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Pauline Amy de la Bretèque

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Creolization as Cultural and Poetical Rebirth in “Arrival of the Snake-Woman” by Olive Senior

Pauline Amy de la Bretèque

1 Creolization is a notion that has given rise to many debates since the 1970s, in the context of the birth of independent Caribbean nations. This phenomenon has played a key role in the definition of identities in the Caribbean whose populations came from all over the world, and where only traces of indigenous culture could be retrieved after the quasi-total extermination of the native populations by the European settlers. In the case of Jamaica, most of the Arawaks (also called Tainos) who inhabited the island died of disease exposure or were killed by the Spanish, even though some of them survived and mixed with the maroon communities of fugitive slaves. The islands have therefore been regarded as cultural laboratories, where the encounter and the mixing of European, African, Asian and Amerindian cultures have given birth to a completely new identity:

> What has been happening in the Caribbean for the last three centuries is literally this: a coming together of cultural elements from absolutely diverse horizons, which become truly creolized, which really interlink and mix with one another to produce something absolutely unforeseeable, absolutely new: Creole reality. (Glissant 2020, 5)

2 Edouard Glissant, even though he is a Martinican writer, considers the Caribbean archipelago in its totality and does not limit his theory to the French Caribbean. Even if each island has its own linguistic, historical and political, but also demographical specificities – Jamaica counts much fewer people of East Indian descent than Trinidad for instance – Glissant, like many authors, has stressed the profound unity that connects the different parts of the Caribbean, sometimes even including non-insular regions in the Caribbean space, like Louisiana, Guyana or Brazil (see also Benitez-Rojo and Walcott). Slavery, European colonization, but also creolization and the encounter of a multiplicity of cultures create the “submarine” roots that connect the different parts of the Caribbean (Brathwaite 1974, 64).

3 For Glissant, creolization is a never-ending process of cultural encounter and rebirth. However, the definition of creolization has always been controversial, and some important elements of Caribbean creolized identities have often been excluded by its theorists. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, in his investigation of Jamaican Creole society, traces the multiple origins and significations of the word "creole" – from which "creolization" is derived – which comes from "*criollo*" in Spanish, and from the Latin verb "*creare*" (to create). In French, the term was first used to designate a servant who was born in his master's house, then white people born in the Caribbean. The term referred to both masters and slaves, then to any person who was born in the colonies but who was of foreign origins. Brathwaite insists that it is essential to study Caribbean societies under slavery in order to understand their evolution until today. For him, creolization is intimately linked to slavery, and he therefore reduces this phenomenon to the encounter between European and African cultures, overlooking Asian and American cultural contributions:

> The people, mainly from Britain and West Africa [...] contributed to the formation of a society which developed, or was developing, its own distinctive character or culture which, in so far as it was neither purely British nor West African, is called 'creole'; that this 'creole culture' was part of a wider New World or American culture complex, itself the result of European settlement and exploitation of a new environment. (Brathwaite 1971, XIII)

4 The exclusion of the Indo-Caribbean population from some theories of creolization has given birth to the term "douglarization" which has been used to refer more specifically to the mix between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians (Puri). In this article, I shall rather use the term "creolization" as it has been defined by Edouard Glissant – a broadly inclusive phenomenon embracing *all* cultural encounters. The narrow definitions of creolization have been the object of strong criticism. Other critics have highlighted the absence of the role of women from the nationalist representations of the creation and transmission of creolized Caribbean culture (see Arnold and Brown). Moreover, while creolization is depicted by Edouard Glissant as a positive phenomenon, some critics have rather regarded it as a process of forced assimilation to European dominant culture (see Misir).

5 This article tackles those debates on creolization and its definitions through a reading of cultural renewal in one of the short stories by the Jamaican writer Olive Senior entitled "Arrival of the Snake-Woman" (1989). It examines the idea of rebirth through the representations of creolization in this particular story, and shows how it rethinks and questions the possibility of cultural renewal. "Arrival of the Snake-Woman," the first short story of Olive Senior's eponymous collection, relates the arrival of an Indian indentured woman in Mount Rose, a small rural village in late nineteenth-century Jamaica.[1] She is brought there from the bay by a man called SonSon, who first calls her a "Snake-Woman" – a woman who is part of the Indian indentured population – and then names her "Miss Coolie." These successive name changes can be seen as the onomastic manifestation of the protagonist's identity renewal. The story is told from the perspective of Ish, the narrator, who relates the arrival of the "Snake-Woman," but also the history and the culture of his community.

6 My aim is to analyse the way mobility, migration and personal encounters engender cultural transformation and rebirth but also highlight the pitfalls of cultural transformations. I shall therefore examine cultural interactions and rebirth through the prism of creolization. This phenomenon originally described a linguistic synthesis

between European languages and African languages through which syntactic and lexical elements from African languages have inflected French or English. Linguistic creolization is particularly visible in the French Caribbean, but also exists in the English-speaking Caribbean islands: Coromantee for instance is a language that is spoken by the Jamaican descendants of the maroons and is a mix between several West African languages and English, and the term Jamaican Patwa often refers to a form of Creole (see Velupillai). This linguistic notion has then been applied to cultures and identities, and creolization can be also defined as the encounter and mixing of heterogeneous cultural elements. This phenomenon is intrinsically linked to slavery, colonization and their legacies, and it is therefore fraught with inequalities as European settlers have tended to erase the cultures they encountered. Of Amerindian, African and Asian cultures, only traces remain. Yet, these traces persist and develop through contact with other cultures and are especially visible in oral traditions such as music or culinary practices. Creolization is now commonly applied to non-Caribbean contexts, from Europe to Southeast Asia (see Gutiérrez Rodríguez). We should nevertheless keep in mind that this concept was born of the colonization of the Americas, and more precisely of the colonization of the islands of the Caribbean archipelago, whose small size creates microcosms favourable to cultural interactions and the development of creolization.

7 I argue that creolization can be traced in Senior’s short story through the narrative of the adaptation of Miss Coolie to her new environment. In exile, she has to renew her cultural habits, to shed the cultural skin of a “Snake-Woman” to fit into a new society. Moreover, the story illustrates the process of creolization that is constantly at work in Caribbean islands, as the narrator relates the diverse cultural influences that have creolized his community (from Europe, Africa and North America). Miss Coolie inevitably influences and transforms the culture and identities of the inhabitants of Mount Rose. Like other Indian migrants at that time, she brings some cultural elements that will participate in the development of an Indo-Caribbean culture and that will profoundly renew West Indian cultural identity. Through the eyes and the voice of the narrator, the tale also underlines the tensions that these new cultural elements bring. This article will thus delve into the difficulties caused by the permanent rebirth of identities and cultures in Senior’s story.

8 My analysis first considers migration as cultural rebirth, and examines the representation of Miss Coolie’s adaptation. It underlines the ambiguity of creolization and questions its possibility through cultural rebirth and adaptation in a colonial context. To put it differently, we shall see that Senior’s short story challenges the positive vision of creolization that has been developed by theorists like Edouard Glissant while the narrator almost systematically stresses acculturation and loss. Yet this article also highlights the inescapability of cultural renewals and the reciprocal impact of migration on the place of arrival of the Snake-Woman. Through an ecocritical approach to the text, I shall demonstrate how gardening and cooking mirror and encapsulate the creolizing process. Finally, this study seeks to open a reflection on how creolization shapes and renews the literary genre of the short story through the use of oral language and vernacular speech.

Rebirth in migration: adaptation and the shedding of one’s skin

9 At the beginning of the story, Miss Coolie is depicted as a model of adaptation: she conforms to the social practices of the village, and to the patriarchal rules imposed by her husband, SonSon. The narrator stresses her compliance and her docility, as well as her silence. She accepts to convert to Christianity after the American pastor – who rules and controls the community of Mount Rose – refuses to give medicine to her son because she is a “heathen” (3) and a “temptress” (Senior 2009, 26). She no longer wears her traditional saris because they are not considered as “decent people clothes” (4), but as “thin and sinful” garments (4). In the eyes of the narrator, she appears as the embodiment of cultural adaptation as she strives to blend into her new environment: “she had left behind all that reminded her of the old, shed her identity and her history, became transformed into whatever we would make of her” (7). The trope of the shedding of the skin, already suggested by her nickname, “Snake-Woman,” seems to illustrate what the narrator describes as Miss Coolie’s renunciation of her former culture, and her rebirth into a new identity.

10 She even takes the names that the community gives her: “Miss Coolie,” a stereotypical name referring to Asian labourers, then Gertrude, a “proper” Christian name chosen by the pastor – her real name is never to be revealed in the story: “Everyone came to call her Miss Coolie for that is what SonSon and Cephas called her and in all the years I knew her, I never knew her name except for Gertrude which Parson gave her when she was baptised [...]. I don’t think that anyone ever knew her Indian name or anything about her” (Senior 2009, 7). The act of naming is particularly significant in the context of colonization. Jamaica Kincaid indeed reminds us that “to name is to possess” (Kincaid 1999, 114) while she re-thinks Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the “New” World, which was new only because he could not find the words to describe what he had never seen before: “To have knowledge of things, one must first give them a name. This, in any case, seems to me to have been Christopher Columbus’s principle, for he named and he named [...]. This world he saw before him had a blankness to it, the blankness of the newly made, the newly born” (155). But Columbus’s desire to know the things of the New World, Kincaid tells us, does not come from mere curiosity, but from a wish to possess them, to enclose them within his own system of understanding, his own *episteme*. In this case, one may see in the naming of Miss Coolie an act of colonization, domination and possession of her identity. When she becomes a mother, Miss Coolie is in turn allowed to name, and, significantly, she gives an Indian name to her son whom she calls Biya.

11 Senior’s representation of the Coolie woman as a model of adaptation and as a good and hard-working wife has been criticized, especially by Ramabai Espinet who denounces the invisibilization of Indo-Caribbean women in West Indian literary texts but also their stereotypical portrayal as docile and submissive wives: “The Indian woman is invisible because no novelist has yet been able to regard her existence in the West Indies and give voice to the peculiarities and perceptions of that particular existence” (Espinet 1996, 430). Espinet argues for literary representations of “the truth” of Indo-Caribbean women’s experience. Birbalsingh, in his analysis of Indo-Caribbean short stories, also reminds us that the earlier Caribbean literary accounts of indentured labourers were fraught with prejudice, reducing them to their poverty or depicting

them as violent and treacherous (2004, 119). Yet, he expresses a completely different vision of Senior’s short story: “Olive Senior of Jamaica has produced a remarkable study of Indo-Jamaican experience in the study of Miss Coolie in her story ‘The Arrival of the Snake Woman’” (133). For him, Senior’s story gives visibility to Indian experience in the Caribbean. Indentured women characters have indeed barely been represented – or misrepresented – throughout Caribbean literary history, but, like Birbalsingh, I argue that Senior’s depiction of Miss Coolie is not stereotypical. On the contrary, the story exposes the narrator’s prejudices, denounces Miss Coolie’s voicelessness, and deeply subverts these stereotypes as the story progresses – the complexity of the portrayal of Miss Coolie and her resistance to complete acculturation will be analysed later on in this article.

12 Rather than conveying a stereotypical vision of the East-Indian woman, the story denounces the pitfalls of Miss Coolie’s cultural renewal and reveals the ambivalence of her rebirth and of the creolization of her identity. Her adaptation is indeed for the most part imposed by the rigid rules of the community. Indian indentured people were actually constrained to conform to the Caribbean societies in which they settled since their traditions and languages were rejected and mocked and their religions and institutions were not recognized – Hindu and Muslim weddings were not considered as official weddings (Kumar and Kumari). In Jamaica, where the number of indentured labourers was much smaller than in Trinidad or in Guyana, the rejection of East Indian culture was even more pervasive. Yet, in spite of the strong repression of their culture, the indentured population’s influence is visible in many cultural elements such as music, cooking and dances (Kumar and Kumari). Senior’s story highlights Miss Coolie’s obligation to conform and the construction of the social and cultural norms that rule the life of Mount Rose, as well as the different cultural layers that contributed to forming the village’s identity. We learn that Mount Rose was a plantation, and that after the abolition of slavery and the departure of the white planters, the community of free slaves took possession of the place. The story explains that the inhabitants experienced at that time a cultural rebirth through the practice of Afro-Caribbean rituals and beliefs. Two central figures of the village, Papa Dias and Mother Miracle, had contributed to the revival of the traces of African cultures and spirituality in the community, and to their integration within European forms of knowledge. Papa Dias, for instance, was educated by his white master who taught him how to read and write, but his own father, who was a powerful sorcerer, also passed on to him elements of African culture, such as the knowledge of Yoruba divinities and myths.

13 Mount Rose’s culture creolized even more rapidly after the abolition of slavery, but creolization is a never-ending process, and it therefore entails a constant rebirth of cultures which keep on creolizing through encounters with other cultures. Yet, as Glissant reminds us, if the cultures that meet are not considered as equal, creolization fails, or leaves a bitter taste (2020, 7). Senior’s story warns us against the ways in which the process of creolisation can be threatened when it recounts that a few decades after the abolition of slavery, the arrival of a pastor and his wife, missionaries from the United States, puts the creolized culture of the community in jeopardy with their project “to bring light to darkness” (Senior 2009, 6). A hierarchy is then established between Afro-Caribbean beliefs, and the parson’s Christian religion. His preaching is all the more convincing as it is accompanied by intellectual and economic power, through the books and drugs he brings from America. His religious domination imposes new moral and social values that progressively become part of Mount Rose’s habits. The

story thus reveals the frailty and the ambivalence of creolization because despite the multicultural layers that form the cultural identity of Mount Rose, the Western, Christian cultural elements eventually dominate: Miss Coolie is thus forced to renounce her culture, her religion, her name, her clothes, and her jewels, all perceived as deviant.

14 Are Miss Coolie’s rebirth and adaptation more similar to a form of acculturation than to creolization then, since she is forced to adapt for survival? Her apparent passivity and her malleability are embodied in her absolute silence as she barely speaks and almost never expresses herself through direct speech. An entire page of the story is devoted to the depiction of her silence: “I never knew whether she spoke so little because she was naturally very reticent or whether she never really felt comfortable speaking English, or whether in her early years of hardship, isolation, and exile she had got into the habit of not speaking” (Senior 2009, 7). For Olive Senior, migration and exile are intimately linked to silence:

> I would say “home” is a place where there is a condition of resonance, or sound returned; that is, a place where you speak to a community and it speaks back to you. Thus one might see the condition of exile [...] as signifying a lack of resonance, a condition that is often expressed by words like emptiness, coldness, and silence. (2005b, 37)

15 The feeling of belonging is then linked to the possibility for an individual to make his or her voice heard, and to obtain a response from society. The extreme marginalization of the uprooted characters in exile makes them inaudible and erases their voices. The apparent lack of reciprocal interaction between Miss Coolie and the community of Mount Rose questions the possibility of creolization, which thus appears as forced assimilation to a dominant culture. Senior’s short story therefore significantly undermines the possibility of creolization through cultural rebirth since she constantly reminds us of the violence of Miss Coolie’s adaptation to her new environment. In this brutal colonial context, one might therefore wonder if cultural rebirth necessarily implies a form of cultural erasure or if it can actually lead to a form of creolization of identities. Françoise Lionnet addresses this question and, drawing on Edouard Glissant’s theory, she stresses the inextricability of creolization and acculturation: “the concept of creolization encompasses and exceeds the concepts of métissage or acculturation” (Lionnet and Shu-Mei 2011, 265). Yet, according to Lionnet, creolization, even though it implies acculturation, also goes beyond mere cultural erasure and unavoidably results in new and more complex forms of cultural identities. Building on Lionnet’s statement, I would like to argue that Miss Coolie’s new cultural skin, like her actual skin, is only what appears on the surface, and that in spite of her seemingly passive behaviour, Miss Coolie actually subverts the dominant culture which silences her.

Beyond acculturation: the inescapable creolization of identities

16 Miss Coolie is not only passively transformed by her new environment, she also surreptitiously transforms the society into which she settles, as she brings new habits to Mount Rose. Transformation becomes visible through the plants that Miss Coolie

grows in her garden, and the meals she cooks and that will slowly be added to the dishes of the Afro-Caribbean community.

> Miss Coolie had transformed the yard from a weed-filled place to a magical garden in which she grew things which at the time were new to us [...]. Did she bring all the plants from the Bay, from India, and how did she get them to grow in a place where nobody else had grown anything else but coffee and cocoa beans, yam, dasheen and eddoe, red peas and cassava, cho-chos, skellions and time, mint, ginger and sage? Her kitchen was so full of wonderful smells and colours, mixes and powders, which she parched and pounded and stored in tiny baskets she wove herself. (Senior 2009, 9–10)

17 Miss Coolie has transplanted spices and herbs from India into her garden. These new vegetal specimens have adapted and blended with the plant species already present, and which had themselves been transplanted from afar, sometimes from Africa. Cooking is commonly regarded as a typical feminine and domestic activity and is sometimes represented as a marker of patriarchal oppression, as cooking is part of the sexual division of labour in Western countries (see Sayer 2010, 30) but also in the Caribbean (see Hilary Nicholson 2002, 371). The reduction of women's lives to house chores – including cooking – in the Caribbean is inherited from slavery (see Momsen) and unpaid housework is even qualified as a form of slavery by Virginia Woolf in her essay "Three Guineas" (2007, 863). Moreover, Caribbean women writers also tackle the invisibilization and the oppression of Caribbean domestic workers in the Caribbean or abroad (see Cliff 1985, 75). Olive Senior's short story "The Pain Tree," for instance, recounts the life of the narrator's maid whose life is limited to housework and who has to renounce her family and home to live with her employers. However, in "Arrival of the Snake Woman," cooking becomes for Miss Coolie a way of expressing and claiming her own culture. Miss Coolie's contribution to the creolization of the community's cooking habits epitomizes the impact of Indian culinary tradition on Caribbean food. Ingredients from Asia such as aubergines, fenugreek or turmeric have indeed become essential ingredients of Caribbean cooking, which they have integrated and creolized. When they settled in Jamaica and in the Caribbean, Indian indentured labourers started cultivating crops that were new to this part of the globe, and gave birth to specific Indo-Caribbean gardening traditions through the cultivation of rice, spices, vegetables from India but also cannabis (*ganja*) – many plant species that have now been integrated into Jamaican and Caribbean customs. More broadly and from an ecocritical perspective, Senior's short story enables us to trace the changes of the environment as the text recounts the evolution of the Jamaican biotope engendered by multiple migrations from all over the world. Caribbean plant species – coming from as far away as Asia or Africa and which are now an integral part of Caribbean landscapes – therefore mirror the multiplicity of cultures that have been imported to the archipelago throughout history. Moreover, the story reveals the impact of the evolution of crops and cultigens on certain aspects of local culture in the islands.

18 Through gardening, Miss Coolie thus physically reshapes her new environment, and transforms it so that it reflects her cultural origins. Gardening appears as an empowering activity, giving her the agency to express her creolized identity. Notably, it is only when she is gardening that she feels free to wear a sari, displaying her Indian origin. The garden can therefore be regarded as a place of transformation, and of self-invention for Miss Coolie, but also, according to Myriam Moïse, for Caribbean women in diaspora in general, "claiming the right to garden one's own space and cultivate one's

own patch of land is a metaphor for cultivating one's own identity beyond limited spaces, beyond normative gardens" (2018, 45).

19 Moreover, the cultivation of plants and herbs takes on a particular significance in relation to gender, as the knowledge and mastery of plants has often been associated to female emancipation and to women's control over their own bodies – and therefore to witchcraft, as suggested by the narrator's use of the adjective "magical" to qualify Miss Coolie's garden. Many works of fiction deal with female sexuality in regard to plants, such as *Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid (1990), or *Abeng* by Michelle Cliff (1984). Gardening becomes a way for women to emancipate themselves, to explore the multiplicity of their cultural influences and to express their rhizomatic identities (Deleuze and Guattari).[2]

20 Miss Coolie's arrival brings a new layer to the cultural complexity of Mount Rose, as she manages to change the community, not only through gardening and cooking, but also when she questions and undermines some of the inhabitants' beliefs and traditions. For instance, she challenges the villager's lack of confidence in hospitals, when she decides to bring her own child there so he would be cured. Moreover, the Coolie identity which her name alludes to evolves over time as she becomes a mother-figure and as her son makes her part of the community ("Biya pulled Miss Coolie more and more into the life of the district," Senior 2009, 29). Motherhood turns out to be a form of rebirth for Miss Coolie: on the one hand, she becomes more integrated into the life of the community, changes the way she dresses and converts to Christianity, but on the other hand, she asserts herself and makes her voice heard as her words are for the first time in the story expressed through direct speech. The birth of her first child is also for her the occasion to share food – and therefore culture – with the rest of the community: curry goat or tamarind balls and other recipes from India that are completely new to Mount Rose inhabitants.

21 Olive Senior's short story thus draws a complex portrait of its protagonist whose apparently submissive adaptation contrasts with the strong influence she has on her environment. This ambivalence is encapsulated in her very name, "Snake-Woman": I have so far suggested this name could be connected to Miss Coolie's adaptation and to the shedding of the skin. But in her study of Senior's short story, Ameena Gafoor reads the figure of the Snake-Woman differently, in the light of the myth of the Garden of Eden, as Miss Coolie subversively brings knowledge to the "fossilized" (1993, 37) and isolated community. Gafoor's interpretation sheds light on Miss Coolie's impact on her environment and contrasts with her adaptation and seemingly passive attitude.

22 At the end of the story, Miss Coolie eventually finds a place within Mount Rose society, but her role in changing the community's habits has become ambivalent, since, in order to complete her social and economic ascent, she sets up a new order of domination. She climbs up the social ladder, and reconfigures the community's life, but she embodies a new capitalist and unequal order: she charges interest on loans and accumulates large amounts of money. She moves into the property of the former missionaries, which was originally the property of the plantation owners, thus perpetuating a similar pattern of domination. She also does not challenge traditional gender categories, nor does she encourage her daughters to study, but again reproduces the same mechanisms of domination of women: "Miss Coolie had not bothered to educate any of her girls, but she brought them up properly and taught them how to please a man" (Senior 2009, 44).

Miss Coolie, while freeing herself from the shackles imposed on her by the colonial hierarchy, uses them to establish her own power.

23 Senior’s protagonist plays an ambiguous role in the story, as she is at the same time opening the way for cultural transformation – of herself as well as of the community – but she also participates in the perpetuation of some patriarchal and colonial models. Cultural creolization appears as similarly ambiguous, as it allows for the emergence of new cultural practices, which, however, cannot quite escape social and gender hierarchies.

24 Ameena Gafoor asserts that, even though Miss Coolie contributes to the renewal of Mount Rose’s habits, she remains impervious to its creolization, as she does not totally give up her Indian culture. Gafoor develops Brathwaite’s analysis in *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, and considers creolization as the adoption of Afro-Caribbean culture, which is the result of the encounter between European and African cultures only. Therefore, according to her, Miss Coolie’s creolization has failed, as she retains some of her own culture (1993, 39). I argue that, on the contrary, Indian cultural elements fully participate in the process of creolization of Caribbean cultures in the text, and that their survival is essential to the creation of a creolized culture. Senior’s story thus broadens the definition of creolization by including Indian cultural elements. Creolization can no longer be restricted to the interaction between African and European cultures. On the contrary, the rebirth and the creolization of Caribbean cultures is the result of the encounter of all the cultural elements present in the Caribbean, including Indian ones. Senior’s story re-thinks creolization as a broader phenomenon, which includes the agency of women, but also that of the Indian indentured population, long excluded from the fixed theoretical and nationalist definitions of Caribbean identities. The text also encapsulates the debates around creolization – its unavoidable reality and the violence associated to it. A close examination of creolization reminds us that cultural renewal is inescapable, but cannot be disentangled from loss and a form of acculturation.

25 Cultural rebirth results in new habits, new religious, sartorial or culinary traditions, but also in new modes of expression and language, as Miss Coolie is also forced to adopt the language of the community – English. I shall therefore examine the way creolization is reflected in the poetical characteristics of Senior’s literary language, and the way the author revisits the genre of the short story.

A poetical rebirth: revisiting the short story

26 Olive Senior has often claimed that the short story was her favourite genre for writing fiction. I would like to suggest that she gives shape to a renewed and creolized form of short fiction, mirroring the cultural creolization she depicts in her short story. The idea of renewal implies the departure from a standard, from a tradition. The short story is, however, a difficult genre to define, and its characteristics are extremely variable. Its flexibility allows for the transgression of literary norms, and is more favourable to formal and narrative innovations. I argue that Senior takes advantage of this plasticity to mix Caribbean oral elements into this literary genre. As a Caribbean writer, Senior is deeply influenced by a creolized culture, and she reveals in her interviews that her written fiction is shaped by the oral traditions of storytelling in the Caribbean: “I think that the oral tradition has profoundly influenced me as a writer because I grew up in a

society where the spoken word was important. We created our own entertainment; every night as a child living in the village I remember an adult told us stories" (Senior 1986, 19).

27 Orality is a founding element of Caribbean cultures, and of Olive Senior's writing. She gives a particular importance to performance and storytelling: "what I am trying to do is to write as if I am actually *telling* a story" (Senior 1994, 77). "Arrival of the Snake-Woman" includes some elements of orality through the presence of vernacular speech – "Ol'Massa" (Senior 2009, 16), "backra" (14) – and vernacular names of plants – "cassava" (10), "cho-chos" (10). Orality is notably visible through the transcription of Creole or Jamaica Patwa which is mixed with Jamaican English and standard English. Noraida Agosto reminds us that in Jamaica, people commonly use a linguistic continuum from Creole to standard English: "This continuum invites code-switching and makes language restlessly innovative [and makes it] difficult to create a standardized orthography" (1999, 135). Senior's retranscription of this linguistic continuum in her fiction bridges the gap between oral and literary languages.

28 Moreover, Ish sometimes directly addresses the reader: "Believe it or not" (Senior 2009, 20). He sometimes uses exclamations or interjections: "Whai!" (3), "Doctor!" (32). The oral dimension of Senior's writing is also visible in her other short stories, like "Ballad" (in the collection *Summer Lightning*) or the last short story in the collection *Arrival of the Snake Woman*, "Lily, Lily." Barbara Lalla analyses the link created in Senior's texts between the narrator and a listener/reader:

> In a typical story by Senior, the voice (whether in first or third person) interacts with the reader, sometimes by overt cues such as questions or exclamations, but more often by subtler, underlying modes of address inferring intimacy and direct connection to the audience. In other words, the reader is really an *audience,* one who listens to the speaker on equal terms, a member of the speaker's group. (D'Costa, Lalla and Pollard 2014, 20)

29 The reader becomes a member of the audience, and is invited to participate in the experience of storytelling. Senior says that she always imagines that she is addressing an audience when she writes a short story. She reminds us that the reading of her texts, just as in the experience of oral narration, involves the reader/listener in the story: "This implies, of course, that if you choose to listen, then you are equally to blame for whatever consequences result. It thus cements a bond between teller and listener – and I will suggest that in writing a story, there is also the need for the creation of such a bond between writer and reader" (Senior 1996, 40). Her texts intertwine two narrative experiences – reading and listening – that are usually thought of as incompatible and unite them in a creolized literary form.

30 This reflection about the dichotomy between orality and writing is echoed in the narrative, as it is also pursued by the narrator, who highlights the dominance of the written forms of knowledge over the oral ones. After the departure of the planters, and before the arrival of the pastor, Papa Dias is the keeper of oral and spiritual knowledge among the community. He also knows how to read and write, but it is the oral Afro-Caribbean culture that is perceived as the most powerful by the inhabitants of the village. However, the text later provides a more nuanced view of the importance of orality in relation to writing and reminds us of the supremacy of writing over orality in a globalized world, and in a country governed by colonial institutions. The narrator mentions in particular the problem of the absence of property deeds in the village: "even though Mother Miracle's father had given her a plot of land, he had never given

her a paper to go with it and everybody knew that the white people and the law which supported everything they did only dealt in *paper*" (Senior 2009, 21). The italics emphasizing the term "*paper*" underline the fact that despite the essential place occupied by oral traditions, the written word prevails in the colonial system. The conflict between orality and writing seems to be resolved in Senior's poetical creolization, as the encounter between Western literary traditions and Caribbean oral traditions gives birth to a renewed form of short fiction that includes oral elements within a written text. The very shape of the short story thus mirrors the cultural creolization taking place in the Caribbean while encapsulating and fusing different modes of expression and of cultural transmission.

31 Senior is not the only writer who has chosen the short story as a way of transcribing oral culture. She reminds us that the mixture of orality and writing is a manifestation of the creolization of Caribbean culture: "Finally, in our culture, there is the collective voice that might not be written down in books but is nevertheless an equally potent force: the voice of ancestral heritage that is labelled—in academic circles—orality" (Senior 2005b, 36). Moreover, the short story genre is often thought of as being particularly appropriate for the writing of oral tales, according to Kenneth Ramchand: "West Indian writers are more comfortable and cavalier with the short story, have modified it more confidently and radically because they can bring to it a whole range of stories, and modes of story-telling that are indigenous. The West Indian short story has always been more West Indian than the West Indian novel" (1997, 28). Ramchand even regards it as a typical Caribbean genre and argues that the Caribbean short story creates the conditions for the encounter between oral and written traditions. Frank Birbalsingh goes further than Ramchand when he claims that: "[The short story] is a direct descendant of a Caribbean oral tradition of folk tale" (2004, 125). According to him, West Indian short stories have been shaped by oral traditions inherited from African, Amerindian and Asian cultures.

32 Senior's writing is anchored within the literary renewal described by Ramchand and Birbalsingh, as the author gives birth to a new form of short story which is profoundly creolized, thus mirroring the cultural creolization taking place in the story. The story's aesthetics can be qualified as "poétique de la créolisation" or *poetics of creolization* (Glissant and Noudelmann 2018, 59) which seems to be more appropriate than "Dougla Poetics" – a term that refers to the aesthetic hybridization of Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian cultural elements (Puri 1997, 143). Even though we could say that Miss Coolie "douglarizes" the Mount Rose community, the short story appears more as an inclusive mix of various oral and literary traditions rather than a strict hybridization of Indian and African aesthetics.

33 The idea that short stories are more adapted to the transcription of oral knowledge, however, has certain limits: even though the conciseness of the short story can be regarded as better fit to the format of the oral story, there is actually no rule governing the length of the short story. "Arrival of the Snake-Woman" for instance is quite a long short story of forty-seven pages. Moreover, if we look at Olive Senior's writing, elements of orality can be found in other generic forms like poems, through which she also seeks to establish a link between the reader and the narrator which is reminiscent of the relations between storyteller and listener. More broadly, through the integration of elements of storytelling inherited from African, Asian and Amerindian oral cultures, twentieth- and twenty-first-century Caribbean writing has contributed to the renewal

of literary conventions, not only of the short story but also of the novel and of poetry (see Ramchand 1979, and Morris 1998).

34 Lucy Evans explores yet another link between the form of the short story and the Caribbean context as she stresses the appropriateness of this particular genre to the complex literary representation of Caribbean communities. To Evans, this accounts for the enduring popularity of Caribbean short fictions. In her study, she analyses literary portrayals of Caribbean communities and cultural diversity through contemporary short stories. According to her, the large number of short fictions in Caribbean literature can be linked to the fact that the structure of a short story collection provides a complex mode of representation of community in the Caribbean: "the form of interconnected stories is a crucial part of these writers' imagining of communities which may be fractured, plural and fraught with tensions, but which nevertheless hold together" (2014, 2). She stresses the difficulty of expressing the idea of community in the Caribbean because of the ruptures provoked by the violent history of the region, but also because of the current tensions created by neocolonialism, climate change, or the tourist industry. Evans's reading of the short story leads us to reflect on Senior's portrayal of Jamaican society in "Arrival of the Snake-Woman" but also in the entire short story collection. "Arrival of the Snake-Woman" depicts a community fraught with cultural tensions, which are also expressed in the story "The Two Grandmothers," in which a young girl is torn between the different cultural influences represented by her two grandmothers. The collection also stages many isolated characters who cannot find their place in their community because they identify only with an idealized vision of British culture and deny the other cultural influences that also live in them (see "The View from the Terrace" or "Lily, Lily"). Senior's short story collection in its totality encapsulates the challenges of creolization and cultural rebirth within Jamaican society. The form of the short story is particularly adapted to this project, as it conveys this fragmentation but also the multicultural influences that permeate Caribbean identities.

35 "Arrival of the Snake-Woman" highlights the unavoidability of cultural transformation through encounters, and its consequences on the very shape of the text. Yet, it also reveals the ambiguity of creolization and the limits of cultural rebirth, as cultural creolization is sometimes difficult to distinguish from acculturation, and as it appears quite hard to free oneself from patriarchal and colonial hierarchies. Olive Senior, like other Caribbean women writers, has included "Coolie" women characters in her narratives as a way to tackle the question of multicultural tensions within Caribbean communities and to challenge any idealized conception of creolization. Maryse Condé has pursued the same objective; her novel *Crossing the Mangrove* depicts the tensions between the East-Indian Ramsaran family and the white Creole Lameaulnes family to highlight the violence of power relations in Guadeloupe.

36 Gardening and cooking perhaps best encapsulate cultural encounters and mixing in the short story. Nature is often used as an image for cultural renewal and creolization in Senior's writings. In her poems, like the ones relating "Hurricane Stories" in the collection *Gardening in the Tropics*, renewal and rebirth are described as emerging out of chaos and destruction. Nature's ability to grow again after destruction can be read as a metaphor for the cultural renewal emerging from the violence of Caribbean history, marked by slavery and colonization. Senior's texts shed light on the shaping of

Caribbean nature by colonization and examine the way landscapes can help us remember the past violence that gave birth to Caribbean cultures.

37 Yet, nature's metaphorical resilience and rebirth find their limits with global warming and human destruction of landscapes. In her later works, Senior thus departs from a metaphorical writing of nature as mirroring cultural encounters to delve into its material dimension and explore environmental issues. In her short story "Boxed-In" from the collection *The Pain Tree*, she mentions for instance the mining of bauxite in Jamaica, which destroys the landscapes and makes the soils barren. Her recently published *Pandemic Poems* also express a more pessimistic vision of the global situation during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, denouncing the world's preoccupation with the economy and capital, rather than with the environment. In the poem "Firebird" in particular, she tackles California's wildfires and subverts the image of the phoenix – another symbol of rebirth – when she depicts burning birds that are *not* going to rise from their ashes. These birds falling from the sky are apocalyptical omens, warnings for humans about climate change: "Like the canary in the coal mine, these birds are dying to tell us something" (Senior 2020). Rebirth and renewal are thus not always an option as far as nature is concerned, Senior points out: some destructions are irreversible and do not belong to any cycle of rebirth.

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NOTES

1. Indentured labourers were contract labourers who were sent to the colonies for a specific period of time, usually five years. The arrival of indentured labourers from Southeast Asia, and mostly from India, developed with the labour shortage provoked by the abolition of slavery in the 1840s. More than 36,000 Indians settled in Jamaica between 1845 and 1917. While their contract included a travel back to India, most indentured labourers stayed in the Caribbean after the end of their contract.

2. Deleuze and Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus,* oppose the rhizome, a root that intermingles with other roots, to the root-tree system. They use the rhizome as a metaphor to describe a non-hierarchical form of knowledge, as opposed to a binary and vertical form of knowledge. Edouard Glissant draws on this metaphor to characterize the composite cultures of the Caribbean: like the

multiple roots of the rhizome, “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (Glissant 1997, 11).

ABSTRACTS

This article examines cultural and poetical rebirth in Olive Senior’s short story “Arrival of the Snake-Woman” (1989). It delves into the difficulties caused by the permanent rebirth of identities and cultures in migration and studies the role of the short story in the renewal of oral practices, with a narration in vernacular speech that anchors it deeply in Caribbean oral traditions.

INDEX

Keywords: Olive Senior, creolization, diaspora, gardening, cooking, ecocriticism, Caribbean literature, orality

AUTHOR

PAULINE AMY DE LA BRETÈQUE

Université Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis / laboratoire VALE
Pauline Amy de la Bretèque holds a PhD in English studies from Sorbonne University. Her doctoral dissertation examines feminine poetics of creolization in the works of anglophone Caribbean women writers. Her publications include **“**Memorial Excursion and Errancy in Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*” (*Babel* 40, 2019), “Greffe, bouture et créolisation : des jardins de mots et de sens chez Jamaica Kincaid” (*Wagadu* 19, 2018), “Textes rhizomes et créolisation chez Jean Rhys et Michelle Cliff” in *Edouard Glissant, l’éclat et l’obscur* (Presses Universitaires des Antilles, 2020), and “Paule Marshall,” *Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Fiction, 1980-2020* (Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming in 2021).