

LOUISE BENNETT: BETWEEN SUBCULTURES

Michael Hoenisch (Berlin)

Louise Bennett, deeply rooted in the local folk culture of Jamaica, has won wide recognition in the anglophone Caribbean as well as in other parts of the English speaking world. In 1983 she received an honorary doctorate from the University of the West Indies. She was at the top of a list of the most outstanding women in Jamaica when Carl Stone carried out a poll in Kingston in June 1988.¹ Her record *Yes M'Dear: Miss Lou Live* (1983), which was recorded live at the Lyric Theatre in London, captures the power of her performance and the enthusiastic response she evokes in her international audience. Although there is, of course, no comparison with music superstars like Bob Marley, as a poet and performer of her own work she is an international literary celebrity.

When she began to appear at free concerts, festivals and poetry readings in Jamaica in the late 1930ies, published poems about topical events in the *Daily Gleaner* newspaper, and broadcast prose monologues in local radio programs, the Jamaican public perceived her as an entertainer, versatile and skilled, but of limited local and cultural appeal. This image was shaped to a large degree by the fact that she used Jamaican "dialect", or creole, in her poems and prose; spoke about everyday experiences of common people; placed her work in the context of folk culture; and chose orality as her medium of expression. The books she published in the early 1940ies did not change this impression, but reinforced it. Like her other works, *Jamaica Dialect Verses* (1942), *Jamaican Humor in Dialect* (1943), *Anancy Stories and Poems in Dialect* (1944) could be accepted, as Rhonda Cobham points out,² as collections of folk material by a developing middle class, which felt no longer threatened by the lower classes and therefore could permit a certain curiosity about them. For decades, Louise Bennett was caught in the role of an entertaining performer in the medium of folk culture. Like Claude McKay's dialect poems earlier in the century, her work could be perceived as a direct expression of a somewhat exotic "native" culture, which remained outside the sphere of what

¹ *Jamaica Bulletin* 30 (Oct.1988), 52; 32% of all respondents named Louise Bennett.

² Rhonda COBHAM, *The Creative Writer and West Indian Society* (Diss., 1981), pp. 158-168.

was considered literature. This patronizing view of her work, shaped by an implicit acceptance of the dominant culture of the colonizing 'motherland', is illustrated by the fact that she was not included in the early literary projects which began to assert an independent Jamaican culture since the late 1930ies. Her poetry did not appear in the volumes of *Focus*, which were published in 1943, 1948, 1956 and 1960. *The Independence Anthology of Jamaican Literature* (1962) did not place her contribution in the section for poetry.³ In her interview with Dennis Scott, Louise Bennett emphasized retrospectively her awareness of these exclusionary policies and attributed them to the stigma attached to the use of creole. At the same time she rejected firmly the label of "professional entertainer of the middle classes" and claimed to speak for "the people" as a whole.⁴

A new perspective on her work emerged during the shift of the socio-political equilibrium and the cultural opening of the 1960ies and 1970ies: What had been considered as a limitation of her work was now perceived as an asset. The cultural emancipation of this period could receive her work as an early expression of an autonomous creole culture, which would form the center of an independent national tradition. Her use of dialect was no longer seen as a restriction of her talent;⁵ instead, her work and its use of folk elements was welcomed as a sign of the "acceptance of Jamaican culture".⁶ No more could one praise her, if praise it is, because she "raised the sing-song patter of the hills and of the towns to an art level acceptable to and appreciated by people from all classes in her country".⁷ Now she was claimed for the tradition of "nation language" which preserved and shaped the cultural space for Afro-Caribbean identity through the centuries.⁸ In fact, the confrontational cultural model which emerged during this period could be used to point out a different kind of limitation of her work: its lack of realism and its alleged middle class orientation.⁹ While critical discussion about Louise Bennett's contribution to Jamaican culture continued,¹⁰ younger poets like Linton

³Mervyn MORRIS, "Introduction" to Louise Bennett, *Selected Poems*, Kingston 1982, p. VIII.

⁴"Bennett on Bennett: Interviewed by Dennis Scott", in *Caribbean Quarterly* 14 (1968), 97-101.

⁵MORRIS, "On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously", in *Jamaica Journal* 1 (Dec. 1967), 69-74; cf. *Sunday Gleaner*, June 1964, pp. 7, 14, 21, 18.

⁶MORRIS (1982), p. XVIII.

⁷Rex NETTLEFORD, "Introduction" to Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, Kingston 1966, p. 9.

⁸Edward K. BRATHWAITE, *History of the Voice*, London/Port of Spain 1984, pp. 26-30.

⁹SCOTT (1968); BRATHWAITE (1984).

¹⁰Cf. e.g. Lloyd BROWN, "The Oral Tradition: Sparrow and Louise Bennett", in his *West Indian Poetry* (Boston, 1978; London, 1984), pp. 100-117;

Kwesi Johnson, Mutabaruka, Oku Onuora and Michael Smith included her as an important but contradictory predecessor in their project of a radical poetic critique of white capitalist society.

The reception of Louise Bennett's work has been controlled to a large extent by varying interpretations of her uses of Caribbean folk culture. Shifting relations between the dominant traditions of the capitalist centers – the United Kingdom and to a certain degree the USA – and the culture of the poor at the periphery; the changing equilibrium of class and race forces within Jamaican society; and the commercial exploitation of decolonizing local cultures on international markets are powerful influences on the process of reception, and Louise Bennett was highly aware of them. In fact, a promising approach to her work is the attempt to understand her poetry and prose as the result of a literary strategy which tries to create a symbolic creole community within the context of these powerful pressures. The creole culture projected by her work does not simply reproduce an existing folk culture, although it is deeply immersed in it, but can be understood as a complex construct which should provide a space for identity and cultural freedom within – not separate from – the dominant culture. In a rough analogy to the continuum of the creole language in Jamaica one can perceive in Bennett's work a continuum of creole culture. However, the appearance of coherence should not obscure the diversity of subcultural elements which are included – or not included – in Bennett's complex poetic project.

The most noticeable aspect of Bennett's vision of a symbolic creole community is the ambiguous self-designation of her poetry as 'dialect verse'. The term 'dialect' implies the perspective of the dominant culture of the center, from whose position other language forms at the periphery appear as local varieties, used only by a limited number of people and lacking the social prestige and normative power of the language of the educated elite. When Louise Bennett began to write, dialect was still strongly associated with illiteracy and lack of formal education in general.¹¹ Therefore, dialect signaled popular entertainment, not serious art. Louise Bennett was, of course, perfectly aware of this situation and of the price she paid for her position.¹² In the context of powerful upheavals in the Caribbean

Carolyn COOPER, "Noh Lickle Twang: An Introduction to the Poetry of Louise Bennett", in *World Literature Written in English* 17:1 (April, 1978), 317-327; COOPER, "Proverb as Metaphor in the Poetry of Louise Bennett", in *Jamaica Journal* 17:2 (May 1984), 21-24; Michael HOENISCH, "Louise Bennett", in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: African and Caribbean Literature*, eds. B. Lindfors and R. Sander, forthcoming; MORRIS (1983), "Louise Bennett", in *Fifty Caribbean Writers*, ed. P.C. Dance (New York, 1986), 35-45.

¹¹COBHAM, *ibid.*

¹²"Bennett on Bennett" (1968).

in the late 1930ies, profound changes seemed imminent, accompanied by a strong thrust toward cultural independence. The journal *Public Opinion* and the literary magazine *Focus* demonstrated to a middle class public the creative possibilities of an indigenous Jamaican culture. The ambiguity of this project is demonstrated by Roger Mais, who was closely associated with this process of cultural transformation. In his work dialect lost its association with comic effects or entertainment, and was used for serious, in fact tragic purposes, but in a limited way. When he introduced the Kingston ghetto as the collective protagonist of two of his novels,¹³ creole appears occasionally in the form of the quoted direct speech of the people: enclosed in a narrative competing with English and American models.¹⁴ The writers close to *Focus* and *Public Opinion* expressed their position of cultural independence in language or thought patterns similar to those of their English contemporaries. Louise Bennett, who shared their position in many ways, was isolated at that time by her commitment to the oral tradition and the creole language. Bennett maintained the position of 'dialect author', which appeared as a very modest one at the time, with remarkable strength and self-confidence as part of her poetic strategy to construct a symbolic creole community. Distinct, but not separate from the dominant public discourse – whose structure was shaped by European sources, a traditional form of 'the public' and transmission by print media – she addressed, and helped to create, a public discourse accessible to the common man or woman and modeled on oral communication. The range and flexibility of this subcultural public discourse as well as the effort to maintain its integrity and coherence are the subject of some of her best poems.

In the poem "Dry-Foot Bwoy"¹⁵ the young man's claim to a status beyond the local community because of his visit abroad is undermined by the female speaker and the chorus of women she addresses. The "bwoy's" English accent is not accepted as a sign of cultural superiority but ridiculed and lamented as a symptom of alienation from his true self and from the creole community. The speaker is not impressed, but considers the boy's language a defect and a sickness which evokes pity: "Me start fi feel so sorry fi / De po bad-lucky soul". With his creole language the boy has lost his happiness: "Wha happen to them sweet Jamaica / Joke yuh use fi pop?". The community, however, does not give him up as lost. By means of mockery they try to shame him out of his inauthenticity. And with

¹³*The Hills Were Joyful Together* (London 1953); *Brother Man* (London 1954).

¹⁴HOENISCH, "Symbolic Politics: Perceptions of the Early Rastafari Movement", in *The Massachusetts Review* 29:3 (Fall 1988), pp. 432-449.

¹⁵Louise BENNETT, *Selected Poems*, op.cit., pp. 1-2.

various verbal tactics: addressing him as "Mary boy", reminding him of his true name "Cudjoe" and emphasizing his enjoyment of "Nana's" food, the speaker evokes through these names the African or Maroon tradition and recalls the boy's happy childhood; draws him back into the sphere of creole culture, and, at the same time, asserts the coherence of the community:

Me seh, 'You understand me, yaw!
 No yuh name Cudjoe Scoop?
 Always visit Nana kitchen an
 Gi laugh fi gungoo soup!

Similarly, in the poem "No lickle Twang"¹⁶ the ironic complaint about the lack of an American accent satirizes the effects of Americanization from the position of an unintimidated creole perspective. In these and other poems, creole is shown to have the function of deflating the claims to superiority of the colonizing powers and asserting, in contrast, a self-confident community of discourse in Jamaica. The standard language of England appears, e.g. in the poem "Bans a Killin",¹⁷ as nothing more than one dialect among many. The cultures of the 'motherland' and its American successor are not rejected with hostility; but they are taken down from their elevated position, stripped of their claim to privilege and normative power, democratized, and incorporated in the vision of a pluralistic universe of fraternal cultures: a utopia which includes creole culture not as a local deviation or colonial regression but almost as an equal.

Louise Bennett's vision of an autonomous creole culture draws boundaries in the direction not only of the colonizing foreign cultures but also the various indigenous forms of domination and false authoritarian postures. One of the major thrusts of her poetry is directed against the upper ranks of the social hierarchy, against government, representatives of power or status, and pretenders of cultural superiority. Satire and irony deflate their claims to eminence. In her concept of 'the people', the everyday needs of the common man or woman are emphasized in opposition to public discourse. The strength of 'the people' manifests itself in their withholding of deference from the usurpers of authority. However, the deeply rooted anti-authoritarian protest of the ghetto poor, which has been expressed by dub poets since the 1960ies, does not exist among Bennett's creole community either: there, populist leaders, who are perceived to speak for 'the people', have an important and highly respected position, regardless of their party affiliation. Alexander Bustamante, in particular, is elevated to the position of saviour from all kinds of troubles.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

His absence is lamented in "Deares Chief",¹⁸ because without his "magnet power" the people tend to go astray and follow "dem / Back-to-Africa fool", the Rastafarians. Bustamante's mobilization of the poor is celebrated as a clever move to make the West India Royal Commission pay attention to the needs of 'the people' after the 1938 uprising.¹⁹ And the self-confident servant girl, who browbeats the potential employer, signals her independence through her demand to go dancing every night with the "Busta Union bwoys".²⁰ But when Bustamante's Jamaica Labour Party is swept into power in 1944 and Norman Manley, the founder of the People's National Party, did not even gain a seat in the House of Representatives, this political defeat is lamented as the dethronement of "me King"; the people are criticized because they did not recognize their saviour: "Jamaica people / Wha dis oonoo do? / Leff out de man weh bun an work / An fight fe save oonoo?"²¹ However, officials who lack the populist appeal of these leaders are turned away at the boundaries of the symbolic space occupied by Bennett's creole community.

When the government, represented by the census taker, enters the house of a poor woman in the poem "Census",²² this is rejected as an invasion of her own space and as an interference with her everyday life. But the invader is beaten back without noticing it, not with force but with Anancy tactics, while the defender not only maintains her independence but also derives pleasure from it. She gives the government man misleading fictions instead of facts, enjoys her own cunning and, possibly, gets some sexual satisfaction from the deceived collector of statistical data. Even when Bennett's poems do not deal directly with the pretensions of the powerful and the successful survival of the common man, her work has a political dimension much more significant than the explicit and often dated topical commentary. The oral quality of her poetry, most directly expressed through the dramatic monolog of a creole speaker, evokes the talk of local communities, where events and people can be judged by personal observation. The public discourse of a creole subculture is constantly brought into play against the dominant public discourse of the powerful and erodes their claim to universal validity. Underneath the surface of laughter, her poetry poses a challenge to the cultural hegemony of the established elites.

Race is an essential element in Louise Bennett's symbolic creole territory. Mervyn Morris has referred to the fact that pride in being black is

¹⁸Louise BENNETT, *Jamaica Labrish*, op.cit., pp. 146-147.

¹⁹"De Royal Commotion", *Jamaica Labrish*, pp. 117- 119.

²⁰"Seeking a Job", *ibid.*, pp. 191-192.

²¹"Wat a Dickens", *ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

²²*Selected poems*, pp. 23-24.

one of the central values in her poetry.²³ Before black power movements became visible all over the world, Bennett pursued a calm and persistent course of racial decolonization by resisting the claims of white superiority. Blackness does not have the function of a battle cry in her poem, but it is purged from the stigma of inferiority and inserted in a pluralistic universe on the basis of equality. Black representatives of authority are not exempt from her satire; but 'the people' of her symbolic creole community derive their power of survival from their black tradition in the 'new' world. Bustamante's march of the poor against the Royal Commission gave the speaker of the poem the opportunity for a liberating and joyful laughter because a momentary reversal of the racial hierarchy took place: "Fe see 'ow nayga man dah-spre himself / Eena wite people hotel".²⁴ Jamaica is taken out of its position as colonial back yard and redefined as black home in the poem "Nayga Yard".²⁵ In Bennett's perspective the social revolt of the late 1930ies reveals the potential of the black community. The poem "Strike Day"²⁶ translates the revolutionary actions of the masses into the experience of an unemployed black servant girl. Her narration of a temporary liberation from white rule unfolds as an oral report of the strike events against an initial moderating voice:

Shet up yoh mout mah meck me talk,
 How nayga reign today,
 How we lick wite man till tem beg
 An shout an start fe pray.
 So me gwan bad just like de res,
 An never fraid at all,
 For nayga was a-reign today,
 An wite man got a fall!

The voice of fear and hesitation is overcome by an assertion of boldness and pleasure about the temporary reversal of the power hierarchy. The emphasis is not so much on the practical consequences of the strike actions as it is on the emergence of a new image of blacks: free of fear, passivity and powerlessness. By appearing to quote the woman striker herself, the poem undermines and reverses the printed versions of the strike events and asserts the experience of those usually excluded from the white middle-class public. The narrator, her friend Maggy and the rest of the crowd expropriate public transportation – "We drive pon tram car free of cos' / Dis like is fe we own" – and, at the same time, the dominant public discourse. The dramatic monolog reveals the self-confident

²³MORRIS (1982), p. XVIII.

²⁴*Jamaica Labrish*, pp. 115-116.

²⁵*Selected poems*, pp. 102-104.

²⁶*Jamaica Labrish*, pp. 115-116.

perspective of the creole speaker: black, female, rooted in the creole community of the poor, and deriving pleasure from an assertion of liberty which, although temporary, may be seen as a sign of future changes.

Louise Bennett's emphasis on black self-confidence may appear more inclusive than it is on second thought. It differs, on the one hand, from traditional European concepts of labor organization, which were introduced into the Caribbean in the 1930ies. Arthur Lewis' Fabian interpretation of the 1938 revolt, e.g., tries to exclude the "over-militant" in order to make workers accept "trade union discipline" and the leadership of "sober responsible men".²⁷ In this concept there is no place for the Afro-American tradition in the Caribbean: "They have lost most of their African heritage, assimilating the ideas of their white rulers, and adapting themselves to European institutions".²⁸ While Bennett's symbolic strategy of constructing a continuum of black folk culture is immune against such white magic attempts of cooptation into European traditions, it resists, on the other hand, also those contemporary impulses which project a symbolic Africa in the Caribbean.

The Rastafari Movement, as far as it appears in her poetry, is satirized as a deficient rival project of black autonomy. The antagonistic and separatist stance of the symbolic reversal of the spiritual, racial and class conditions, which various Rasta groups initiated in the 1930ies, was incompatible with Bennett's vision of cultural pluralism. The colony of Jamaica may be redefined in her poetry as "nayga yard", but the achievements of blacks, which justify the claim on the island as home of the black people, are measured by the criteria of the system as it exists. Nothing could be more alien to the radicalism of the early Rastas. For them, Africa was the ancient and future home of blacks – Jamaica was a temporary exile. For Bennett, Jamaica was the appropriate place to fulfill the potential of its black people, and the return to Africa was a ridiculous phantasy.²⁹ In particular she attacks the attempts of the early Rastas to reverse the slavery tradition of male powerlessness by constructing an image of masculine strength and dominance. In her poem "Pinnacle"³⁰ which refers to Leonard Howell's controversial commune, she deconstructs this image with devastating effects. The first stanza sets the stage for the spectacle of reducing Rasta men to the smallest possible format:

Mass John come back from Pinnacle
Yuh want see him head Mumma

²⁷ *Labour in the West Indies*, London / Port of Spain 1977; first pub. 1938, p. 40.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁹ Cf. e.g. "Back to Africa", *Selected Poems*, pp. 104-105.

³⁰ *Jamaica Labrish*, pp. 121-123.

Yuh kean tell ef it meck o'hair
 Or out o' constab-macka.

Seen in the moment of defeat, the Rasta man is made the object of a critical female discourse: Here the symbol of natural growth and lionlike strength looses all of its magical aura and appears as a bizarre deviation from everyday normality. The Rasta man's dream of "paradise" is contrasted with the humiliating presence and the prospect of "jail". He is not a proud, fearless and upright figure but has to "crawl pon him belly like worm" and lie down in front of the woman he had treated badly before:

She say she hooden fegive him
 'Cep him go dung pon him knee,
 She get har wish, far him da-lidung now
 Flat-flat pon him belly.

The emphasis on lying down points to his degradation and, together with the repeated references to his belly and to crawling, reverses the cliché of female weakness derived from Bible interpretations: an image which the Rasta man might have associated with women in general and with Eve and the snake in paradise in particular is applied to himself. The Rasta project of building an outpost of Africa in the middle of Babylon is totally destroyed through the power of female discourse.

The realism and strength of women and their free communication are, in fact, close to the center of Bennett's vision of a vital creole community. The speaker and the chorus who shame "dry-foot bwoy" back into the community where he has his real roots, the cunning victor over the census taker, the striker who takes over the streets of Kingston, the critic of the dream of Africa, the destroyer of the masculine image of Rastas, the shouters of street cries, the participants in a continuous communal discourse: each one of them is a version of the female persona which is perhaps the most characteristic feature of Bennett's poems. Her work is based on the strength and verbal skill of a women's tradition, which infuses its ambiguity and complexity into her poetic project. The poem "Jamaica Oman"³¹ celebrates the tradition of female survival power since the period of Nanny and Maroon resistance, but reduces its modern scope to the victory in school competitions. The feminist emancipation movements in the First World – "Oman lib bruck out / Over foreign lan" – seem late and superfluous in comparison with the achievements of Caribbean women, who are supposed to have been liberated from the beginning. However, their liberation had to be maintained by cunning – "Jamaica oman cunny, sah!" – and realized through the manipulation of unsuspecting men. Although women are supposed to be on top, their happiness

³¹ *Selected Poems*, pp. 21-23.

is still deeply buried, as the proverb has proclaimed for generations: “ ‘Oman luck deh a dungle’ ”. Real happiness is in an uncertain future: “Oman luck mus come!” In the meantime, the impressive achievement of women, and its limit, consists in the successful organization of everyday life, the stoic will to survive behind a mask of laughter, and the maintenance of a space for female identity and for the life of the community.

Louise Bennett’s syncretistic effort fuses various elements of folk culture into a vision of communal survival under severe pressure. One of her best poems, “Dutty Tough”,³² asserts the potential of the community more indirectly than others, but perhaps more powerfully. The poem is a complaint about hard times and the effort to survive. What appears to be, in the center of the poem, only a catalog of prosaic everyday items and an indirect –sometimes humorous – expression of pain about their rising prices, in fact constitutes a community of sufferers:

Salfish gawn up, mackerel gawn up,
Pork an beef gawn up same way,
An when rice and butter ready
Dem just go pon holiday.

The poem does not state explicitly who the sufferers are, but the perspective on details of food and marketing implies as a collective subject those who organize everyday survival among the poor. The poem is framed by proverbs, which have a generalizing and metaphorical function:³³

Sun a shine but tings no bright;
Doah pot a bwile, bickle no nuff;
River flood but water scarce, yaw;
Rain a fall but dutty tough.

Scarcity exists in nature, too; but it is contrasted with abundance, as it is not in the catalog of everyday privations. The paradoxa of these two stanzas point to an unnatural situation: they lead up to, but withhold the question about what caused the ominous contradiction between abundance and scarcity, and what can be done about it. Bob Marley’s song “Them belly full but we hungry”³⁴ quotes the same proverbs: “A rain a fall but the dirt it tough / A pot a cook but the food no ’nough”. The suffering of the poor is expressed in a condensed and pointed style. But the sufferers do not remain passive. Hunger can be transformed into angry mass action: “A hungry mob is a angry mob”. And there is the perspective of a total break with a reality of suffering: the dancers and believers follow the promise of freedom from want and of salvation.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 25- 26.

³³Cf. COOPER (1984).

³⁴*Natty Dread* (LP), Bob Marley and the Wailers (Island Records, 1974).

Bennett's poem does not point to these or to other specific alternatives. Neither does it plead for acceptance of these pressures. It conjures up threats of reality and, by implication, the power of 'the people' to survive them as a coherent community.

Louise Bennett's concept of folk culture mediates skillfully between the colonial periphery and the colonizing center, the weak and the powerful, the poor and the rich, but it has a specific perspective. It is centered in a certain type of oral discourse: creole, female, democratic to some extent. It stresses an indigenous black tradition and rejects black self-hatred but, at the same time, excludes antagonistic strategies of black power or symbolic strategies of black salvation from white dominance. Her construct of a symbolic creole community organizes some subcultural elements in a utopian vision of cultural pluralism within the existing social and cultural frame work: but at the expense of a wider utopian vision which would reach beyond the violence of racism, the devastations of exploitation and all forms of alienation.

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