assessment of the quality of the work or its meaning for today's readers. Yet the critic's view of how the writer functions within this frame influences her reading of the texts, her assessment of the author's feminist and political commitment, and, ultimately, her importance as a writer. Both books add to the literature about "writers on the left," but whether they contribute to a better understanding or a deeper distortion of that topic concerns readers for whom the nature and influence of the CPUSA is itself an important topic.

As Party members both Le Sueur and Olsen primarily identified with workers and accepted the Party line as guide to the nature of their activism. In Le Sueur's case, it was also a strong influence on her writing from the 1920s to the 1950s. In contrast, Olsen published so little before the 1970s that the role of the Party in her writing is far less clear. Le Sueur's "life" as a publishing author was built around Party publications; her collection of short stories, *Salute to Spring*, was issued by the CP's Inter-

national Publishers. When her work was again brought forward in the 1970s it was primarily through John Crawford's West End Press. Crawford had worked for the *Daily World* and was associated with the Party. Coiner sees Le Sueur as subverting the Party's agenda with her feminist concern for individual consciousness, but Roberts writes, "Although quixotic, Le Sueur was compliant" (59). Party editors objected to the "lyrical" in Le Sueur, who was more influenced by D. H. Lawrence's concept of sexuality than an awareness of "gender" as we now understand it. Accepting the Party's criticism as valid, Le Sueur attempted to purge her work of its lyrical and individualist tendencies. In her 1984 "Afterword" to *I Hear Men Talking* she questions again the lyricism of her stories from the 1930s and discusses the correction she found in the life of the working class: "The events and struggles of my people have taught me. I have stayed close and paid attention." Olsen left the Party in the Cold War period, but Le Sueur stayed close and paid attention throughout her life, sticking with the CP despite the correction of her work, the denunciations of Earl Browder, the rigidities of William Z. Foster, the Stalin revelations, and the purges of politically incorrect members. For her, the Party was family, and if she did not always like what she saw, her loyalty and desire to serve the Communist agenda prevailed. During the 1930s through the 1950s Olsen either wrote and worked for the Party or for other political causes addressing union activity, war relief, and peace. We know from *Silences* how constrained her time was by child care and the need for employment, but what she chose to do with the time she had was political work. When she left the Party about 1948, she had herself run afoul of its strictness, which Coiner discusses in more detail than available before. Olsen's general ideological stance of support for the working classes remained strong, but the harshness of a Party ready to punish and expel any voice perceived as out of line with the Party line was more than she was willing to endorse. Less the supportive

"family" for Olsen, the Party was perhaps more like a bad marriage that had become abusive of its members' devotion.

Reading the authors as subverting Party masculinity with feminist views leads Coiner to praise Olsen's *Yonnondio* for its "emphasis on domestic labor" rather than the "primacy-of-production theory" or the "privileging of the workplace and the industrial worker as the loci of struggle." Most critics agree that the book is focused on the developing consciousness of the child Mazie, and that her mother Anna's suffering, affection, and delight provide intimate registers of what it may mean to grow into womanhood. In terms of Marxist considerations, however, the dominance of capitalism is at the center of the novella's political vision. The nature of labor, both husband's and wife's, grows out of the economic life imposed by the owners of the packing houses. The stench of the meatpacking houses proclaims, "*I rule here*," Olsen writes, and the sickening odor pollutes Mazie's family's air, their bodies, their chances for better lives. In a nightmare vision of the controlling power in her world, Mazie sees the "great hulk" of the Armours plant. "Armours, said Mazie over and over: Armoursarmoursarmours." Anna's "domestic labor" is part of the impoverished lives of families overwhelmed by the foulness of capitalist power and greed.

Roberts sees in *Yonnondio* a dialectical tension between sociological and ideological forces and a psychology of individual development that may be influenced by nature. For her the growth of Mazie's self is the center of the book's concerns, but "authorial interventions" about characters and episodes set up an ideological substructure of political intent that originally was to culminate in Mazie's becoming a Communist organizer. Both Coiner and Roberts argue that in *Yonnondio* Olsen combines an emphasis on the potential for individual development and imagination with an awareness of working class life and the oppression of capitalism. Coiner praises Olsen's feminist development and resistance to "some tendencies of Party politics and orthodox

Marxism" (191). Roberts discusses at length the Leninist and Trotskyist utilitarian views of human nature but finds that Olsen assigns to the family nexus and the natural world greater powers of influence than the sociological or ideological ones. As a critical reading of the text, Coiner's commentary on *Yonnondio* is more satisfactory; as a study of the novella in terms of questions of Party, ideology, and feminist readings, Roberts's more historical perspective on the left is a useful counter to the contemporary emphasis that displaces the writing's ideological purposes with an interest in gender study.

Roberts's strengths and weaknesses may be seen in her readings of "I Stand Here Ironing" and "Tell Me a Riddle." In a somewhat iconoclastic response, she sees the mother in "I Stand Here Ironing" as "both guilt-ridden and pleading for exoneration" from the authorities because she "has internalized standard bourgeois family ideology" (102). She is a "self-involved" narrator more concerned with making the case of how "social determination" justifies personal exoneration than with the loving care she might offer her daughter to meet the problems that working-class life has imposed on the family. For Roberts, Eva in "Tell Me a Riddle" has influenced the way the family has become unwittingly bourgeois. Unlike her husband, David, who belonged to his union and his Workman's Circle, Eva rejects the "communized life" in favor of the personal, private life of the individual which her roles as wife and mother have occluded. Roberts sees the stories as "a quest for belief, an odyssey guided by the question, where is the source for hope in the human species, especially in the context where the light of social determinism seems to have failed" (118). Both readings run against the grain of the more usual feminist interpretations of these stories which typically valorize the mother-daughter relationship and praise Eva for her inner fidelity to her beliefs.

Roberts notes at the outset that there is perhaps something of a "personal bias" in her sensitivity to the mother's response to the

authority at school instead of to her daughter. Her readings have an edge most critics of Olsen or Le Sueur avoid, cutting beneath the beauty of poetic style and sympathy with women's lives, an edge honed by the critic's historical awareness of how unromantic, how narrow and provincial political life can be, even among the moments of solidarity and the passion for a better world. Coiner reads the texts more sympathetically because their feminist concerns far outweigh for her the political realities of Stalinism and the internecine harshness of a Party discipline that moved in harmony with the dictates of the Soviet Union. Both books pose questions and commentary valid to the study of these authors as women writers on the left.

The interest today in Olsen, Le Sueur, Herbst, and other left-wing women writers of the past derives from their representation of how women suffered oppression and found ways to survive and sometimes triumph. Certainly this is both personal and political, but the lives of these authors were political in a more institutionalized sense. We distort what they have to say to us when we disconnect them from the very politics they embraced, or cast them as dissenting from what we don't now like in those politics. Must we make them more like ourselves to value them as feminists? Le Sueur's texts were not a "muted dissent" from the Party; they were the translation of Party ideology into the perspective of a woman within the Party. The Party was dominated by men and patriarchal in character, but Le Sueur chose to be a political person who was also a woman writer within its confines. Today we prize resistance to authority; the left politics of the 1930s and 1940s valued solidarity with the Party and the masses. The old radicals' sense of fulfilled selfhood came from submerging personal identity in the yearning of the masses. One of the unique things Le Sueur offers us, for example, is an account of how that was emotionally satisfying and how solidarity could become a form of transcendence. In "Song for My Time" from her collection, *Harvest Song*, Le Sueur tells us

the story of Bud's sister, dark with the grief of her brother's death in World War II, finding comfort and meaning when she meets his "comrades" from the Lincoln Brigade. The comrades tell her they knew her brother "in Spain," and she comes to understand and refigure his life in that perspective. The meaning of being "in Spain" defined for more than a generation what it was to combine the personal and the political. Experiences like the "hard times" of the Depression or being "in Spain" in the 1930s defined self-realization as communal, not personal, as universal, not gendered or ethnic. Our interest in gender and feminist identity conditions our reading of Le Sueur, Olsen, or Herbst today, but their work rose out of a different set of values. Both Coiner and Roberts help us reconstruct the world of those values, but Coiner never fully understands the emotional meaning of being "comrades." Roberts has been inside the left's factions so long that her study partakes of the querulousness of bitter ideological debates. Both books give us only a limited understanding of why these writers would give so much of their time, talent, and devotion to a patriarchal and dogmatic Party. Yet without that insight we cannot finally account for their work.

Book reviews are richest when part of an on-going scholarly discourse. The untimely death of a scholar whose work was just beginning to engage that broader discourse voids the expectation of hearing her react to what is said about her work. The death of an artist like Le Sueur ends the conversation on which scholars had learned to depend. We are thrown back on ourselves, the documents, and a recorded account which neither the scholar nor her subject can any longer revise or help others to expand. Coiner's study is rich in suggestions and subjects we would have pursued with her with great interest and debate. Meridel's life remains veiled, but she can no longer help us piece together the lost facts and stories that remain to be discovered and understood. Many of the people who belong in this story are dying before we can understand what is lost in their lives. Perhaps it is inevitable that scholarship will focus on what we want to hear about today's interests, but the deaths that silence key voices in this dialogue between the writers and their critics remind us of how fragile is our grasp on history and knowledge.

LINDA RAY PRATT  
Department of English  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln