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AUSTRALIA

Kunapipi

Volume 31 | Issue 2

Article 10

2009

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Recommended Citation

Doumerc, Eric, An interview with Mervyn Morris, *Kunapipi*, 31(2), 2009.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol31/iss2/10>

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Abstract

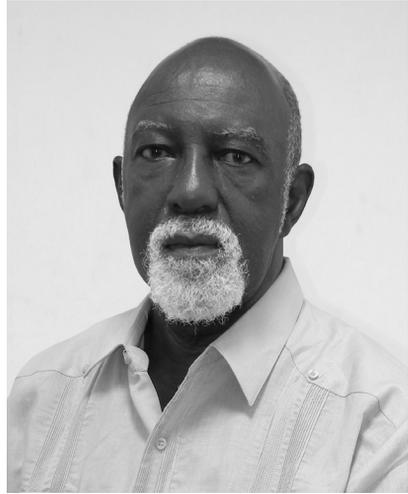
Mervyn Morris was born in 1937 in Jamaica and taught at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica from 1970 until 2002 when he retired. He is well-known as a poet, critic and editor of anthologies of Caribbean writing. Morris was educated in Jamaica and at St Edmund Hall, Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship. After returning from England, he taught at Munroe College and was Warden of Taylor Hall between 1966 and 1970.

ERIC DOUMERC

An Interview with Mervyn Morris

(25 August 2010, Kingston)

Mervyn Morris was born in 1937 in Jamaica and taught at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica from 1970 until 2002 when he retired. He is well-known as a poet, critic and editor of anthologies of Caribbean writing. Morris was educated in Jamaica and at St Edmund Hall, Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship. After returning from England, he taught at Munroe College and was Warden of Taylor Hall between 1966 and 1970. He joined the English Department at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies in 1970. Morris was a visiting academic at the University of Kent in Canterbury between 1972 and 1973, and in Hull in



1983. In 1992 he was writer in residence at the South Bank Centre in London. He is Emeritus Professor of Creative Writing and West Indian Literature at the University of the West Indies.

Morris's books of poetry include: *The Pond* (London: New Beacon, 1973; revised edition 1997); *On Holy Week* (Kingston: Sangster's, 1976; Sydney: Dangaroo, 1993); *Shadowboxing* (London: New Beacon, 1979); *Examination Centre* (London: New Beacon, 1992); and *I been there, sort of: New and Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006). Some of his poems, such as 'Valley Prince' and 'To an Expatriate Friend', have been anthologised many times and are considered as Caribbean classics.

As an anthologist, Morris's contribution to the dissemination of West Indian literature is immense. He has compiled (or helped to create) significant anthologies, such as *Seven Jamaican Poets* (Kingston: Bolivar, 1971), *Jamaica Woman*, with Pamela Mordecai (Kingston: Heinemann Educational, 1980; London: Heinemann, 1985), *Voiceprint: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry*, with Stewart Brown and Gordon Rohlehr (London: Longman, 1989), and *The Faber Book of Caribbean Short Stories* (London, 1990; Boston, 1991). Morris has also worked as a critic of West Indian literature and has examined various kinds of

Caribbean writing. Some of his essays and interviews have been collected in *'Is English We Speaking' and Other Essays* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1999) and *Making West Indian Literature* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2005).

Last but not least, in the 1970s and 1980s, Morris edited the work of several oral, performance or dub poets and prepared their work for publication. He nurtured the development of dub and performance poetry in Jamaica, and was one of the first academics to write about this art form. Morris knew Oku Onuora and Michael Smith personally and his friendship with these poets led to his interest in the art form. Thus he came to edit the late Michael Smith's poems (*It A Come*. [London: Race Today, 1986; San Francisco: City Lights, 1989]). Mervyn Morris has also been a long-time admirer of Louise Bennett's work and in 1982 he edited a new collection of her poetry entitled *Selected Poems* (Kingston: Sangster/s, 1982). More recently Mervyn Morris edited a collection of Dennis Scott's poems entitled *After-image* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2008).

He has acted as friend, adviser and mentor to many budding poets, critics and teachers, and his warmth and humour are legendary. In 2009 the Jamaican Government awarded him the Order of Merit for his contribution to West Indian Literature. The following interview was conducted in Jamaica in August 2010.

* * * * *

ERIC DOUMERC: *I'll begin by asking you a very simple question. You've worked for many years as an academic on performance poetry and orality. One of your first essays that got you noticed internationally is entitled 'On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously'. I know that this essay was published in the 1960s, which was the time of independence, when West Indians were discovering or re-discovering their heritage, but did you have any personal reasons to write this article, apart from the obvious ideological ones?*

MERVYN MORRIS: Yes, very much so. Growing up, in our household, we read, as in many households, Louise Bennett poems when they appeared in the newspapers and in some of her early books. We enjoyed many of the poems. Then later, when I was teaching in a secondary school, at Munro College, to which I returned in 1962, I included some Louise Bennett poems in the selection I used in teaching literature, because I liked them and I thought the students would find them attractive. Looking closely at some of her poems, it occurred to me that I might write an essay on them — I thought she was a lot better than some of the people who were getting anthologised. I wrote the essay largely out of my pleasure in reading her poems, which is how most of the stuff I write comes to me.

ED: *So you're telling me basically that in your household, as you were growing up, people knew about Louise Bennett's poetry.*

MM: Throughout the country people knew about her poetry. But I have at least one friend who used to tell me that my household was unusual. We also read P.G. Wodehouse, which is oral too. We liked Louise Bennett's work — we were not uncomfortable with Creole. Some of the stuff being published in the newspapers in standard English was awful. My dad would read a few lines and then ask us to supply the next one, and we often got it right. The craft was so poor. We knew that Louise Bennett was a lot better.

ED: *In your collection of essays entitled Is English We Speaking, there are pieces on Mutabaruka, Paul Keens-Douglas, Miss Lou and an essay entitled 'Printing the Performance'. About Paul Keens-Douglas, would you see him as Trinidad's answer to Louise Bennett, or is his poetry significantly different from Miss Lou's?*

MM: Paul has always acknowledged the influence of Miss Lou. He studied in Jamaica for a while. He thinks the world of Miss Lou and he invited her to share some of his performances, in North America mainly. They're similar in many ways. Paul is a terrific performer, a terrific manipulator of audiences. In a sense, so is Miss Lou. But there's something about Paul's style — it works, it's very efficient, but to me it seems more studied than Miss Lou's.

ED: *Would you say he's more of a storyteller than a poet?*

MM: Yes, absolutely. But Louise Bennett is a storyteller too.

ED: *Then, in the same collection, there's an essay on Mutabaruka, which is an account of one of his performances. In that essay, you seem to see Muta more as a cultural activist, more as an orator than as a poet. This is something that I noticed at the conference on the Rastafarian movement. There were several presentations on Muta, but apart from Carolyn Cooper's talk, the other presentations were mainly about Muta as a cultural activist, or a black 'icon'. My feeling is that Muta is a real poet, and that sometimes his poetic talent is overlooked.*

MM: But he has led us in that direction really. I think he knows he's a poet, he's got accustomed to being called a poet now. He has many times disclaimed any interest in the shaping but it's not true. I mean, the fact is he's got better. I think in that article I gave one example where there's an earlier version and a later version.

ED: *Yes, the poem about the Statue of Liberty.*

MM: Yes, and it's quite clear he had improved on it. I don't know how often he rewrites, but then you know, quite often the oral people, without thinking they're rewriting, say something differently. But he defines himself

primarily as a cultural activist. He's developed that more and more and more. He's got his radio programme. He also has his own sound system that plays black music from all over the world. And he's been on a television series quite recently, *Simply Muta*. You see, Muta's great skill is that he is a communicator. He's a kind of natural orator. He will come up with various things that he takes very seriously, but they're said in a way that makes you laugh as well as think. He's a cultural activist and that's the way he wants to be seen. Another point I was making in that article is that I like some of the poems, but when you go to a Muta performance, the poems are often only a small part of the overall impact.

ED: *Since we're talking about Muta, maybe we should move on to dub poetry. You were one of the first critics who wrote about Mikey Smith, Jean Breeze and Oku Onuora. So what's the state of dub poetry today in Jamaica? Is it a flourishing or a decaying art form?*

MM: It's a very reasonable question to ask, but I don't have a good answer because I haven't really kept up. Much of what I've written about dub poetry in general is derived from conversations with Oku. Before Oku started promoting the term 'dub poetry', Linton [Kwesi Johnson] had written of deejays overdubbing rhythmic phrases on to the rhythm of music, and had called some of them poets, but that was something I learnt much later.

ED: *Ironically, if you look at all these early pioneers of dub poetry, Oku, Muta, LKJ, Jean Breeze, Oku is the one who's probably the least recognised today, internationally. Muta has a huge profile, Linton tours regularly, but Oku seems to keep a low profile.*

MM: I doubt that he wants to keep a low profile, but I don't think he's been writing as much as the others. He is more concerned, I think, with trying to get films of dub and the whole recording scene.

ED: *You've edited the work of several oral poets like Miss Lou, Mikey Smith and Jean Breeze. Your poetry is quite different from these poets' work and your background is different from their background. So do you or did you see yourself as some kind of cultural translator, as a bridge between the world of oral poetry and academia?*

MM: I would understand if you saw me in that role, but I never saw myself as that. I've told you how I came to write about Louise Bennett. About me and dub poetry — what happened essentially was that in 1975 to 1976, when John Hearne was away, I was director of the Creative Arts Centre on the Mona campus. And when I was there, late in 1975, Leonie Forbes, the terrific Jamaican actress, phoned me and said she had some poems by someone who was in prison, and she wondered whether I would have a

look at them. They were by Oku Onuora, who was Orlando Wong at that time. I liked some of them. Leonie said: ‘You should go and tell him that!’. So I went and I became one of his regular visitors. I talked with him a lot and lent him some of the books he wanted. He talked to me about what he was doing in his poems, suggesting some of the rhythms of Jamaican popular music. And as it happened, I had met Linton when I was at the University of Kent in 1972–73. So I was able to tell Oku that what he was doing was similar to what Linton had been doing, and I lent him some work by Linton.

ED: *So you did act as some kind of ‘bridge’.*

MM: Yes, but what I’m resisting is the idea that I did it self-consciously. It fits the pattern that you’re talking about, certainly. But my basic line is that the bridge is not necessary, and I know a number of people for whom it is not necessary. People like Eddie Baugh, like Dennis Scott, have always recognised excellence in some of the popular music, and in Louise Bennett. You can say there’s a kind of bridge yes, but it’s simply that you like the stuff and you talk about it, and some of what you say makes sense. About translation, there’s one instance where that is certainly what I was doing, that’s when I was helping Mikey Smith towards his *It A Come*. Because in a sense that was the assignment! I did what Mikey asked me to do. He was already making a huge impact as a performer and then he wanted to get published. He asked if I would help him put things on the page; so we started working on that. Somewhat earlier, I had helped Oku with *Echo*. But what I’ve done in relation to Oku and Mikey, I’ve also done in relation to some standard English poets who give me stuff and ask me what I think of it.

ED: *What about Jean Breeze? I understand you edited her work too.*

MM: Although *Race Today* credited me with having edited *Riddim Ravings*, I didn’t really see it as something that I had edited, though I helped at an early stage. Jean was one of the poets who asked me to look at stuff and she was very responsive to some of the things I said.

ED: *At one stage, Jean Breeze distanced herself from the dub poetry scene and said that she did not want to write poems to a one-drop reggae rhythm.*

MM: To some of its most talented practitioners, dub poetry is a limiting category. They see themselves simply as poets.

ED: *What about Louise Bennett? How did you work with her on the 1982 collection? What was it like?*

MM: Oh, it was a wonderful experience! She had ultimate control, and she agreed with most of what I proposed. I made the selection which she approved. When I was drafting the notes and questions, she would tell me,

very gently, what a particular detail meant and where it came from, and so on. She was immensely knowledgeable, a great scholar of Jamaican folk culture. A key thing I did which is subject to serious question, but was done completely with the agreement of Louise, was try to get a common-sense orthography.

ED: *Yes, you wrote about it in 'Printing the Performance'.*

MM: Yes, what I said is that in many, many instances, there were words and phrases which gave difficulty in the forms in which they had been written in previous editions. We said, 'Let us assume that the reader of this thing has already been taught to read standard English. We want to give signals that this is not standard English, but where traces of the standard English spelling might be helpful, let them stay'. It makes a lot of sense to transcribe 'friend' as 'FREN', but in *Selected Poems* it's spelt 'FRIEN', so that someone who's been reading standard English constantly will pick up right away that this is 'friend' without a 'd'. But when I asked Louise whether she would approve of 'ha fi' for 'haffi', she wouldn't. She chose 'haffi'.

ED: *You also edited Voiceprint, an anthology of oral and related poetry, with Stewart Brown and Gordon Rohlehr. So how did you work with these two researchers?*

MM: In the initial project, it was suggested that Gordon would do the Eastern Caribbean, Stewart would do Britain (Black British) and I would do the rest of the Caribbean, Jamaica and other places. We did some of the early selections on that basis. I think it's a good anthology, but it was made much better by what Gordon did at the end, which was rearrange it on different principles from the way it had first been conceived. And he wrote that superb introduction.

ED: *Moving on to your poetry now. Many of your poems seem to be about the relationship between the poet and the reader, or between the poets and literary critics. Poems like 'At a Poetry Reading', 'Data', 'Question Time' tackle the issue of the relationship between poets and the outside world, or poets and academia. Would you agree with that very blunt characterisation?*

MM: I try to stay away from is regarding the sense of any one poem as expressing my view of a whole lot of situations. The poems are very often trying to say something that may have some kind of currency in one specific situation. [Mervyn Morris reads from 'At a Poetry Reading']. Yes, trying to avoid 'the false pretence', that's the heart of it, really. And 'manage' is important too, you know, 'manage' as in 'If I can just manage to do so and so' but it's also 'manage' as in control or organise or arrange the occasion or epiphany.

- ED:** *In a lot of your poems, you use paradox, which reminds me of the Metaphysical poets.*
- MM:** Oh, it's a very big influence, mainly because when I came to the University College of the West Indies in 1954, Professor Croston taught a number of the Metaphysical poets. We did Donne, Herbert, Marvell, bits of Vaughan. Plenty of ambiguity and paradox. And we were reading critics such as Empson and Cleanth Brooks and learning to recognise that a word or a phrase might be doing several different things at the same time.
- ED:** *In the poem entitled 'Post-colonial Identity', you seem to attack the post-colonial school which you see as formulaic. The last line of the poem is in Creole ('white people language white as sin'). Could you comment on that aspect of the poem?*
- MM:** Well, it's working against the line before. That's a very helpful question... My answer's coming from very far back, I think. When we were taught English at school, it was still a common notion that if you thought clearly you would write in good English. And there was also the notion that Creole was limited in its ability to deal with complex ideas. But during my university time at Mona I realised that Creole could perfectly well do what you chose to make it do. And a bit later, in the late 1960s, it became quite fashionable for some of the academics to sometimes teach or lecture in Creole. George Beckford, the economist, did some public lectures in Creole. There was also *Abeng* magazine but it didn't last long — it was a magazine with revolutionary ambitions, and most of the writing was in Creole. More and more we were realising that Creole can do the work we choose to make it do.
- ED:** *Some of your poems like 'A Poet of the People', 'Afro-Saxon' and 'Advisory' seem to deal with the pressures intellectuals had to bear in the revolutionary 1970s when art for art's sake was challenged by a more social approach. You seem to take the view that social art is a sell-out.*
- MM:** That's probably a view I have grown away from. But a poem that makes your point is 'Advisory'. The key thing is the last couple of lines with 'Don't let anybody lock you in' — and that's a very Jamaican line by the way, because that 'in' rhymes with 'between'. 'Don't let anybody lock you een!'
- ED:** *In some of your poems you use Creole very sparingly and to telling effect, and there are other pieces like 'Valley Prince' or 'For Consciousness' which are written entirely in Creole. What were you trying to achieve with the poems written entirely in Creole? Did you make a conscious decision to write in Creole or did they come naturally in Creole?*

MM: Neither, perhaps. Or perhaps both? You sort of feel you way into the voice. Take ‘Valley Prince’: I started drafting it in standard English and that was not the voice that I felt it wanted.

ED: *In some of your Creole poems, I seem to hear Dennis Scott’s influence.*

MM: He was a very good friend. But I don’t know if I see the influence where you see it. I’m not sure. In the period in which many of the poems were written, the late 1960s, Dennis was a good friend. So was Tony McNeill ... and Wayne Brown, the Trinidadian poet.

ED: *Some of your poems are about human relationships, love, life, and domesticity (‘Proposition One’, ‘Togetherness’). One of them, ‘The Roaches’, is quite enigmatic.*

MM: It was originally an element in a longer poem about moving house. People talk about me writing short poems. Sometimes from the beginning they were short, but quite often they are what’s left of a much longer draft. ‘The Roaches’ is a poem I still have a lot of time for. Where I place it in a reading helps to colour the way it’s received. Sometimes it’s placed next to a political section, sometimes it’s somewhere else. But it’s really all about the fact that whatever the problems are, they are likely to recur!

ED: *Well, thanks for answering my questions.*

MM: Thank you for talking to me!