



## On the Transformation of Amerindian and African Mythology — Olive Senior

An interview with Nicole Ollier

*Olive Senior was born and raised in Jamaica. She studied in Canada, and after a few years in Europe, settled in Toronto in 1993. However, she returns to her native island every year. Until her work began to feature on the syllabuses of Jamaican schools and universities she was a journalist, an editor, and a teacher. Her fame as a writer has grown internationally. She has won a number of awards—the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, the F. J. Bressani literary award for Gardening in the Tropics, and an award in the Humanities from the West Indies’ University in Barbados. She has also been awarded several medals—by the Norman Washington Manley Foundation, the Institute of Jamaica, as well as the medal of the Centenary for her contribution to literature.*

*Olive Senior spent two months in residence in Bordeaux from early February to early April 2014. During that time, in the peace of her sitting-room, we talked as we browsed through her books of poetry. I have transcribed these interviews, and have chosen here to leave out my questions—which amount to the single, “In your poetical work, what is related to fairy tales, nursery rhymes, myths, and mythology?”—and to retain only Olive Senior’s answers, adding the excerpts from her poetry on which her reflections are based. Senior then cut more than half the final transcript. In fact, the poems seem almost bulky in comparison to her comments. But her decision is revealing: Olive Senior writes by subtraction rather than addition.*

*The following conversation is a perambulation through American religions that originated in Africa. Olive Senior feels sure she has “Taíno” blood in her veins and she talks here about the “Taíno” myth of the origin of creation. But at heart, she is a gardener and she also explores the mythological significance of plants (bamboo), vegetables (cassava, maize) and fruit (guava, papaya, guinep, anatto) while the poet plays with the idea of weaving, including basket-weaving, and thread—the eternal thread of life, death and after-life.*

*And now the poet’s voice:*

Although in my forthcoming collection of stories (*The Pain Tree*, Toronto, Cormorant, 2015) I am playing with some of these elements, it is poetry that I have used for this kind of exploration, especially of mythology and folk and traditional beliefs. In *Gardening in the*

*Tropics*, I have a whole section called “Mystery,” which are poems looking at the Yoruba Orishas, through their manifestations in the New World, where they are called by different names. These African gods are very much alive in the New World, unlike the gods of Greece and Rome that we were told about in school. What I have tried to capture in the poems is their essence. Although their names might change, the essence of that spirit remains the same. They are alive in religions such as Vaudou (Haiti) in Shango (Trinidad), in Candomble (Brazil), in New York City, in Cuba, and so on.

“Marassa” is a poem about the divine twins as they are called in Haiti. There are also poems about the God of Hunting, the God of Iron, and so on. Babalu, god of the earth, is originally the god of smallpox, he cures smallpox but he also gives it. The gods give and they also take away. It is up to their devotees to appease them.

([...] on our skin something  
is breaking out and threading its way,  
like beads.) Lord, accept our offering,

our vever of grain placed outside  
our gates to save you the pain

of that long walk in the sun-hot.

[...] the marks of your last  
visit we wear forever on our skin

[...]

We thank you for the beads; we thank you  
for the peanuts; we thank you for the

sesame seeds; we thank you for the gourds;  
we thank you for the smallpox. And if

you do choose to come in, we pray you  
find everything so spotless your broom

will not dislodge a single grain of dust,  
for it would grow into such a whirlwind

(of pox, pestilence, plague) you'd sweep  
the entire country clean

[...] we who succumb so easily to temptation; for we know,  
Doctor of the Poor, if you send affliction,

you also hold the power to heal us.

(“Babalu: God of the Earth,” GT 127-128)

Nowadays, people with AIDS invoke him because AIDS manifests itself on the skin also. The Orishas are kept alive among the worshippers because they are flexible enough to meet contemporary needs. Guédé is the Haitian Lord of the dead; his personification is that of a greedy sexually predatory guy, a bit of a joker, but he has the power of life and death. On the surface he might appear even childish; beneath the surface there is a lot of wisdom behind these concepts.

[...] You think

I'm just a trickster, playing

the cocksman, joking around,  
working brain. Remember: is you  
waiting on me, not the other  
way: today you here, tomorrow

you gone — if I say. Pray

I don't come dressed in top hat

and tails, [...]

(“Guédé: Lord of the Dead,” GT 136)

As far as Amerindian mythology is concerned I have a lot of poems such as the ones about key food crops, Cassava (or Yuca) and Maize. “The First House” addresses the myth of turtle mother, utilising a Taino myth. The first house is the turtle shell. If you look at the shape of Amerindian housing, through the Americas, that is the shape, even today.

Homeless, Deminán and his brothers,  
orphaned and wandering forefathers  
Winds of Four Quarters, blew hither  
and yon until

Turtle-Woman stopped them  
in their tracks: the first mating. Said:  
I am ready for nesting. Said: Build me  
a house. Untrained but undaunted  
(in the way of such heroes) they each  
took a corner of the world, stood like  
pillars to anchor it, and strained and  
puffed to lift high the roof of the sky,  
which billowed out and in (they had  
a hell of a time controlling it) until  
it righted itself and domed into  
the model of Turtle-Woman’s shell.  
And so we were born in the House  
of our Great Mother, our crabbed  
and comforting genitor, who still bears  
our first house on her back.

(“The First House,” *Shell* 71)

“Taíno Genesis” is the retelling of the Taino creation myth, their emergence from a cave.

We the people of Cacibajagua emerged  
from the cave the moment Sun’s longest leg  
splintered the horizon [...]  
we emerged dressed in our naked  
best, not yet possessed of the feathers and beads  
of the red anotto paint, the gift of Sun Father,  
color of worship and warrior, of  
Hummingbird’s iridescence. We would come  
into the world stained black with our sacred  
juice, guinep, colour of difficult passage  
and tumescence. We would bleach in the sun  
for nine days; then to the water to gather  
the sacred herb digo, for the washing  
to remove the last traces of our birth passage.  
Guinep stain running like rain  
till we reached again bare skin, our palette ready  
for our first painting [...]  
[...] We were Taíno, the ones gifted  
with guinep of *jagua*. With sacred *bixa*: the herb  
anotto. The ones shelled out by Sun father.

(“Taíno Genesis,” *Shell* 18-19)

Maize is sacred to Mexicans and people of South America who believe the first humans were created from maize. So I created the maize-mother, speaking. If you look at a corn-stalk, and how the cobs grow they have to be ripped apart to be propagated.

Mothers will understand this...

Okay, perhaps I spoil them. Bearing them now, not solitary

and naked like the first but many together, gift-wrapped [...]

(“Maize,” *Shell* 14-15)

Cassava or yuca was the Taínos’ food of life, their daily bread. Their whole life, their religion, everything was bound up with growing cassava. There are two varieties, one is called sweet, one is called bitter, and bitter cassava is poisonous. Thousands of years ago, native South Americans discovered how to expel the poison from bitter cassava in order to eat it. It is quite a complicated process and the same process that is used today in every country including Jamaica to treat bitter cassava. I describe the process in the poem in which I also capture the sacred nature of yuca:

Cut me down. For you, I die each season. This is my  
body. Come, dig me, peel me, grate me, squeeze me,  
dry me, sift me, spread me, heat me.  
Give me life again. Eat me.

(“Cassava/Yuca,” *Shell* 20).

“Guava” is another sacred plant. I have found so many correspondences between contemporary life and the Taíno, who we were taught as children had just vanished as the conquerors came, but I think there is a lot of this indigenous element in us. I was thinking of these connections. I was in Barbados, and I went to stay with a friend whom I hadn’t seen for a long time. She did not seem well, something was wrong. Shortly after I left, she collapsed from an aneurism and died. When I first walked into her house, I was overwhelmed by the smell of guava, and the cook said, “Boy, the tree won’t stop bearing, I don’t like it.” I knew that in our folklore, if a tree starts bearing to excess, it means somebody is going to die. Within a few days my friend was dead. I was aware that among the Taíno, their Lord of death is Maquetaurie Guayaba—Lord of the Guava—because the dead Taíno are believed to come out at night and feast on guavas. So, in the poem, I link the Taíno and the contemporary beliefs:

Maud was making guava jelly  
when she said to me: “I don’t  
like it when guava tree starts

to bear too much. I take it  
as a sign. Remember that time  
in Barbados?”  
... that house scented with guava  
and Maud trying to reduce the vast  
quantity of fruit you kept harvesting.  
That week she made guava jelly, guava  
cheese, guava paste, stewed guava,  
and blended the pulp into drink.  
But your tree would not stop  
producing. It bore faster than she  
could cook or we could consume.

I think of you, stricken so suddenly.  
I say nothing. To her it would seem  
extreme if I said that the Taíno  
zemi of the dead is called Maquetaurie  
Guayaba—Lord of the Guava—and that  
it is he who instructs the tree when  
to speed up production so that  
the incoming soul will have enough of  
the fragrance of guava to feed on.

(“Guava/2 (for Myrth),” GT 74)

Guinep and Anatto are two other sacred plants. Anatto provides a red dye used in food coloring today; the Taino used it on their bodies which is why Columbus thought he had discovered “Red Indians.” Guinep, rubbed on the skin, will turn black temporarily and is used in death rituals. These are plants we take so much for granted today, but they were two of the most sacred plants of the Taíno.

Well, with the Arawaks and others who were  
here before us

it wasn't so. Nothing could happen without  
anatto paste

or guinep stain to paint their bodies  
with.

Guinep black to summon the rain clouds;  
anatto red

for war. They also used both for things  
in between like

medicine and curing or birth or death.  
Patterns in red

or black were to them like dressing up  
for occasions.

They wore these colors on their bodies  
as we wear clothes:

to protect themselves, to signify or  
engage in play;

as markers on the road of life or as  
flags signaling

in the most straightforward way:  
look at me:



I'm beautiful! So give a thought to  
forgotten anatto

to humble guinep and the memory  
of the ol'people

who weren't the first to wear them  
anyway:

How do you think Moon got stained  
black like that?

What do you think Sun used to redden  
its face?

("Anatto and Guinep," GT 76-77)

A lot of the poems in *Gardening in the Tropics* are based on Taíno mythology or reference current folklore. For instance, "Pawpaw" (Papaya) has a lot of legends associated with it.

Everybody likes pawpaw  
but some don't like it planted  
too near the house.

Me too.

I know for a fact  
that tree will sap your strength  
waste your muscle  
draw you down  
to skin and bone.

To nutten.

An ol' lady

told me that.

It's better to plant it  
the far side of the fence.

(“Pawpaw,” GT 78)

“Bamboo” is playing around with various stories on a common theme.

[...] Duppies inhabit bamboo root

and if I don't take care those spirits  
will cause my head to twist around, my  
tongue to tie, my eyes to shoot up  
straight out of my head as bamboos do

from the ground.

(“Bamboo (*In Five Variations*),” GT 81)

“The Colors of Birds,” that is based on Amerindian mythology, is explaining why birds have different colors of plumage, they killed the anaconda to gain these colors. I extended this to make a statement about modern life, about the importance of skin color and so on.

After the killing, they dipped  
their bodies, legs, heads, and beaks into the palette

of Anaconda's remains to stain themselves with.

Some are show-offs now [...]

[...] in any case in the color

domain the spirit of the Anaconda—as the Rainbow—

continues to reign pre-eminent.

[...]

that other monster has not yet been slain. So when it comes to the color of skin, pigmentation is not yet in.

("The Colors of Birds," GT 91-92)

"The Tree of Life" is based on a myth of the Caribs in Guyana, it is my favorite story. The earth is first destroyed by fire, then by flood and human survivors are starving. They find this magic tree which bears every kind of fruit. They feed from the tree but then are ordered to cut it down. That is a test, the first test for humankind. They cut down the tree and from it come many different plants. This is a myth about the origin of food plants. I use that as a basis for a critique of modern agriculture. Jamaican farmers like my father, they'd grow a cash crop like yam or bananas but they'd always have a mixture to ensure that they could always feed their family; it is like having a food bank. Whereas modern agriculture is saying, plant one crop. I am linking the present with the lesson first learnt:

The Mighty One took pity and planted

deep in the interior a tree so

ubiquitous it bore on its branches

food of every different kind. [...]

[...] In front of this

unimaginable tree we fell down and

praised Him—and then we ate our fill.

[...]

So imagine our dismay when out of

the blue His voice came one day and said:

*Cut the Tree Down!* We trembled, but obeyed,

chopping away for generations

until it swayed and fell [...]

[...] He ordered us to take from

the branches slips and cuttings and plant  
them everywhere. And that is how we  
acquired crops for cultivating. From  
that time I've been a convert of  
mixed farming though, of late, I've  
noticed the agricultural officers  
[...]  
have been coming around to try and  
persuade us to chop everything down  
and plant only one crop. They say we can  
get more money that way—from exporting. [...]

("The Tree of Life," GT 93-94)

"Seeing the Light" is a critique of Christianity which destroyed local culture.

[...]  
We never took more than we needed. Always gave back  
(to Earth) our thanks and our praises, never failed  
to salute the gods of the rain, the wind, the sun,  
and the moon in her phases.  
[...] You told us your  
one God had the power to bring us the true light,  
but we've waited in vain. To this date—as catastrophe  
holds sway and earth continues to burn—there are  
things we still cannot learn. Why did those  
who speak of Light wear black, the color  
of mourning? Why was their countenance so grave?  
Why on a dead tree did they nail the bringer  
of light, one Cristo, torture and kill him  
then ask us to come, bow down and worship him? [...]

("Seeing the Light," GT 95-96)

“Amazon women” is based on the legend of warrior women which began in Guyana in the Amazon basin. Walter Raleigh called them Amazons. I am joking about how these men like Columbus and Walter Raleigh came along and made up these stories. It is a long narrative.

Gardening in the Tropics, sometimes  
you come across these strong Amazon  
women striding across our lands a  
like Tooeyza who founded the Wori-  
shiana nation of female warriors  
in the mountains of Parima—of whom  
the missionary Brett and Sir Walter  
Raleigh wrote. [...]  
when the warriors went away—  
to war or voyages—it was the  
women who kept the gardens going  
and sometimes of the men were not  
heard from again (as occasionally  
happened) they banded together and  
took up arms to defend the territory.  
So somebody—like Cristobal Colón  
or Sir Walter Raleigh—could have  
come along and heard these (marvelous)  
tales of (fabulous) lands full of  
(pure) gold and fierce (untamed,  
exotic) women (you know how men stay!).  
And the rest (as they say) is history. [...]

(“Amazon Women,” GT 97)

With “The Immovable Tenant” (GT 101-106) I am using the old woman as the representative of somebody who is challenging so-called “development” or imperialist interventions in the hemisphere.

[...] She says these  
hurry-come-up schemers build on sand.  
She's watching them fill up their pockets

but she knows once the going gets rough,  
the digging too tough, they'll leave,  
abandon her house and land, jettison

their efforts to the jungle. [...]

Strangers might occupy my house and land

from time to time, but from this redoubt,  
I always repossess it, inch by inch.

With the help of the steadfast tropical

sun, wind, and rain, with the help of the  
termites, the ants, the wood lice, and  
the worms, I always reclaim. I can wait, [...]

(“The Immovable Tenant,” GT 101-106)

“Gardening on the run” is based on Caribbean history, especially that of the Maroons, slaves who fought for their freedom.

[...] I who  
spent so many years in disquiet,  
living in fear of discovery,  
am amazed to discover, Colonist,  
it was *you* who feared *me*. Or

rather, my audacity. [...]

(“Gardening on The Run,” GT 110)

In “Advice and Devices,” I am contrasting beliefs that are handed down from generation to generation with “modern” scientific advice.

[...] Take pumpkin. (The morning you plant it, plan nothing else for the day, for once you put the seeds in the ground and water, you must stay at your yard, lie down and rest unless you want your pumpkin to grow worthless and run around with no time to settle down and bear. And when the vine is nicely

blossoming, ask a pregnant lady to walk all over it to make the fruits set and grow full, like how she’s showing. [...]

(“Advice and Devices,” GT 111-114)

Farmers used to plant Overlook Bean; because someone can cast the evil eye on your crop, the Overlook Bean grows very tall and can see danger coming; it is a magic bean.

[...] Should the evil-doers still trespass (for even Overlook Bean has to rest) be sure to burn wangla (but not to excess).

Wit the ashes, mix a trace of the  
dirt from their footstep with powdered  
hummingbird wings [...]

(“Advice and Devices,” GT 112)

There are a lot of bird poems in my book *Over the Roofs of the World*. “The Pull of Birds” describes Columbus’s first voyage when he had no idea where he was; until he followed migrating birds.

[...]

And suddenly from the north a density  
of birds flying south, their autumn migration  
intersecting his westward passage.

At such an auspicious conjunction, his charts  
he threw out, the flocks drew him south  
across the blue fabric of the Atlantic.

Weary mariners buoyed by the miracle  
of land soon, of birds flying across the moon.

(“The Pull of Birds,” ORW 9)

The secrets of the parrot are practices of the Amerindians.  
His captors use smoke to draw him in: pimento wood and  
resin on a fire built under the tree parrot is perched in.  
They’ll sit and wait till Parrot is stunned enough to drop.

(“The Secret of Capturing Parrot,” ORW 13)

“Bird-Man/Bird-Woman” is about the creation of a shaman who has to die, go through fire, become a skeleton then be born again. To serve others he/she has to learn to fly to other



realms. I found the link between shamanism and gold in the work of Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Goldwork and Shamanism*,<sup>1</sup> and this shaped the poem:

*Over-time, representations of the bird-shaman in pre-Colombian gold work evolved into heart-shaped icons.*

[...] Purified, you will rise again another day as that other being, the one destined to serve, destined to cure, destined to recover lost souls, destined, Poet, to sing. But first, soul traveller, you have one more test to meet. Flight as the only way home. [...]

(“Bird-Man/Bird-Woman,” ORW 91)

I have worked on these poems by doing a lot of research. I explore the subject exhaustively and eventually I find a way into the poem, what the connection or thread is. “Hummingbird:” the hummingbird is a symbolic bird in all the islands. The “doctor bird” is the symbol of Jamaica. They are everywhere, very visible, very beautiful, a representation of something which is iconic. For the Aztec Mexicans, a hummingbird is a warrior or a woman who died in childbirth, people who are honored, so I wanted the rhythms to capture this warrior spirit:

your daily stance your warrior pose  
against the Sun to vanquish foes.  
Your virility glows. For your capoeira  
dance, the drum rolls beaten by your heart.

(“Hummingbird,” ORW 27)

“Woodpecker” is also mythic in the Americas: there was a time when women vanished, so a new woman had to be created, out of a wooden tree trunk but it had no female parts. The woodpecker was the one who pecked at it to create the vagina. I had fun with this poem; the tree is rejecting everybody because it is waiting for the woodpecker.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Goldwork and Shamanism: an Iconographic Study of the Gold Museum of the Banco de la Republica, Columbia*, Bogota, Villegas Asociados, 2005.

*Women were created from yellow-skin plum trees  
transformed by the action of the woodpecker*

(Amerindian myth, Epigraph to “Woodpecker,” ORW 28)

“Magpie:” the magpie is the only Canadian bird in the book, but it is based on universal beliefs. I lived in Edmonton for a year, and I was so taken with the magpies; they behaved as if they owned the city. They are bold, and invasive, and also much disliked, if you believe all the stories about them. I like magpies, so I wrote a poem to try and redeem their reputation.

You’ve been accused of ‘conspicuous arrogance’, greed,  
gossip, dissipation, vanity—Bacchus your lord, symbol

of drunkenness and garrulity; of engaging in  
“indiscriminate collection”—known as thievery. [...]

Your reputation needs  
rescuing but you make it so hard as I find you

parading in yard after yard in our neighborhood,  
sitting on fences, teasing the dogs, engaging in

seemingly senseless chatter — to divert from  
what you plan to nick. [...]

(“Magpie,” ORW 31)

*Over the Roofs of the World* also plays on the theme of thread. For instance, dancing around the Maypole in “Penny Reel” (ORW 80): it is a European dance that we danced everywhere in the colonies. The poem includes mythological elements too. “Ol’Higue” is a witch who sheds her skin at night and flies in the shape of a bat to feast on blood. She must assume her skin

(and human shape) before daybreak. The term “Ol’Higue” is also applied to someone perceived as a nag in the shape of a woman.

[...] Who decides on our measure?

She addresses this to no one in particular.

Her man could be anywhere: penny-reeling,  
at his gambling, the rum-bar. Perhaps (she is hopeful)

tonight he won’t come. Forever. No more scars  
on her body criss-crossing like ribbons. No more  
riding her. No more grinding her down. No more  
turning her into Ol’Higue. If she knew how to stop

having children she’d do it. But there’s no one to ask.

[...] Keep dancing

till the dawn when witches must return to their skin.

Or be undone. Like the man coming in to curse her

—‘Ol’Higue’— when she asks where he’s been.

(“Penny Reel,” ORW 80-82)

“Basketmaker” is also about weaving, referring to South American mythology. In Warao culture (tropical South America), expert basket makers are believed to have a “specially reserved place in the after-life, once they have passed a final post-mortem test of their skills” (note ORW 105).

[...] For each one marks a step on the journey to perfection,  
the reeds in your hand a weave of your post-mortem fate,  
each twist of your wrist a template of your soul’s  
patterning, your craft that will bear you up to the place

where the past masters dwell with the Divine Bird  
of the Dawn.

Your hands cannot rest. After death you are still  
compelled to weave as you navigate the final passage  
where the dread Frog Mistress of Earth, arbiter of your fate,  
scrutinizes every twist and turn. [...]

(“Basketmaker,” ORW 90)

To me, poetry should take you outside of yourself, otherwise, it is just a statement. I am bored with just statements, I don't want to read a poem which is just stating something; I want a poet who is giving me something, that will make me sit up, even if it is just one word.

**List of poems quoted:**

“Babalu: God of the Earth”

“Guédé: Lord of the Dead”

“The First House”

“Taíno Genesis”

“Maize”

“Cassava/Yuca”

“Guava/2 (for Myrth)”

“Anatto and Guinep”

“Pawpaw”

“Bamboo” (*In Five Variations*)

“The Colors of Birds”

“The Tree of Life”

“Seeing the Light”

“Amazon women”

“The Immovable Tenant”

“Gardening on the Run”

“Advice and Devices”

“The Pull of Birds”

“The Secret of Capturing Parrot”

“Bird-Man/Bird-Woman”

“Hummingbird”

“Woodpecker”

“Magpie”

“Penny Reel”

“Basket-maker”

### **Works cited by Olive Senior**

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(ORW): *Over the Roofs of the World*. Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2005

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### **Works done by the collaborative translation group “Passages” (CLIMAS) around Olive Senior’s work**

Senior, Olive. *Un Pipiri m’a dit / A Little Bird Told Me*. Dir. et texte établi par Nicole Ollier. Préface d’Olive Senior. Glossaire, postface et note biographique de Nicole Ollier. Bègles : Le Castor Astral, 2014

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