

Louise Bennett: On Writing the Creole Community, Poetically

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Abstract: Louise Bennett wrote in the Creole – by doing so, she claimed the maternal language of her nation community, and subverted not only the hegemony of the patriarchal society but also the historical colonial dominance over her colonised race. By reimagining the “marginalised” status of a colonised island as a singular community itself, I present various arguments. Firstly, Bennett’s writing career spans pre and post Jamaican independence and her works provide a unique social commentary of the sub/culture of the Jamaican people, in their own “bastardised” language. Bennett’s use of the Creole allows the Jamaican people to claim their own identity under colonial power. I will be referring in this article to Bennett’s two poetry collections, *Selected Poems*² and *Jamaica Labrish*.³ Secondly, this is balanced by an exploration of her extensive use of Jamaican proverbs in her work – proverbs embody the ‘distillation of generations’⁴ affording a communal, didactic approach to the Jamaican cultural heritage. Thirdly, her influence continues in the diaspora, particularly in the Dub poets who slide on the Creole continuum for popular accessibility but who acknowledge the debt to Bennett for her orality and her vision to gain credibility and an identity for the “submerged” Jamaican voice.

Key words: Jamaica, Louise Bennett, Jamaican Creole, colonial dominance, female Caribbean writers, Jamaican proverbs, dub poets,

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² Louise Bennett, *Selected Poems*, edited by Mervyn Morris, (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1983; repr.2005)

³ Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, with notes and introduction by Rex Nettleford, (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1966; repr.1973-1995)

⁴ Bennett, Louise, ‘Introduction’, *Selected Poems*, edited by Mervyn Morris (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1983; repr.2005), p.

‘I have been set apart by other creative writers a long time ago because of the language that I speak and work in – from the beginning nobody recognised me as a writer.’⁵

It takes a very special lady to move from an “unacknowledged” status as a writer to one of acclaimed national Jamaican hero – but that is what Louise Bennett achieved. Throughout her substantial corpus of work – textual and performative – Bennett exclusively wrote in the Creole. By doing so, Bennett not only challenged the privileged status accorded to the poetic tradition of white discourse in Caribbean letters, she empowered the voices and expression of the Jamaican people. Her use of oral and scribal forms as she refashioned the language to express the poetic sentiments of the people, was an important breakthrough in Caribbean literature.⁶ It allowed the Jamaican people to find their sense of worth and identity through their own native voice – ‘Language is an index of power and identity. If we think our language is unworthy we think ourselves unworthy’.⁷ Bennett’s work was a unique contribution to Caribbean literature and a truly distinctive voice within the canon. She claimed the maternal language of her nation community, and subverted not only the hegemony of the patriarchal society but also the historic colonial dominance of her colonised race. Her use of the Creole allowed the Jamaican people to assert their own identity under colonial power. Through the voices of and within her poetry, which will be the textual frame for this article, Bennett stressed the importance of the Creole language as a creative practice that reimagines and experiences social opposition and social accommodation. In this article I will be encompassing this collective identity of the Jamaican people to embody “community” by reimagining the “marginalised” status of a colonised island as a singular community itself; but equally I will approach the Creole language, used by Bennett, as itself determining a community identifier, where communities are sites of exchange and evolution and in which these connections are translated in a variety of forms. The use of Creole language – a hybrid language created under the regime of a dominant colonial society – is therefore seen as a powerful signifier of a submerged spirit of resistance and subversiveness.⁸ Translatability can be read as a horizontal action across borders, cultures and languages; arguably, Bennett’s use of the Creole constitutes one form of language layered under another i.e. the Creole is placed subversively and vertically underneath Standard English. Not only does Bennett use the Creole to undermine the position of the colonial Standard English, but she drills down into her own culture to mine the wealth of oral folklore of her heritage, highlighted specifically in this article by her use of proverbs. Her poetry also drills into the heart of her culture to present a communal “writing.” In essence, she engages a community of readers/audiences in a Creole conversation.

⁵ ‘Interview with Louise Bennett’, *Caribbean Quarterly*, quoted in Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, (London, Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1984), p.27

⁶ *Caribbean Women Writers*, edited by Selwyn. R Cudjoe, (Wellesley, MA: Calaloux, 1990), p.27

⁷ Ian Boyne, *Sunday Gleaner*, Aug 5, 2012

<https://jamaicagleaner.com/gleaner/20120805/focus/focus1.html>

⁸ Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001)

There are three areas in which Bennett embeds the notion of community in her poetic identity and works; firstly the use of the maternal language to create a space for a communal Jamaican identity; secondly, her use of proverbs which widens the scope for a broader interpretation of community by tapping into generational wisdom; and thirdly, how her influence in the oral use of the Creole, i.e. in performance, translates outwards to a diasporic presence exemplified here by the Dub poets such as Lillian Allen and Mandiela.

Turning first to an examination of the socio/political and cultural impact of Bennett's choice in using the Creole, a complex picture arises. At the time that Bennett was writing there was a perceived lack of dignity in the Creole speech, "distorted" as it were by the "bastardising" effect of colonisation. This arguably deflects the reader from the complexities and meanings behind Bennett's poetry, with the truth of her observations being submerged within the dialectic. The Kenyan writer and critic, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o succinctly and powerfully draws our attention to the way in which language can convey particular ideological presences and absences within the colonial context. In his words, language is a carrier of people's culture. Culture is a carrier of people's values. Values are a carrier of people's outlook or consciousness and this sense of identity. So, by destroying or under developing people's languages, the colonizing nations were deliberately killing or under developing the cultures, values and consciousness of the people. And by imposing their languages, they were also imposing the culture, values and consciousness carried by them. It was this that Bennett rigidly opposed, despite drawing scorn and "non-acknowledgment" for the first part of her career as not being a "proper" writer, only "doing" dialect. Bennett's epiphany about using the dialect, a language she was surrounded by, came when she boarded a tramcar one day. She heard the market women exclaim:

Pread out yuhself deh Liza, one
 Dress –oman dah look like she
 She see de li space side a we
 And waan foce herself een deh⁹

This can be read literally as the market women making no room for a woman such as Bennett i.e. of middle class; equally it can be read metaphorically as making no room for the Anglophone language associated with those not from the working class – i.e. squeezing out the nation language. Despite being colonially educated, Bennett chose from that moment to write exclusively in her own dialect. If we look at the issues of representation here, we can see that Bennett's work shows she chooses 'nation language' at a crucial time. She cannot speak for the nation. Instead her practice is one of listening to the multiple voices of her culture/community and then reimagining them/dramatizing them within a quite strict form

⁹ Louise Bennett, 'In the tramcar', *Miss Lulu Sezz*, (Kingston: Gleaner Co, 1949), pp.150-151

of poetry. This form allows a range of readings – readings that can include national allegory where a poem about a streetcar becomes a poem about Jamaica, class and language, but which also enable a range of voices to be performed and thus be interpreted widely. Bennett’s social contribution is not just recording or representing voice accurately, it is also about reframing it for critique.

The Mother Tongue, although nationalistic, is perceived as a female concept – that of learning the first language at the mother’s knee. This language remains ‘at the centre of one’s being’ even after other languages have been learned and it is this that Bennett taps into by her exclusive use of the Creole.¹⁰ She is communicating at the first basic level, that of child/ daughter and mother. This relationship is vital for the transference of knowledge and culture within a community. It was Kristeva who claimed that the semiotic potential of language is subversive and displaces the hegemony of the paternal/symbolic.¹¹ This is indeed what Bennett achieves with her use of the mother tongue. She absorbs the fundamental argument that the poetic use of the mother tongue in effect recovers the maternal body linguistically, and subverts and displaces paternal law. In other words, Bennett recovers the maternal presence of musicality and rhythm within her Creole poetry, and subversively displaces the structured colonial order of the patriarchal language. Brathwaite makes the same point that by using the Creole Bennett was, in fact, being subversive and that she was effectively undermining the power of the coloniser.¹² Bennett was perceived as non-partisan (despite being closely involved with the Manleys in her personal life.) But her poetry provides a perceptive, often biting, social commentary, underpinned by the subversively determined choice of the communal language. She spoke for the people of Jamaica redirecting the inverse relationship of coloniser and colonised – refracting the truth to ‘tun history upside dung.’¹³ So doing, she created a “linguistic” community for the marginalised people of the island state – a writing that effectively identified her own community of Jamaica. By using the Creole she afforded communication within her own community to the exclusion of others, socially and politically.

Turning to her poetry – Bennett was perfectly placed, with her writing career spanning pre- and post-independence, to provide a unique social commentary of the sub/culture of the Jamaican people in their own “bastardised” language. Her poetry became the voice **of** and **for** the people, dealing with the topical, everyday life of Jamaicans. Bennett’s urban poems vividly describe aspects of life in Kingston of an earlier period, (she was not just Jamaican-centred but Kingston-centred) Her streets scenes are enhanced by

¹⁰ Giselle Anatol, ‘Speaking in (M)Other Tongues: The Role of Language in Jamaica Kincaid’s “The Autobiography of My Mother”’, *Callaloo*, Vol. 25. No.3, (Johns Hopkins University Press, Summer 2002), p.940

¹¹ Judith Butler, ‘The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva’, *Hypatia*, Vol.3. No.3, (Winter 1989), p.108

¹² Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, (London, Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1984)

¹³ Katherine Verhagen Rodis, ‘Vernacular Literacy and Formal Analysis: Louise Bennett-Coverley’s Jamaican English Verse’, *Journal of West Indian Literature*, Vol. 18. No.1, (November 2009), p.65

characters such as the street peddler in ‘South Parade Peddler’, crying out her wares, or the candy seller soliciting passers-by, in ‘Candy Seller’.

‘South Parade Peddler’
 Hairnet, scissors, fine teeth comb!
 Wey de nice lady dey?
 Buy a scissors from me lady?
 Hair pin? Toot pase? Goh Wey!
 Me say go-weh already, if
 Yuh doan like it see me.
 Yuh dah swell like bombin plane fun’
 Yuh soon bus up like Graff Spe. ¹⁴

The street cries of a South Parade Peddler are seldom heard today as they (the peddlers) are now “respectably” perched behind Corporation stalls which control their movements and save passers-by from old time peddler persuasion. (paratext from Rex Nettleford attached to each poem)

‘Candy Seller’
 Candy lady, candy mam?
 Bizniz bad now-a-days.
 Lady wid de pretty lickle bwoy
 Buy candy, Gwan yuh ways!
 Yuh right fe draw de pickney han,
 Koo pon him nost hole,
 Him y’eye dem a-tare out like him want
 Hickmatize me candy-bole. ¹⁵

The professional salesman – charm of the local candy seller can easily turn into abusive, if humorous, anger against the reluctant or unwilling customer, The “abusive asides” are a kind of stock in trade in the sorority of candy-sellers. (Rex Nettleford)

Equally, Bennett’s wartime poems are undoubtedly dated by their topicality but contextually still have much to say about the Jamaican culture. Britain went to war and as a colonial state so did Jamaica.

¹⁴ Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, with notes and introduction by Rex Nettleford, (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1966; repr. 1973-1995) p.27

¹⁵ Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, with notes and introduction by Rex Nettleford, (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1966; repr. 1973-1995) p.28

Although it was distanced from it, the war had its effects – there were important by-products for the ordinary man and woman, such as the recruitment of Jamaican labour (much of it unemployed at the time) to meet the shortage of male farm labour in the US, which had by 1942 become fully engaged in WW2. The exposure of Jamaicans to American consumer goods through contacts at the base showed the extent to which people's lives were dominated by the events. The shortage of food supplies, price controls and the attendant profiteering by merchants and shopkeepers are vividly recorded by Bennett.

A close analysis of three stanzas of a single poem about food purchasing, 'Wartime Grocery' illustrates Bennett's poetic expertise at obliquely and succinctly commenting on issues within her community – those of inequality of race, class and gender:

Jackass say de worl' noh level
 Koo how Miss Pan she fat!
 She noh need milk, wen me side o' her
 Me fava mawga rat! ¹⁶

The proverb incorporated in this poem is 'Jackass say worl' not level' – the simple meaning of this particular proverb is that there is no equality, no fairness. The poem itself talks about the hardships facing the Jamaican people in wartime, and the fact that the shopkeepers exploited the food shortage by marrying commodities together to sell a commodity that was harder to sell with one that was in demand. For instance, flour was "married" to cornmeal, salt-pork to mackerel. One commodity which was especially scarce was milk and this is the immediate context to which Bennett applies the proverb – she comments on how it is unfair that the rich, who are well fed and thriving, do not need milk but can obtain it, whilst the poorer people cannot obtain it but need it. The main point to notice here is that the shape of this one stanza mirrors the stratification of the Jamaican class system from rich down to poor, overarched by a general comment provided by the weight of the proverb in the following manner:

'Jackass say de worl' noh level' – this proverbial statement contextualises the stanza by making a generalisation of inequality pertaining to a wider group – in this case the Jamaican people. It creates a broad arc for the stanza which then narrows down into a specific group. 'Koo how Miss Pam she fat!' – this next line names a single person who is identified with the richer class of people i.e. one that is fat in times of scarcity of food. Bennett embodies a group identity in a singled out and named persona. Therefore, Miss Pam represents the rich in this poem. 'She noh need milk, wen me side o' her' – the irony here is that Miss Pam does not need milk because she is comfortable but can get it – this comments on the fact that the richer classes are not suffering. The balance of the line, created by the comma, highlights the comparison that is about to come. 'Me fava mawga rat!' – This last line contains the punch: the

¹⁶ Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, with notes and introduction by Rex Nettleford, (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1966; repr. 1973-1995) p.83

speaker is like a thin rat next to Miss Pam. The placement of the word 'rat' at the end of the last line emphasises the status of the speaker within the stratification of the stanza. The fact that the speaker (presumably female) is unnamed infers that the lower, poorer classes are unimportant.

The speaker belongs in this poorer class who are struggling with the exploitation of the retailers who, in turn, are manipulating the situation for their own gain. It is this injustice that the stanza replies to, with the proverb at the start announcing Bennett's response.

The theme of "marrying" commodities is continued in stanza 7 of the poem 'Wartime Grocery' where Bennett writes that:

Sometim you kean get wite-grain rice
 'cep you buy de brown-grain one,
 Now dem mix up de two togedda
 You can guess how it tan!¹⁷

This is clearly an allegory for the mixing of races of brown and white, which also, in Jamaica, reflects the hierarchical view of race and class – white/brown and black as the lowest denominator. Arguably it could also be extended to an allegory of the interplay between the masculine and feminine (the brown rice representing the male, the white the female) i.e. the interplay of the patriarchal and the matriarchal systems in the Jamaican environment.

For brown –grain rice is very loud,
 You can smell it from afar!
 Wen dem a bwile, de good an bad snell
 Jus a play tug-o'war!¹⁸

Inscribed into the meaning is the morality of good and bad – this alludes to the stereotypical reading of the patriarchal domination of the women and in the face of this, Bennett suggests that there could be a tug of war for power/equality. Equally, the allegory may also allude to the class system of white rice being the pure and preferred rice (the rich) and the brown being the coarser, less good rice (the poor.) Notably then, the suggestion of mixing them together now merges race and class and gender within the same complex allegory within this poem through which Bennett critiques the socio- political environment, albeit opaquely. The intersections within this poem of race and gender further highlights the need to

¹⁷ Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, with notes and introduction by Rex Nettleford, (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1966; repr.1973-1995) p.83. lls.24-28

¹⁸ *Ibid.* lls.29-32

account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.¹⁹

As noted, Bennett was supremely placed to be writing over this time period. Independence of course did not arrive to Jamaica in a vacuum – there were earlier attempts at federations, but the island got its independence in 1962 and while Jamaica celebrated, Bennett wrote a trio of poems entitled ‘Jamaican Elevate’, ‘Independence dignity’, and ‘Independence’ (note the pun on “dance”.) These three poems showed that Bennett had grave concerns that Jamaica was ready for independence. Whilst she was larger than any political party – Ian Byrne in *Sunday Gleaner* 2006 notes that ‘Louise Bennett was non partisan in a way that was mystifying, She mastered the art of discretion and control of the tongue’ – her concern for the political implications can be seen in the following excerpts:

‘Independence’
 Independance wid a vengeance!
 Independance raisin’cain!
 Jamaica start grow beard, ah hope
 We chin can stan’de strain!²⁰

The implications of the new won status were to show themselves much clearer six months later and Bennett declares this position unequivocally in the poem ‘Jamaica Elevate’

We sen we Delegation
 Over to United Nation
 An we meck OAS know dat (organisation of American states)
 We gwine join dem.
 We tell Russia we don’t like dem
 We tell Englan, we naw beg dem
 An we mek ‘Merica know
 We is behine dem!

Then she becomes irreverent in her “send up” of the search for an identity as expressed in her poem about the appointment of the first native Governor General

We owna Governor General

¹⁹ Kimberley Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color’, *Stanford Law Review*, Vol, 43. No.6, (July 1991).

²⁰ Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, with notes and introduction by Rex Nettleford, (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1966; repr. 1973-1995), p.169

A true – born Native son;
 Don't you member Bada John – john?
 Well, him faba him can't done ²¹

Bennett outlines in these three poems how Jamaicans could identify themselves with the new Independence (i.e. Jamaican) regime but expresses her concern by pointing out the irony. This idea is explored by Ramazani as 'the hybridity of double consciousness of irony' – Bennett couches her message in humour against the colonisers, but also pokes fun at her own people as the colonised; the double consciousness of not only the "marginalised" writer but the duality of the function of humour is shown here. In the eye of independence, in 1966, she wrote her most referenced poem 'Colonisation in Reverse':

What a joyful news, Miss Mattie
 I feel like me heart gwine burs'
 Jamaican people colonizin
 Englan in reverse.

What a islan! What a people!
 Man an woman, old an youn
 Jusa pack dem bag and baggage
 An tun history upside dung! ²²

She uses humour to poke fun at, almost ridicule the whole idea of colonisation. Underneath of course lies a critical eye of observation which deals with the migrant Jamaican to the promised lands of US or UK. As noted, her incisive social observations were couched in humour. Bennett believed in laughter in the face of adversity 'I have found a medium through which I can pretend to be laughing' Louise Bennett says – this continues: 'otherwise I would weep'.²³ She had to find a way to be heard, writing as she did in the Creole, and equally as a woman in this traditionally, historically patriarchal and "submerged" nation. Black laughter was one of the chief mechanisms used during and after slavery to undermine the power of the coloniser and this is what Bennett taps into. As Morris notes, the laughter is of two distinguishable, though often intermingling kinds: the laughter of sympathetic comedy and the laughter of satire. Satire seeks to reform or to destroy by ridicule; through often not obviously angry it often implies something

²¹ Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, with notes and introduction by Rex Nettleford, (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1966; repr. 1973-1995), p.174

²² Louise Bennett, *Selected Poems*, edited by Mervyn Morris, (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1983; repr. 2005) p.117

²³ Louise Bennett and Dennis Scott, 'Bennett on Bennett', interview, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 14, nos. 1 and 2 (1968), p.97

akin to anger. In sympathetic comedy, on the other hand, there is generous acceptance of foibles.²⁴

Bennett inverts the balance and, through laughter, places the native language at the centre of her poetry, deliberately recentring the power to the colonised – ‘When you look between the lines you find all the sorrow there and all the facts too, but if you don’t search for it, well then you won’t find it’.²⁵

Turning now to Bennett’s use of proverbs we see how she creates a bridge between the past and the present; ‘After all, proverbs are the poetry of the people’.²⁶

‘One could say that there is a ‘story behind every proverb. Proverbs are speech acts with text, texture and context that have a noteworthy impact on oral and written communication within a culture and society’.²⁷

Bennett was aware of the importance of folkloristic material as a means of capturing essential truths relating to a/her community and the authoritative voice which folklore holds, including the importance of preserving and collecting proverbs. Proverbs are ‘the distillation of generations’²⁸ and afford a communal didactic approach to the Jamaican cultural heritage. Proverbial poetry is informed by social experience and practice, and for Bennett it enables a non-partisan critique of those experiences and practices. Prahlad’s holistic understanding is of the proverb as ‘a lived part of the culture’.²⁹ Bennett superimposes onto her own poetic and cultural commentaries this aspect (identified here by Prahlad) of a traditional “living culture” which is embodied in the proverbs and thus she creates a double layer to her commentary: the layer of the present, and the inherited layer of the past. Many scholars have addressed the aspect of communality latent in proverbs and Bennett hooks her poetry (and monologues) to this sense of communal group identity. Early on in the paremiological debate Taylor identified that ‘proverbs belong to many people, are ingenious in form and idea, and are used as a source of wisdom and moral advice based on experience, often used to teach the younger generations’.³⁰ Dundes, the unparalleled folklore scholar,

²⁴ Louise Bennett, ‘Introduction’, *Selected Poems*, edited by Mervyn Morris, (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1983; repr.2005) p. xxiv

²⁵ Ibid. Introduction, p. xvii

²⁶ Wolfgang Mieder, *So Many Heads, So Many Wits An Anthology of English Proverb Poetry*, edited by Janet Sobiesky and Wolfgang Mieder, (Burlington, VT: Queen City Printers, 2005) intro. xiv

²⁷ Wolfgang Mieder, *Behold the Proverbs of a People: Proverbial Wisdom in Culture, Literature, and Politics*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), p.

²⁸ Louise Bennett, ‘Introduction’, *Selected Poems*, edited by Mervyn Morris, (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1983; repr.2005) p. xxiv

²⁹ Michael Kuelker, “A life in Proverbs: an interview with Anand Prahlad,” *African American Review*, Vol 43. No 4 (John Hopkins University Press, 2009) p. 657

³⁰ Archie Taylor, ‘The Wisdom of Many and the Wit of One’, *The Wisdom of Many, Essays on the Proverb*, edited by Wolfgang Mieder and Alan Dundes, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, [1981] 1994), p.3.

further identifies that ‘there is an important connection between the concept of identity and folklore’.³¹ He cites Bauman’s claim that ‘folklore is a function of shared identity.’ A member of such group would know the common core of the traditions of the group and therefore create part of their own and the group’s identity. This becomes an important narrative in the discourse of intersectionality of gender, race and class which underlies Bennett’s poetic and proverbial work in terms of identity politics within a subculture. Through the element of proverbial usage, Bennett stabilises the shared needs and the identity of a/her own community. Inclusiveness and exclusiveness is part of any process of identity construction: it is through the knowledge of the self and the discovery of the others that an individual develops a feeling of belongingness and security.

An example of a strongly orientated proverbial poem where two proverbs frame the catalogue of hardship is a poem called ‘Dutty Tough’, a gritty poem about poverty and subsistence that lower-class Jamaican people endured. Stanza one starts with these proverbs:

Sun a shine but tings noh bright
 Doah pot a bwile, bickle noh nuff
 River flood but water scarce yaw
 Ran a fall but dutty tuff!

This is then echoed in the final stanza with an interesting inflection:

Sun a shine and pot a bwile, but
 Tings noh bright, bickle noh nuff!
 Rain a fall, river dah- flood, but
 Wata scarce and dutty tuff. ³²

The inversions here present the catalogue of each element slightly differently which stresses effectively the fact that no matter what, wages may rise but the price and hardship of living continues to take its toll – metaphorically, the ground remains hard even if the river floods and there is never enough water to sustain a livelihood. Notably the use of the Creole words, “bickle” (food) and “dutty” (ground) challenges the reader to understand the meaning of the words – this highlights the tension between speakers of Standard English and those who speak the Jamaican dialect. The use of such localised dialectal vocabulary personalises the crisis to the Jamaican people whom it is affecting and references the historical

³¹ Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters*, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), p.7

³² Louise Bennett, *Selected Poems*, edited by Mervyn Morris, (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1983; repr. 2005) p.27

divide between the coloniser and the colonised. For Bennett, not only the use of the Creole but the use of proverbs reinforces the existence of group identities within societies.

Bennett also takes a plural, allegorical approach to proverbial imagery: consider for instance, ‘dog a sweat but long hair hide I’. This proverb, found in ‘My Dream’, refers to a washerwoman’s subversive thoughts of discontent/ rebellion at having to wash Rose’s clothes, where Rose operates as an allegory for England. The poem can be read within the context of the Jamaican nationalistic desire for self-government in 1947, as well as internal class conflict within Jamaica.

Dog a sweat but long hair hide I’
 Mout a laugh but heart a leap
 Everythin wha shine noh gole piece
 An me jump out o me sleep.³³

The reality inscribed here is the fact of a working woman’s subservience to the richer woman in washing her clothes i.e. the position of Jamaica to Britain. The dream is for independence. As Cooper states: This sublimatory use of proverbs in a potentially explosive context of class antagonism is an excellent example of Bennett’s linguistic subterfuge, indirection as a strategy to preserve psychic equilibrium.³⁴

One final point to note is that with the inclusion of proverbs, Bennett is drawing attention to the importance of writing memory – i.e. she is calling on members of her community to keep them remembered and in current use. The collective memory of a community constitutes the heart of the community and Bennett’s repeated use of proverbs reinforces this commonality and aligns with the central element of generational memory.

Having looked at the behaviour of the maternal language that Bennett chooses to use, at the specifics of Bennett’s complex and culturally underscored poetry, and the communal use of proverbs to hook onto the inherited wisdom of generations, I now want to open the discussion to look at Bennett’s diasporic influence. Her locally centred focus now finds another space transnationally in a conversation between communities, translated as it were through the Dub poets.

The dubs themselves slide on the Creole continuum for popular accessibility but they acknowledge the debt to Bennett for her orality and her vision to gain credibility and an identity for the “submerged” Jamaican voice. Like Bennett’s work, this is a form of poetry which is not elite but emerges out of the

³³ Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, with notes and introduction by Rex Nettleford, (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1966; repr. 1973-1995) p.155

³⁴ Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the “Vulgar” Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*, (London: Macmillan Education, 1993)

people’s need for a voice, a form of communication and connection, going back to the African tradition of preacher-teacher and the everyday form of language. It is meant to disrupt traditional discourse, to call attention to the form of speech which is ignored in middle class colonial life and ‘call the system to account’³⁵ Allen states that ‘without two remarkable figures of the twentieth century, Louise Bennett and Bob Marley, there would be no dub poetry’.³⁶ She acknowledges Bennett’s influence in her collection of poems entitled *Tribute to Miss Lou*, for instance the poem ‘Heartbeat’ which echoes the lines at the start of Bennett’s poem commented on at the start of this article – ‘Pred out yusef Miss Lou.....’.³⁷ Here Allen invites Bennett (not the market women) to take the metaphorical space at the back of the tram and therefore mark the status of the Creole language and to spread the message out.

She writes
 the heartbeat of our lives
 dignity/culture/politics/history/ lovingness/soul
 dis dressup oman wi shinning star.³⁸

Sometimes in this dimness
 A flicker
 A light
 A path
 A Miss Lou.³⁹

As noted, Miss Lou campaigned to legitimise the use of the “nation language” and by doing so she created a base for the dub poets to build on. She effectively raised it to a level of oral art form which the dubs copied and continued to shape. It is the sound of the spoken word that is the central aspect of live performance, the sound of the word which gives rise to musical riddim, the central formative aspect of the dub.⁴⁰ The sound becomes power and power is a concrete force leading to action. Differing from Bennett, action for the Dub community is first and foremost political, resistant and for the Canadian dub poets such as Allen, a feminist’s tool. Together the dub poets presented a united and global political and cultural presence, greater than one individual. One might say that at the height of their popularity they

³⁵ Lillian Allen, ‘What is Dub Poetry?’, uploaded by Different Knowings, (Youtube, 2 Sept 2011), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWrvzUMc2aI>>

³⁶ Lillian Allen, quoted in Ric Knowles, ‘To be Dub, Female and Black: Towards a Wombcentred Afro-Caribbean Diasporic Performance Aesthetic in Toronto’, *Theatre Research in Canada*, Vol 33. No. 1, (2012), footnote 13, p.99

³⁷ Lillian Allen, *Women Do This Every Day*, (Toronto: Women’s Press of Canada, 1993), p.43, l.1

³⁸ Lillian Allen, *Women Do This Every Day*, (Toronto: Women’s Press of Canada, 1993) p.43, lls.10-13

³⁹ Lillian Allen, *Women Do This Every Day*, (Toronto: Women’s Press of Canada, 1993) p.43, lls 7-11

⁴⁰ Christian Habekost, *Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of Afro Caribbean Dub Poetry*, (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 1993)

created a global dub – symphony connecting the whole spectrum of Caribbean aesthetics. However, Habekost points out that academics hesitantly accepted Dub poetry into the nascent canon of Caribbean literature since the voice of the ghetto was still perceived as undeserving.⁴¹ Following this, practitioners and the academic critics have debated the future of the dub genre. More than forty years after Bennett worked to justify the value and reception of the dialect, the dubs were also faced with this complex reception concerning the populist/ low standard of the language, the revolutionary stance against the establishment and the antagonism between the oral and the written outcome. For Kei Miller the dub genre is merely a whisper now – ‘the early dub poetry had a great sound, a mighty fury, today dub poetry makes a faint sound – yet it is a poetry we can identify with and should remember’.⁴² One later poet, closer still to Bennett in essence, is mandiela. (mandiela associates capital letters with oppressive hierarchy, so in deference to that I adhere to that constant)⁴³ mandiela states that ‘her biggest influence was miss lou and the early dub poets and her own roots in Jamaican pantomime’.⁴⁴ I suggest that Bennett’s creative legacy translates this far particularly in the shared importance mandiela lays on the mythological heritage of Jamaica. mandiela echoes Bennett’s conviction to hold onto the mythology and the shared history of black heritage and the performative style out with text, as well as championing the Creole language. mandiela’s dub theatre/ choreopoem genre is one form that is at once contemporary and traditional, evolving directly from an amalgam of historic African culture. Her play, *dark diaspora in dub* gives a medium through which the black migrant community can express itself, in a sub culture of multiplicity.

so I crammed my past/life/present
foreign/future into fresh fake leather.....

don’t....shake your feet
dirt proves home is/
not a fig-
ment of your dreams
& too, customs will dig.⁴⁵

One final point is to place Bennett in her own time and her own space. Ten years ago, Morris noted that ‘West Indian literature, as a body of work, was a fairly recent phenomenon and that the flow of West

⁴¹ Christian Habekost, *Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of Afro Caribbean Dub Poetry*, p.6

⁴² *The Gleaner*, May 10, 2013, <Jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/2013051/ent4.html>

⁴³ Susan Gingell, ‘jumping in heart first: an interview with ahdri zhina mandiela’, *Postcolonial Text*, Vol. 2. No. 4, (2006)

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.2

⁴⁵ mandiela, ahdri zhina, *Dark Diaspora in Dub*, (Toronto: Black Woman and Woman of Colour Press, 1991), pp 24; 25

Indian literature becomes fairly substantial (only) from 1952.⁴⁶ The concept of West Indian literature has expanded rapidly from then on to the point that from the 90s onwards it has been taken for granted that works of merit are now written in Creole. Morris again notes that ‘it is all too easy to talk about the change in attitudes as though one was never part of the colonial situation and its ways of seeing’.⁴⁷ Bennett was a forerunner for this change of attitude, a visionary who moved acceptance and cultural knowledge forward by valorising Jamaican culture and showing that the Creole can be a legitimate language of literary art. She contributed to the “process” that Brathwaite describes as ‘the cultural process of creolisation in which various elements intermingle, to become the tentative cultural norm of the society’.⁴⁸ Her own society, her community, was always at the heart of Bennett’s works and her own persona; despite travelling and finally migrating abroad, she insisted that her cultural (and communal) identity always travelled with her, ‘Any which part mi live – Toronto –o! London–o! Florida – o! – a Jamaica mi deh!’⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Mervyn Morris, *Making West Indian Literature*, (Kingston and Miami, FL: Ian Randle Publishers, 2005)

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.5

⁴⁸ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omen*, (Kingston: Savacou Publications, 1974), p.6

⁴⁹ ‘Wherever I live ---- I am in Jamaica’, *Miss Lou and Friends*, taped March 27, 1990 (Distributed by Reckford Films Limited, 4 Coolshade Drive, Kingston 19, Jamaica)

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