Miss Lou — A personal remembrance of Louise Simone Bennett-Coverley: Poet, folklorist, community worker, lyricist, stage and movie actress

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Miss Lou — A personal remembrance of Louise Simone Bennett-Coverley: Poet, folklorist, community worker, lyricist, stage and movie actress

Abstract
One question that people ask me is: which writers would you say have influenced you? I used to explain that I don't think of myself in this way, as one who served an apprenticeship to particular practitioners of the craft, and therefore properly owes them a debt. That is not to say that I am intensely original; rather, it is to say that, being a greedy puppy, I have lapped up things from all the books I've ever read, and so could not begin to name the writers to whom I am obligated.
One question that people ask me is: which writers would you say have influenced you? I used to explain that I don’t think of myself in this way, as one who served an apprenticeship to particular practitioners of the craft, and therefore properly owes them a debt. That is not to say that I am intensely original; rather, it is to say that, being a greedy puppy, I have lapped up things from all the books I’ve ever read, and so could not begin to name the writers to whom I am obligated.

But the questioners are insistent, and over time I have come eventually to confess that there are a few writers whose works I know so well that they are as close as breath, as the pulsing of blood along my veins. Of that small number — perhaps four — the Hon. Louise Bennett-Coverley, is assuredly one.

If that seems theatrical, I must plead that it is only the truth, and that it does indeed have to do with the theatre. I was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in an ancient house at the bottom of Elletson Road, near Kingston Harbour — ‘the sea’ — and around the corner from ‘prison’ — the General Penitentiary on Tower Street. At age four, I began school with the nuns at Convent of Mercy, Alpha Academy, on South Camp Road. I never attended any another school. (In much of my time, Alpha was composed of several schools, of which the preparatory school and academy were only two. Others were the Boys’ Approved School, the Girls’ Approved School, the primary and elementary schools and the secretarial school.) The Alpha institution was important for the arts, I would learn decades later. Many famous Jamaican dancers and musicians have come from Alpha, and as Errol Hill writes in his seminal work on Jamaican Theatre, Alpha Cottage was one of the places where, towards the end of the nineteenth century, indigenous theatre first developed (164–65).

In my time, there was still plenty of acting and singing and dancing going on at Alpha, with students taking part in all kinds of recitals and plays. Every year we entered the All Island Speech Festival, the All-Island Schools Drama Festival, sometimes the Music Festival and sometimes the French Drama Festival, if we had enough thespians with good French accents.
To get ready for the All Island Speech Festival, we had an internal competition to find out which people were good enough to represent the school at the different age levels and in the various categories. The tryouts were in the big school but in the beginning, the two schools, big (the Academy) and little (the Preparatory) were in the same location, and anything going on in the big school, little school children knew about. So, I think that is perhaps where, by the time I was eight
or nine, I seriously ‘bucked up’ Miss Lou’s poetry and discovered that, working
the warp and woof laid down by Claude MacKay and Una Marson, Miss Lou
was weaving poems, and then the tapestry of a genre, a tradition of writing in
Jamaican Creole of which I am now proud to be a part.

Early in the twentieth century, Claude McKay had published Songs of Jamaica
and Constab Ballads, both collections of poems in Jamaican Creole. The books
earned for him the reputation of ‘Jamaica’s Bobbie Burns’. McKay left Jamaica
for the USA in 1912 and, though he intended to, he never returned. Una Marson
also wrote poetry in the vernacular, a notable example being ‘Kinky Hair Blues’.
Though these two poets were important forerunners, it is Bennett who, from her
earliest years as a writer and performer, consistently affirmed Jamaican Creole
as a language for literature as well as for living. She wrote and performed poems
as well as radio commentary, skits, stories, songs and plays in Jamaican Creole,
helping to shoulder into being, especially through the Jamaican pantomime, a
tradition of theatre in the vernacular, and also promoting the writing of poetry in
the demotic.

In the course of tryouts for speech festival, I heard poems like ‘cuss-cuss,’
‘Candy Seller’ and ‘Me Bredda’, ‘Roas Turkey’ and ‘No Lickle Twang’ performed
again and again by the likes of Marceline Cameron, Noelle Hill Chutkan and
Monica Hill Ogilvie, who were brilliant actresses and among the finest exponents
of poetry and the dramatic monologue. I was never one of the superior talents
selected to go forward as an exponent of dialect verse, but that didn’t stop me
from learning the poems and reciting them again and again at home so that, at a
certain point, my father thought I was in danger of losing the English language,
and warned me that in order to avert that dread fate I had better stop.

I don’t think there was any real danger of Miss Lou’s inspired poetic
extravaganzas depriving me of the English language, nor do I think Papa was
serious. He probably was simply looking for a way out of the unremitting noise
of my ‘performances’. I need to say this because on previous occasions when
I’ve mentioned that my father issued this warning, some people have rushed to
appoint it as an example of the resistance of the middle classes to Louise Bennett’s
poetry.

Such resistance was real enough on the part of many of the movers and shakers
at the time. Miss Lou herself has said so (Bennett 1968), and there is the evidence
of letters to the press to that effect. That digging-in of claws by the Status Crow
(Brathwaite 1982) must have been extremely difficult to deal with when Miss
Lou, a young black woman in a world run by white and light-skinned men,
was daring to do something that had not been done before. Worse, the negative
attitudes towards black people’s skin colour and hair, and the presumption of
‘black-people-bad-behave’, were shared not only by the lights and whites, but by
many brown and black people as well. Helping to dismantle all of that was a big
part of Miss Lou’s contribution.
Louise Bennett at a Jamaica school of dance workshop concert.
(Courtesy of the National Library of Jamaica.)
Still, for whatever it’s worth, I witness now to the way a school of multi-hued girl children who were more or less middle class — at least by Walter Rodney’s definition1 — took to Miss Lou’s poetry. More than that, when the finalists from schools across the islands met in the lecture hall at the Institute of Jamaica to compete, it was clear to me that the level of enthusiasm for Miss Lou’s ‘dialect verse’, the utter revelling in it, was not shared by the exponents of the lyrical and dramatic pieces penned by other wordsmiths. (I was one of the lyric performers.) So though Monica, Noelle and Marceline recited other poems and interpreted the Bard it seemed to me that none of them, nor indeed any of the finalists from Alpha or from secondary schools all over Jamaica, enacted the works of those other writers, native or foreign, with the élan that they brought to reciting poems by Miss Lou.

This enthusiasm for her work belonged to the schoolers of the time, who weren’t moving or shaking anything, the irony being that our enthusiasm, however great, could not have done much to break down the towering walls of prejudice. Well, maybe and maybe not, for had someone pointed to it, the loud cheers of this up-and-coming horde might have counted for something. In truth, one of our difficulties has been that, until reggae and dub rose up and laid firm hands on the culture, those who pronounced on these things had scant regard for the great mass of un-movers who certainly were enthusiastic fans of Miss Lou’s poems and stories from the start.

Miss Lou’s appeal was not only confined to school children and the ‘rootsier’ working and peasant classes, however. Carol Wong, representing the Tsung Tsin Association, a Hakka Chinese association in Scarborough, Ontario, said in her tribute to Miss Lou, at a memorial service held in Toronto:

Our parents arrived in Jamaica speaking only Chinese language and they learnt their English from the local Jamaican customers in their shops, hence their ‘Ching-lish’ was Jamaican patois with a Chinese accent…. While they toiled in the shops, we were rocked to sleep, as babies, with songs Miss Lou sang, and as we grew up, we were mesmerized with Anancy stories, Rollin’ Calf and Duppy Market … we thought in and spoke Miss Lou’s colourful patois fluently….2

Perhaps because I loved performing, the practising for Speech Festival remains with me as a scintillating point of contact, a numinous ritual moment when Miss Lou’s views, humour and nuanced social commentary became mine, became ours; when our mouths and hers, our minds and hers, became one; when she claimed us and we claimed her.

Tryouts for the All-Island Speech Festival could not have been where I first heard Miss Lou’s poetry — that must have been at a much earlier time, most likely on the radio. As for seeing her in the flesh, I cannot remember where or when that first occurred, but it may have been at a Christmas morning concert, or at the 1949 panto, ‘Bluebeard and Brer Anancy’, co-authored by Miss Lou and Noel Vaz, in which Miss Lou featured as Nana Lou. I had by then reached the age
of reason and knew that Miss Lou and her poetry and pantomime performances were pearls of great price.

So, though there must have been a first time, it seems, looking back, that I have never not known the sound of Miss Lou’s voice in my ears, as I have never failed to enjoy reproducing the words of her poems in my mouth. Hers is an oeuvre I admire — no, not just admire, revere — as she was a person about whom I have never had any ambivalent feelings. She was splendid in all the things that she did, and she did so many things, her body of work encompassing folkloric research; social work through drama; radio commentary and performances; pantomimes and other stage productions (the Bard’s included); movie roles; and television programs and presentations. It was my privilege to be there some of the time, to see her and hear her, to run into her going into the studios at JBC to tape the ‘Ring Ding’ children’s programs, as I was on my way in to record ‘Saturday Magazine’ or ‘Bambu Tambu’ programs for JIS-TV.

Inseparable from her commitment to doing many things well, and, I think, more important than it, was Louise Bennett’s spirit. More than anyone I have ever known, she enabled us Jamaicans to look at ourselves to see and celebrate what was good and right, and to discern and identify what was wrong and in need of changing. She had a grand vision of what we could accomplish: among other things, she encouraged our going abroad — in her envisioning, to England, but we knew it was wherever we might choose to go — and daring to effect ‘colonization in reverse’ (Bennett 1966 179–80):

What a islan! What a people!
Man and woman, old and young
Jusa pack dem bag and baggage
An tun history upside dung!

* * *

Wat a devilment a Englan!
Dem face war and brave de worse,
But I’m wonderin’ how dem gwine stan’
Colonizin’ in reverse.

She always invited us to do better, for not only was she convinced that we could, she looked forward, with faith, to the fact that we would.

Writers have responsibilities. One question that I ask myself is whether I did my share to affirm and celebrate Louise Bennett’s work while she was still with us. Jamaica Woman (fruit of a project to collect an anthology of women’s poetry that I conceived and asked Mervyn Morris to share), which has been described as important in Caribbean publishing, was dedicated jointly to Miss Lou and Edna Manley. The book first appeared in 1980. I like to think of that joint dedication as a sort of serendipitous oiling of the waters, for the early editions of the important literary journal, Focus, which Manley edited, did not include any of Louise’s
poetry. Mervyn Morris (2006), who has often emphasised the initial resistance to her work, commented in a remembrance published shortly after she died:

Her poems were always popular, but critical acknowledgement of their worth was slow in coming ... her work did not appear in the important Jamaican magazine *Focus* (edited by Edna Manley between 1943 and 1960), and she was ignored by the Jamaica Poetry League. In 1962 she was included in the *Independence Anthology of Jamaica Literature* (edited by A.L. Hendriks and Cedric Lindo), but not in the section for poetry. (2006 online)

We owe a lot to Morris where Miss Lou is concerned. The first piece of writing that does address Bennett’s work is a critical essay he published in 1963 called ‘On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously’, in which he asserts that Louise is ‘a poet, and, in her best work, a better poet than most other Jamaican writers. However, I have to question Morris’s caveat, ‘in her best work’: other Jamaican writers have work that is not their ‘best’, so why the qualification about Miss Lou’s poetry?

Morris fails to mention a later edition of *Focus* produced in 1983 by Caribbean Authors Publishing in an effort to revive the journal, which he edited and in which Miss Lou does take her proper place. Without wishing to detract from the worth of that issue, one is nonetheless tempted to say that allowing Miss Lou that rightful position may well be the most important thing that it accomplished. No other edition of *Focus* appeared thereafter.

There had been significant developments in the study of Jamaican language and its use in our literature in the two decades between political independence in 1962 and the new issue of *Focus* in 1983. Among these developments were the appearance of a grammar by Beryl Loftman Bailey, called *Jamaican Creole Syntax: A Transformational Approach*, in 1966; the holding of the first Creole Linguistics Conference at the Mona campus of The University of the West Indies in Jamaica in 1968; the formal establishment of the Society for Caribbean Linguistics in Trinidad and Tobago in 1972 and the publication of the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* edited by Frederic Cassidy and Robert Le Page in 1980. The dictionary has since been republished (in 2002) by the University of the West Indies Press and is currently available.

By 1983, word was abroad that ‘dialect’ had been deemed a language in its own right, with words and grammar — morphology and syntax, the linguists called them — and a proper patois way in which to call the words — phonology, the linguists said. Jamaican Creole had arrived, and we were finally allowing, officially, that Miss Lou was writing in a fully elaborated code, not a broken version of English or anything else; and that she was writing not ‘merely’ verse, but poetry.

Also in the period between 1962 and 1980, Dennis Scott had published his prize-winning collection, *Uncle Time*, with a title poem that would thereafter be pointed to as a classic example of the fact that ‘the dialect’ could be used for
writing serious poetry. The tribute was by no means undeserved for ‘Uncle Time’ is a remarkable poem, and Scott was to follow it with others in Jamaican Creole; for example, ‘Love Storey’, ‘Riversong,’ and ‘Birdwalk’ in Strategies (1989). However, this is perhaps where the critics failed to come forward and clarify Bennett’s contribution. Many of Bennett’s poems, never mind their consistent comic slant, tackled serious topics seriously. Miss Lou had discussed this with Dennis Scott in ‘Bennett on Bennett’ (Bennett 1968 97; 101). She had long used the sugar coating of a reputation for comic verse to make us swallow pills like ‘Dutty tough’, an uncompromising study of poverty:

Sun a-shine but tings noh bright;
Doah pot a-bwine, bickle noh nuff;
River flood but water scarce, yaw;
Rain a-fall but dutty tough!
Bennett (1966 120)

Never mind that it rains — the poet offers an increase of one pound sterling (in use in Jamaica at the time) on a person’s pay packet as an example of such metaphoric ‘rain’ — ‘dutty’, the dirt, the earth, remains ‘tough’ because that one pound increase can’t stretch to cover the ten-pound increase on the cost of food or the ten-pound rise in the rent bill. (This is not the place to expand on the many significances of ‘dutty’, but it would be an explication well worthwhile.) If we failed to recognise the gravity of the ailment because the pills prescribed were so efficacious, the doctor is hardly to be blamed.

The dedication of Jamaica Woman (1980) was a tribute. The introduction to From Our Yard: Jamaican Poetry Since Independence (1989) afforded more space in which to speak about Louise Bennett’s contribution:

Unabashedly deploying the language of Jamaicans to poke fun at their foibles, at the same time as she asserted and assented to all aspects of the way of life of ‘Jamaican people’, Louise Bennett in effect recited a tradition into being. It was the continuation of the Jamaican custom of home grown entertainment, of Christmas concert and dinky-minnie, and tea meeting. In her response to the everyday topical Jamaican circumstance, conceived in verse and dramatized to audiences directly and then through the mass media, Bennett was among the first of the modern ‘roots’ artists. Hers was a poetry of protest before the ska and reggae lyricists took up the burden. Hers was a verse infused with Jamaican rhythms before the recent phenomenon of ‘dub’ arose as a ‘version’ of the reggae complaint. Her poetry was a unique contribution to the articulation of the rising political and cultural awareness. (Mordecai 1989 xviii)

Some fifteen years later, as I struggled to conceive of a theme, some overarching aspect of Jamaican writing with which to anchor the chapter on ‘Literature’ in Culture and Customs of Jamaica, a reference work co-authored with my husband, Martin, it occurred to me that there was no better framework to use for articulating a vision for Jamaican writing than the idea of nation-family that underpinned the works of Louise Bennett Coverley.
In the third paragraph of that chapter we write of Miss Lou: ‘… she lighted the way for the literature, joining an oral tradition from Africa and a literary tradition from England, in a unique body of work that … insists on our Jamaican “generation”, never mind where we came from…’ (114). We decided it was appropriate to begin a discussion of the literature with Miss Lou because ‘she reconciles, in her person and her work, an endless variety of family bruck-up — fragmentations of color, class, mores, and language. [She] not only gathers Jamaicans into a family, she also calls them to their “best behaving”’ (115).

Louise Bennett’s work has, albeit belatedly, begun to receive critical attention, and one looks forward to more studies of this seminal oeuvre. Certainly, dub poets, as well as many other poets and authors, have again and again acknowledged the debt that they owe her. If Jamaican literature has grown up around her, there is no better person to have raised it.

All the writing about Miss Lou that I have seen since her death has steered steadily clear of another question: If Jamaicans valued her as we say we did, why did she and her husband emigrate? (Leaving in 1980, she and Eric Coverley went first to the US, and from there to Canada in 1987.) I do not think it’s hard to guess at the reasons why they had to leave, and the fact that they went first to the US and then came to Canada perhaps lends credibility to the speculations. Might it have had to do with the plight of the self-employed, those who, as the joke says, do not retire (having no provision for a pension) but expire? With the need to be assured of adequate health care, as they grew older? With a government pension and old age benefits to anyone above the age of sixty-five? With the assurance of support for seniors where, among other things, transportation and home care are concerned? The corollary of this question is of course, if Miss Lou was the icon we say she was, the National Hero some are proposing that she should be, why didn’t we make it possible for her to remain in Jamaica?

Finally, and this last question confounds me, where, over all these years, have been the conferences to celebrate her contribution and study her work? Ironically enough, had we held them, we might have created circumstances enabling, if not a return to Jamaica, then at least extended stays, as Visiting Writer at one of our several universities, for example; or Research Director for projects in some area of cultural studies; or Distinguished Visiting Lecturer in one course or another. That, in its turn, might have led us to a greater awareness of the importance of preserving our literary and cultural history, and initiatives to secure important records and materials, some of which have been irretrievably lost.8

I leave the saddest story for the last. A Jamaican friend of mine, a teacher and teacher-mentor now resident in Canada, went home recently to volunteer at a primary school in Kingston. When she asked the students about Louise Bennett and her poetry and stories, they said that they had never heard of her. They maintained too that they had never heard of Brer Anansi, and knew no Anansi stories. I assured her that they were ‘fooling her up’. She insisted that
they weren’t. Whichever was the case, it would undoubtedly be a pity if the time came when nobody knew about Miss Lou and her contribution to the literature, including her retelling of many of the tales of Brer Anansi, our fabled trickster spider. Perhaps that alone is an excellent reason for making her a National Hero. For certain, she has my vote.

NOTES
1 At a lecture at Howard University, Washington, DC, in 1972, the late Guyanese historian and activist, Walter Rodney, resolved the ‘Who is middle class?’ dilemma. He told his audience that anyone who had attended secondary school was middle class.
2 I am indebted to the author for her generosity in making available, at short notice, an electronic copy of the tribute.
3 Miss Lou hosted ‘Ring Ding’, a series of weekly television programs for children in which the children performed and learned songs, dances, proverbs, ring games and other elements of Jamaican folk culture, between 1970 and 1982. Between 1965 and 1980, along with substantive jobs (in teaching and then as Publications Officer in the Faculty of Education at UWI, Mona, Jamaica), I worked part-time for JIS-TV, anchoring various magazine-style TV programs including ‘Saturday Magazine’ and ‘Bambu Tambu’.
4 See, for example, Michael Calderado, ‘An Interview with Lorna Goodison’.
5 An important event predated Independence by one year: in 1961, Frederic Cassidy published Jamaica Talk: Three Hundred Years of the English Language in Jamaica.
6 Louise Bennett was, in fact, awarded an honorary doctorate of letters in 1982 from the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, and an honorary doctorate by York University in Toronto, Canada, in 1988.
7 The anthology presented poems by twenty-eight Jamaican poets that had been published since Independence in 1962. The book was the second in a series conceived by Edward Seaga, Prime Minister of Jamaica at the time, and intended to celebrate the nation’s achievements across a variety of disciplines and cultural areas, on the occasion of the nation’s achieving its majority ‘voting’ age of twenty-one.
8 Among these are tapes of the ‘Ring Ding’ program, previously mentioned, which have been scrubbed. One thinks too of the Sistren Theatre Collective archive, much of which was lost in the fire at their headquarters at Kensington Crescent in Kingston in 2004. The fire may not have been averted, but systematic replication of documents or, alternatively, an attempt to lodge originals in a safer place may have saved some of this important collection. In this regard, news of the recent opening of The Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora, located at York University in Toronto, is encouraging. The Centre (http://www.yorku.ca/nhp/intro.htm) is a digitalised research facility that focuses on the history of the African diaspora and the movement of Africans to various parts of the world, particularly the Americas and the Islamic lands of North Africa and the Middle East. Directed by Paul Lovejoy, it is operated as a collective with partners in these areas, in support of document preservation, accessibility of primary materials, training and research.
WORKS CITED


