



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

12 | 2016

Mapping gender. Old images ; new figures

Mervyn Morris, *Miss Lou – Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture*

Eric Doumerc



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/8021>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.8021

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Eric Doumerc, "Mervyn Morris, *Miss Lou – Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture*", *Miranda* [Online], 12 | 2016, Online since 26 February 2016, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/8021> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.8021>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.



Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Mervyn Morris, *Miss Lou – Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture*

Eric Doumerc

REFERENCES

Mervyn Morris, *Miss Lou – Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture* (Kingston and Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2014), 104 p, ISBN 978-976-637-886-0

- 1 Louise Bennett (1919-2006) was born in 1919 in Kingston, Jamaica and died in 2006. She was a folklorist, a singer, actress, poet, entertainer and TV personality, and she made poetry popular with Jamaicans. She is mainly and fondly remembered today as the poet who showed that dialect or Creole could be a viable medium for poetry and that its appeal was not limited to comic effects or local colour. She chose to work in dialect and with dialect from a very early age because she recognised that there was an oral tradition which had not been properly recognised and which had to be defended. She also felt that the oral tradition, with its proverbs, folk songs and riddles was the basis of an aesthetics which could be used to develop a really popular poetry. In 1942 she published her first collection of poems, *Jamaica Dialect Verses*, and in 1943 the chief editor of *The Gleaner*, Jamaica's main newspaper, offered to pay her for a weekly column on Sundays. By then she had also begun to study Jamaican folklore at Friends' College, Highgate, and in 1945 she won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London. She successfully completed the course. In 1947 she went back to Jamaica and was involved in setting up the Little Theatre Movement pantomime, but she had to go back to England because of financial difficulties. In England she worked for the BBC and for repertory companies in Coventry and Huddersfield. In 1953 she moved to New York where she worked with Eric Coverley on a musical entitled *Day In Jamaica* and they toured New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. In 1954 Coverley and Louise Bennett were married and they returned to Jamaica where Louise worked for the Jamaica Social Welfare Commission for four years.

- 2 From 1959 to 1961 she lectured in Jamaican folklore and drama at the University of the West Indies. In 1965 she represented Jamaica at the Royal Commonwealth Arts Festival in Britain. She became increasingly popular with the Jamaican masses and hosted a TV programme in the 1970s called *Dr Ring Ding*. She released several LPs and toured and lectured in many countries, in America, Europe and Africa. Her first collections of poems appeared in Jamaica in the 1940s, but two important collections of her verse were published in Jamaica (*Jamaica Labrish* (Sangster, 1966) and *Selected Poems* (Sangster, 1982)). From the late 1960s on, she was recognised as a serious writer and embraced by the middle classes, by the theatre-going classes and by the people alike. But her new popularity and official recognition led to her new status as a “national icon” and to some kind of hero-worshipping. She became a symbol of Jamaican culture abroad and her poems were and are still part of Jamaican official culture.
- 3 Over the years she was awarded numerous awards such as the Silver Musgrave Medal from the Institute of Jamaica, the Order of Jamaica and even an MBE. As pointed out by Denise de Caires Narain, very few Jamaican artists have received such a degree of official recognition and Miss Lou is now a national icon. In the post-Independence period, children were taught (and they are still taught today) her poems at school and it is safe to say that there is not one single person in Jamaica who has not learnt a Louise Bennett poem. It is very hard to talk to a Jamaican performance poet who has not been influenced by Miss Lou: the dub poets, Jean Breeze, Malachi Smith, Yasus Afari, Mutabaruka, Cherry Natural, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Mikey Smith, Kamau Brathwaite, Lorna Goodison, Olive Senior, Valerie Bloom, and the list goes on.
- 4 Mervyn Morris’s book “examines the legacy of ‘Miss Lou’” (xii) and falls into seven chapters (“Beginnings”, “Later Years”, “Miss Lou and Pantomime”, “Anancy and Miss Lou”, “The Poems”, “Auntie Roachy”, and “Legacy”) which look at various aspects of her work.
- 5 The first two chapters are mainly biographical and provide a lot of information about Louise Bennett’s encounter with the Jamaican oral tradition, her research as a folklorist, but also her training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, her early career as a Calypso singer in America, and her work with Jamaica Welfare, an organisation set up by Norman Washington Manley’s People’s National Party in 1939. These chapters bring into focus Louise Bennett’s many talents and her commitment to dialect and to the Jamaican oral tradition.
- 6 The third chapter (“Miss Lou and Pantomime”) focuses on Miss Lou’s work in the theatre. In this chapter the emphasis is laid on the evolution of the Jamaican pantomime, from its English roots to a Caribbean orientation. Louise Bennett is shown to have contributed a lot to the indigenisation of that tradition by insisting that local themes and characters (like the trickster Anancy) should be featured more prominently. The fourth chapter deals with Louise Bennett’s talent as a storyteller and the Ashanti spider-god Anancy/Anansi was the main character in the stories she told on the radio or that she published in book form. Miss Lou’s considerable talent as a performer is brought to the fore in this chapter.
- 7 Chapter five is about Louise Bennett as a poet. Miss Lou was an astute social commentator who repeatedly dealt with the foibles but also the strengths of the Jamaican people. A lot of the poetry is topical and, in a sense, journalistic. The topics covered are varied and numerous: the coming of a new Governor, wartime privations, the colour-class hierarchy, some Jamaicans’ social snobbery, elections, politicians’

arrogance, Kingston’s higglers, etc. The topicality might have meant, with a lesser poet, that the pieces would have lost their interest with the passing years, but as the critic Lloyd W. Brown wrote, Miss Lou’s poems remain of interest because of the insight they give the reader into “certain modes of perception and communication” (64). Mervyn Morris repeatedly insists on Louise Bennett’s real gifts as a poet, mentioning her legendary wordplay, the many cultural allusions to be found in the poems, and Miss Lou’s creative use of the ballad metre.

- 8 Chapter six is concerned with another aspect of Louise Bennet’s career, that of radio host or personality. Between 1966 and 1982, Miss Lou read on the radio a series of monologues in which the main persona, Auntie Roachy, expressed her views on a number of issues, from class and colour to gender. As pointed out by Mervyn Morris, these monologues were more about values than the poems, but the same “didactic humour” (80) and clever use of wordplay were at work there too.
- 9 The last chapter (“Legacy”) insists on Louise Bennett’s role in the establishment of Jamaican Creole as a viable means of literary expression and also on her lasting influence on many Caribbean poets like the dub poets (Michael Smith, Mutabaruka among others), Paul Keens-Douglas (Trinidad’s answer to Miss Lou), Kamau Brathwaite, but also Dennis Scott and Lorna Goodison.
- 10 On the whole, this is an engaging and refreshingly jargon-free book by one of the foremost experts on Louise Bennett, and the reader comes away from this work with a much better understanding of the various factors which made Miss Lou the compelling performer and outstanding performer she was. But, maybe more importantly, this book will be invaluable for all the researchers who work in the field of post-colonial studies and who interrogate the links between language, decolonisation and identity. Indeed Miss Lou’s life and career are a textbook example of the role language and culture can play in the liberation of a country from the colonial yoke. For that too, Mervyn Morris’s book will be an invaluable resource.

INDEX

Keywords: Creole, dialect, identity, language, oral tradition, post-colonial studies, poetry

Mots-clés: créole, dialecte, études post-coloniales, identité, langue, poésie, tradition orale

AUTHORS

ERIC DOUMERC

Maître de Conférences

Université de Toulouse-Jean Jaurès

doumerceric@neuf.fr