

Title page

Title: (On) Reading Louise Bennett, Proverbially.

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Abstract

In this thesis I approach the works of Louise Bennett through the concept of proverbial thinking, which allows me to open a proverbial ‘conversation’ across all the genres she works in. As each chapter moves through an examination of Bennett’s poetry, monologues, Anancy stories and performances, I explore the impact of the proverbs in each one. I use Bennett’s own collection of proverbs, which I entitle the *Proverb Manuscript*, as a means of expanding the interpretations of the proverbs from within each genre. I argue that the moral and thematic headings under which Bennett places each proverb in the *Proverb Manuscript* become integral to my reading of the malleability of the proverb form. The openness of the concept of proverbial thinking also allows me to discuss many of the central topics which surround Bennett, whose career crucially straddles the shifting cultural moment when Jamaica gained independence. Throughout the thesis, I debate the interweaving of Creole and Standard English as a form of translation which in itself affords a greater degree of accessibility and of communication. Bennett’s diverse modes of communication prompted her to embrace the different media channels that were becoming more prevalent in the Caribbean and I look at the issues involved in presenting the oral form in printed text, recognising that this is often a complicated and circular process. Bennett was both a collector and a creative and in this thesis I identify that her process as a folklorist is to collect, preserve and recreate the various forms of folklore in her own art. This approach is what sets her apart from other collectors of Jamaican proverbs. I further argue that Bennett is grounded in the ‘local’ where the inclusion of the proverbs adds to this notion of localisation. Therefore, my observations of the multiplicity of proverbial thinking reflects the layers of complexity of Bennett herself as a commentator, an artist, and a storyteller of folklore, for she is never straightforward.

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for granting permission to photocopy the proverb collection,
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Preface

Louise Bennett's *Proverb Manuscript*

I started my PhD in September 2014 and quickly noticed multiple references to Louise Bennett's personal collection of proverbs. Professor Mervyn Morris, for example, writes in his article 'Louise Bennett in Print' that 'she has a personal collection of more than 700 Jamaican proverbs and is adept at citing the one appropriate to the particular moment'.¹ He reiterates this in the introduction to the 1983 edition of Bennett's *Selected Poems*.² Furthermore, Carolyn Cooper, in her appendix to *Noises in the Blood*, provides a list of forty-seven proverbs found in Bennett's poetry editions, *Jamaica Labrish* and *Selected Poems*, cataloguing Bennett's width of proverbial knowledge.³ More recently, in 2017, Lisa Tomlinson refers to Morris's observation about Bennett's personal collection in the first chapter of *The African-Jamaican Aesthetic*.⁴ It was the observations from those various scholars, which appear to be based on hearsay, that first started me on my own explorations to find Bennett's collection of proverbs and below I outline my journey to its rediscovery. This was to become a two-and-a-half-year process.

Fortuitously in October 2014, I met Mervyn Morris when he was in the UK to promote his book *Miss Lou: Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture*. One question I asked him then was whether he knew where Bennett's proverb manuscript was, to which he replied that he did not. During my initial research into Bennett for my PhD I searched in the notebooks in the McMaster Digital Archives. In these notebooks, catalogued under 'other contents', I found

¹ Mervyn Morris, 'Louise Bennett in Print.' *Caribbean Quarterly Critical Approaches to West Indian Literature* Vol. 28, No. 1/2 (University of the West Indies, 1982), 52.
URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40653443>

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

³ Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*. (London: Macmillan Education, 1993), Appendix 1, 200.

⁴ Lisa Tomlinson, 'Work Songs, Proverbs, and Storytelling in Jamaican Literary Traditions' in *The African-Jamaican Aesthetic: Cultural Retention and Transformation Across Borders* (Leiden: Brill. 2017) :17, footnote 52. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv2gjw7.4>

pages on Louise Bennett by Mary Jane Hewitt, divided into separate sections.⁵ Mary Jane Hewitt was researching for her PhD in 1976, with the view to collating information for a book on Louise Bennett. She took this no further. In the section entitled ‘Louise Bennett Anthology’, under the title ‘Proverbs’ was a note stating that Bennett ‘has a book in manuscript form waiting for Rex Nettleford’s introduction’ (see image below). This led me to the connection with Rex Nettleford and crucially also gives us the date that the manuscript was deemed to be completed by Bennett.

⁵ McMaster Bennett fonds [‘Miss Lou Fonds’] Aunty Roachy Seh, ‘Other Contents’ in notebooks.
<https://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca/islandora/object/macrepo%3A33188>

LOUISE BENNETT ANTHOLOGY

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Louise Bennett's Biography

Period and Method of Collection

Folksongs (including functions, social context, words)

Legends, Myths, Superstitions

Folktales

Proverbs (she has a book in manuscript form ready for publication, waiting for
Rex Nettleford's Introduction--Sangster Collins)

Verse (some old; some new)

Prose (Miss Lou's Views)

Narratives

Riddles, Singing Games

Glossary

Figure 1

This is the start of the trail to the manuscript, which led me to Nettleford's archive and the next stage of my inquiry.⁶

⁶ McMaster Bennett fonds / Aunty Roachy Seh, 'Other Contents' in notebooks, p.15.
<https://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca/islandora/object/macrepo%3A33188>

After initial unsuccessful approaches to various departments of the Mona library enquiring if Bennett's manuscript could be traced in the Nettleford archives, I asked Morris to enquire for me as he was on site. He did, and he received an acknowledgment from the curator of the Nettleford archives, Cezley Sampson, that there was a manuscript by Louise Bennett in those archives. Sampson called Morris and explained that some of Rex Nettleford's papers had been given to the National Library of Jamaica and some to the University of West Indies (UWI) Mona library. On 4 September 2015, Morris sent me an email confirming that there did appear to be a collection of proverbs belonging to Miss Bennett in the Nettleford archives in the UWI Mona library. Following this, a few weeks later, Morris emailed again, this time telling me that the papers given by the Rex Nettleford trustees to the UWI Mona Library included a folder of proverbs. He stated that, having viewed them for himself, he was confident that this was Louise Bennett's collection. Rex Nettleford had apparently confirmed to Morris in January 2008, that he (Nettleford) had a manuscript but had not intimated which manuscript. This was the confirmation that I needed to continue onto the next stage.

In a well-timed conversation with Professor Alison Donnell she said that she could connect me with Frances Salmon, who was the Head Librarian of Special Collections at the Mona library. Being located in Scotland and unable to travel to the Mona campus, I contacted Frances Salmon to ask if she would be willing to photocopy the proverb manuscript for me. Subsequently, a chain of emails was established between Frances and myself, where she explained that we would need permission to photocopy the collection from the trustees of the Bennett Coverley Trust in Canada. This was done via a series of emails over several weeks between myself and the trustees, Fabien Coverley and Judge Pamela Appelt (copying in Morris and Salmon). Permission was granted in November 2016 on the condition that the Trust be given due recognition in my PhD for allowing the collection to be photocopied. These terms were all agreed and met, and on 21 March 2017 I received a confirmatory email from Frances informing me that the collection had been photocopied and three sets of copies had been mailed during the first week of March, one to my address in the UK and two to Mr Coverley's address in Canada as requested.

As this account of events shows, this was indeed an inspirational transatlantic collaboration between researcher, archivists, scholars, librarian and trustees which culminated in the

rediscovery of Louise Bennett's valuable and exciting personal collection of proverbs. The process that began with my first question to Mervyn Morris in September 2014, followed by his email confirming that a collection of Bennett's proverbs had been traced to the Nettleford archives in the Mona Library, and culminating in the package containing the photocopied collection arriving at my door in March 2017, is testament to the value of transnational research cooperation and a collective willingness to track down and make available key resources. Each person in the chain contributed to this exciting rediscovery which I now use as a key text in my PhD on Louise Bennett.

Overleaf are images of pages from the photocopied *Proverb Manuscript*. Hereafter I shall refer to this text as the *Proverb Manuscript* to differentiate it from other Louise Bennett collections.

Total

<u>PROVERBS</u>	<u>ABILITY</u>	<u>TRANSLATIONS</u>
1) Wen cocoa head meet rich soil, him root bore grans.		- One with ability is most likely to succeed.
2) Dog flea tell him wife sey 'if man ketch him lef him dinner, but if oman ketch him meck him chifin.		- Refers to the fact that women's finger are smaller than man's own.
3) Gane no grow like grass. (see Wrek a Success.		- Prosperity is not easily attained.
4) Johnrow no got teet' but him can tear dead meat.		- Some people have hidden ability. (b) Dont judge by appearances.
5) Lickle bit a axe can cut dung big tree.		- Dont judge by appearances.
6) Lickle bit a dog-flea meck big man jump.		- Small things can have serious effect
7) Lickle bit a crab hole, can bruck horse foot.		- Small things can have serious effect.
8) Keep sensoy fowl fe pick obeash.		- Everything has its use.
9) Learn fe dance a yard, before yuh go abroad.		- Make certain of your ability before you start to shot off.
10) Lickle bush sometimes grow better dan big tree.		- Small beginnings are not to be dispised.
Lickle billy goat got beard, but big bull no got none.		- Outward appearance does not always indicate impotence.
Lickle nenper dum big man mouf.		- Small deeds can bring serious consequences.
Lickle bit a water kill fire.		- Little things have worth.
et no go a war, but him sen' him in.		- The humblest person can be of some use.
ncrow no got teet' but him can dead meat.		- Dont judge by appearances. (b) Some people hidden ability.
buil' house, but oman meck de		- Each person has his particular talent.
s good, better dan big wage.		- Ability serves pne better than money along

Figure 2

<u>CAUTION & PRECAUTION</u>		<u>TRANSLATIONS</u>
1) Sorely Sorely ketch monkey. <i>AKS 108</i>	-	If one remains quiet he can discover a lot.
2) Bare-foot man noffe mash man's.	-	Do not tackle a job unless you are well equipped.
3) Sore foot man start go a market fram Friday night.	-	When you know your limitations you act accordingly.
4) A no want a tongue meck cow no talk.	-	(a) There is a reason for everything. (b) A still tongue keeps a wise head.
5) A no everyting good fe eat good fe talk.	-	A still tongue keeps a wise head.
6) Half a foot man dance near him fambly.	-	A weak or poor person should stay where he can get support or help.
7) A no every chain yuh hear a fe rollin'- calf.	-	Dont jump to conclusion.
8) A no one day dog got heart bun'.	-	It is not one time that a person will need help.
9) All jackass mout white yuh cant tell which one nyam flour.	-	Refers to a corrupt society.
10) Slesken de rope before it heng de Nanny goat.	-	Too much pressure can xxx cause a diaster.
11) Alligeter no got no right fe cuss pig- long mout. <i>AKS 52</i>	-	Those that live in glass houses should not throw stones.
12) Man no done climb hill noffe fling weh him stick.	-	When one is ina a difficult situation he should not discard that which can help him.
13) No cuss Alligeter long mout so till yuh done cross river.	-	Make certain that the the person whom you criti- ze is not inx a position to retaliate.
Bush hab yeye.	-	Be careful of what you say, and where you say it.
Bush hab aise.	-	<i>RAWAAT OF CAUTION & PRECAUTION</i> Be careful of what you say and where you say it.
Before mezz tumble dung me hole manka-	-	Choose the lesser of tow evils. <i>AKS 19/SP32</i>
egger beg fram begger never rick.	-	Dont seek help from those who needd help themselv
tter dem laugh after yuh wen yuh gnt, dan cry over yuh wen yuh ng.	-	To thine own self bez true.
er beg dan tief.	-	It's better to humble one's self than to act dishonestly.
had yeye an stumb wear hat.	-	Be careful what you say and where you say it.
in' ribba never drown smady.	-	A braddart is usually a coward.
irs' moo after.	-	Dont warn any one you are about to attack.

Figure 3

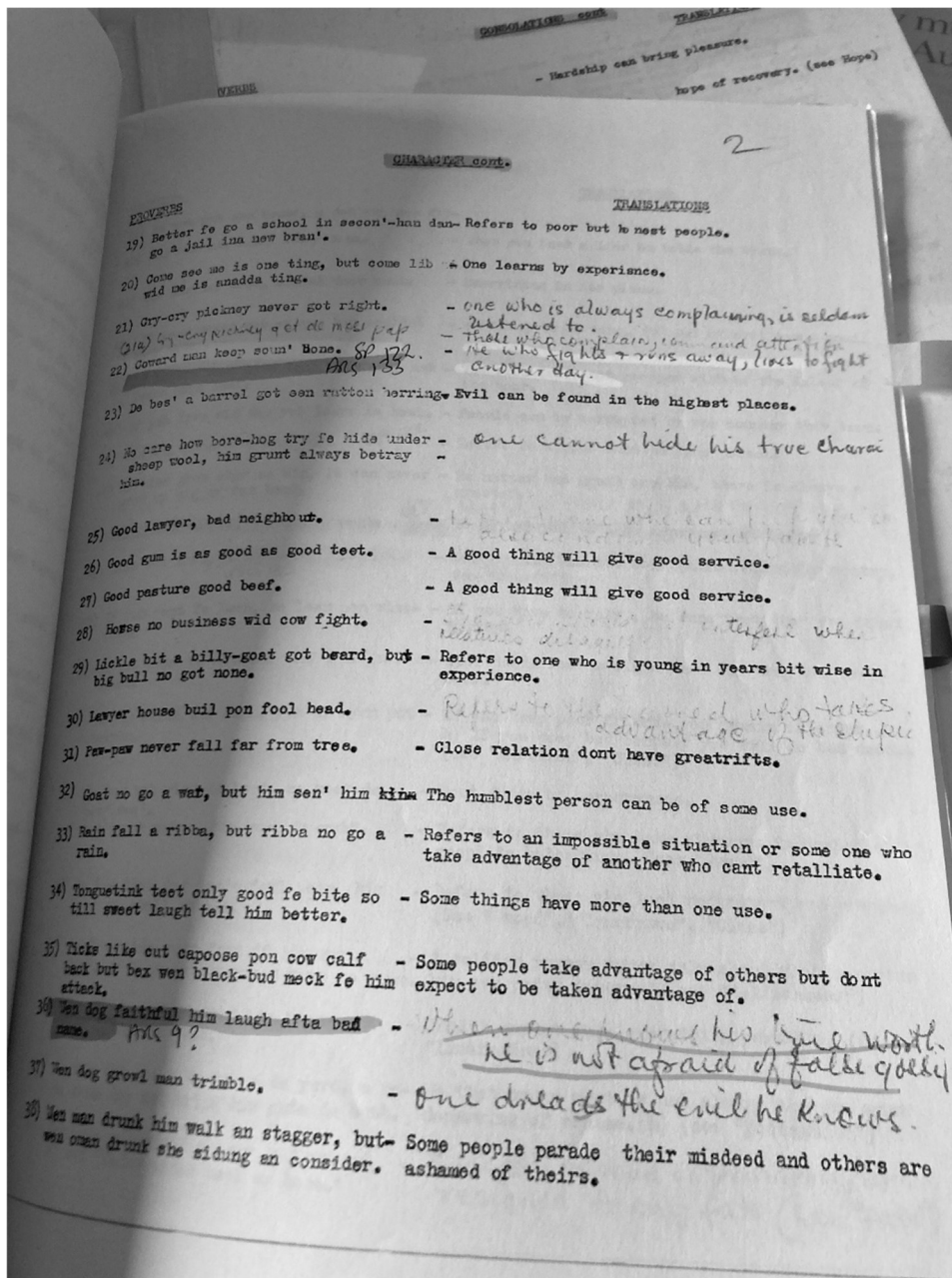


Figure 4

When I received my copy of the photocopied manuscript, I first counted the proverbs listed and discovered that there were more than twice the number suggested by Morris – there are 1881 proverbs listed, including the repetition of certain proverbs under different headings and those written twice on the same page. Despite these repeats, I calculate that there are circa 1800 proverbs in the *Proverb Manuscript*, which constitutes a much more substantial collection than first believed.

In all, the *Proverb Manuscript* contains 196 pages of lists of proverbs, in A4 size, with no cover page, no introduction, no binding. Notably Bennett categorises the pages following an alphabetical ordering of 148 moral and thematic headings beginning with *Ability*,

Abuse, Affluence, Age and ending with *Work, Worth & Worthless, and Worry*. The proverbs under those headings are apparently listed randomly, albeit with an occasional semblance of alphabetic ordering. These are numbered sequentially under each heading, with the section on *Caution and Precaution* being the longest with 167 proverbs included within it. Throughout my thesis, I will cite these proverbs from the collection in the following form:

‘Proverb’; Bennett’s given translation (*Headings under which the proverb is placed, manuscript number*).

I will be using the *Proverb Manuscript* as a key primary source. Although it exists without any introduction or framing work, within its pages are clues as to how Bennett approached the *Proverb Manuscript*, giving an insight into her editorial choices and processes. If we look at the individual pages of the *Proverb Manuscript*, we note they are divided into two equal columns, with the proverbs listed in Creole on the left-hand side, and ‘translations’ in the right-hand column in Standard English. The heading ‘Translations’ immediately raises the question of this particular linguistic practice and its significance to Bennett’s work, suggesting, at the very least, that Bennett was acting as an interpreter, a bridge between Creole and non-Creole English speakers. On one level, the decision to translate shows that she may have felt a practical need to explain the meanings of the proverb, possibly for didactic purposes. The presence of translations could also simply reflect a desire to preserve the knowledge contained in proverbs for future generations, for non-Creole speaking Jamaicans or suggest a desire to make the proverbs more widely accessible when published. Indeed, it is to be surmised from the entry in Mary Jane Hewitt’s note that Bennett did intend this collection to be published and to be accessible to a wider audience, hence the need for a translation.

A particular approach to translation by Bennett in the *Proverb Manuscript*, best described as ‘free translation’, is also discernible, suggesting she is not interested in word for word translations but something more open and dynamic. For instance, consider the following proverb recorded by Bennett;

‘Jackass say de worl noh level’; (a) one does not get a fair deal (b) refers to one who makes excuse for his own actions (*Character, 109*).

Here we see Bennett identifying two different interpretations of this proverb, which colours how she uses it subsequently. Throughout the thesis, I return to the significance of

the multiplicity of proverbial interpretation. For now, it is clear that her ‘translation’ instincts mean she is particularly attuned to how differences between Creole and Standard English open up various possibilities for representing and understanding Jamaican culture in nuanced and complex ways. Therefore, as well as reminding us to think about the implications of linguistic mediation, the decision to translate the proverbs is a means to understand how Bennett’s creative interests lead her in multiple directions. It also, of course, draws attention to the relationship between the two languages on the page. In this respect, some observations from post-colonial translation theory such as those put forward by Susan Bassnett and Hamish Trivedi in *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice* are pertinent, allowing us to recognise that translation is not ‘an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage’.⁷ In particular, Bassnett and Trivedi underline the relationship of power that can exist between two languages in colonial and postcolonial contexts, ‘with the colony often seen as a copy or translation’ of the colonial power.⁸ Bennett’s intralingual translation practice in the *Proverb Manuscript*, such as her refusal to see Creole as a ‘copy’ in any way inferior to the language of colonial power and her refusal to erase Creole even as she translates it into Standard English, clearly echo some of the complexities within postcolonial understandings of translation. However, rather than rely on the growing body of critical work in the field of translation studies to read Bennett’s work, in this thesis I am more interested in how she uses a form of speaking via translation to validate the local in a way that overlaps with collecting proverbial speech elements of Jamaican culture and ultimately becomes a highly creative endeavour.

As I note in the first chapter, proverb collection was a significant practice within colonial-era Jamaica. In Martha Beckwith’s *Jamaica Proverbs*, for example, the proverbs are ordered alphabetically by first word. They appear in bold and below them in a smaller font there is a literal translation into Standard English and a separate Standard English interpretation. Bennett’s practice is different. Her move into Standard English only offers us a free translation of the implication of the proverbs. Sometimes, these translations have the pithy quality of a proverb. For example, for ‘good pasture good beef’, her translation

⁷ Susan Bassnett and Hamish Trivedi, *Postcolonial Translation: theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1998), 2.

⁸ Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1998), 4.

reads: ‘a good thing will give good service’ (*Character*, 27). Sometimes, the complexity of the proverb seems to invite a more open, reflective note. For ‘rain fall a riba, but riba no go a rain’, she writes, ‘refers to an impossible situation or someone who takes advantage of another who can’t retaliate’ (*Character*, 33). The equal space given to both textual representations in the *Proverb Manuscript* could be the mark of a creative writer who (working on the Creole continuum) is responding creatively to them and making new texts so the pages of the *Proverb Manuscript* themselves could be viewed as a form of poetry where the lexical field presented on the page could be interpreted separately as another of Bennett’s works of art. These are areas of discussion that I will return to in the following chapters of the thesis.

The handwritten additions, written in ink on some of the pages, offer another way to consider Bennett’s editorial choices and processes. Morris worked closely with Bennett, and in one of his early emails to me he observed that in the manuscript there are handwritten alterations which he thought he recognised as having been written by Bennett. In this same email, Morris also observed that Bennett usually wrote drafts by hand, then had them typed by assistants who were not professional typists. We can start to build a picture of Bennett herself adding in notes and translations after certain pages of the document had been typed. Morris’s confirmation that Bennett wrote drafts by hand is of interest as it leads to the supposition that there are drafts of those notes that have been lost and are unlikely to be found in her archives, either separately or in number. This absence of source material is a recurring theme throughout the thesis, which continues to highlight the loss of various archival records and the issues that this raises. The insertions by hand after the fact is an indication that this was a live document for Bennett. Although Hewitt’s research suggests that the manuscript was finished and awaiting Nettleford’s introduction, the surviving *Proverb Manuscript* shows us how it was a dynamic text that was being revised in significant ways. These include handwritten translations that are inserted alongside typed proverbs, such as we see with ‘wen horse dead cow fat’. Here, there is a handwritten insertion: ‘there will be more grass for the cow (see Reaction)’. This is placed under (*Affluence*, 7). For ‘cry-cry pickney never got right’ there is a handwritten insertion reading, ‘one who is always complaining is seldom listened to’ (*Character*, 21). It is interesting to see that Bennett has also inserted by hand a new proverb numbered ‘(21a)’:

‘cry-cry pickney got de most pap’; those who complain command attention
(*Character*, 21a).

Thus, we can see evidence of Bennett returning to the document and adding in more information, in this case giving an opposing meaning to the proverb about children who cry too much.

Whilst there are some gaps in the *Proverb Manuscript* (some proverbs appear without either a typed or hand-written translation), it is nonetheless clear that Bennett's approach to recording the proverbs in this manuscript was careful and thoughtful. This is seen where she deliberated over which heading (or headings) each proverb was to be placed. We can tell this because she places several proverbs under multiple headings such as:

'sweet mout fly falla coffin go a hole'; pursuit of luxury may lead to ruin (*Greed, Ambition* (see *Caution, Class* and *Character*)).

So, one proverb is placed under five interpretative moral and thematic headings. For me, this opens up a unique interpretative method prompted by the *Proverb Manuscript*, one which reveals Bennett's interest in how proverbs can be applied to her work more widely. In the *Proverb Manuscript*, each specific moral and thematic heading under which Bennett places a proverb expands the interpretation of the proverb. The key to my interpretation of the *Proverb Manuscript* in this thesis is to not only attend to individual specific headings to widen the interpretation of a single proverb but, more importantly, to notice that often the same proverb is placed under numerous headings, and that this leads us in multiple directions. Considering this dimension of the *Proverb Manuscript* alongside her dual proverb/translation method, I will use this rediscovered text to show the richness and complexity of proverbial meaning in Bennett's work. In simple terms, the manuscript illustrates the way proverbs cannot always be easily translated or 'categorised'. In the same way, the complexity of this form is evident in the way that Bennett uses what I call 'proverbial thinking' to underpin other genres she works within: her poetry, her monologues, her Anancy stories and her performances. 'Proverbial thinking' as a term tries to encapsulate how Bennett's knowledge and use of proverbs creatively permeates and informs all her work as folklorist, poet, storyteller, and performer.

Therefore, the exciting rediscovery of the *Proverb Manuscript* allows me to underscore how proverbial thinking is foundational to her creative practice. In some ways, the finding of the *Proverb Manuscript* gives me confidence that proverbial thinking is as important as I initially believed. The *Proverb Manuscript* is a kaleidoscopic lens through which to look at Bennett's works, offering a range of ways to approach her diverse practice. In one way I

use proverbial thinking as a broad term that refers to diverse methods of using, collecting and preserving the proverbs, and which in turn activates a sense of urgency surrounding the need to preserve and protect a body of knowledge. Looking at proverbial thinking is also about pointing out elements of proverbial use and knowledge that are not always obvious and that become even more interesting when analysed. The idea of proverbial thinking can also aid our conceptualising of Bennett's creative interests, helping us to think more about notions of the local and the Jamaican culture and knowledge. Therefore, in this thesis, I show the breadth and reach of proverbial thinking in Bennett's work and the usefulness of this phrase as a critical term in Louise Bennett studies.

Chapter One

‘Collecting Our Heritage’: Introducing Louise Bennett’s Creative Practice

In this thesis I examine Louise Bennett’s creative work and practice through the organising principle of proverbial thinking, a concept I explore through the complex interplay we find in her work between proverbs and poetry, monologues, storytelling and performance. I show how Bennett moves between the different genres of poetry, monologues, storytelling and performance to create an image of Jamaican society between the 1940s and the 1970s. However, an approach to Louise Bennett’s work which takes an anatomised point of view to genre, that is considering each genre as a singular, self-contained form, fails to portray the complete Bennett and the importance of having an overall view of connections that underpin her artistic skill. Consequently, whilst the different chapters of this thesis move analytically from genre to genre, the arc of the study portrays the breadth of Bennett’s works, from the oral to written text to performance, and highlights the depth of connectivity that is created across her creative work. Within this, the central focus of my approach is to unpack the significance of Bennett’s constant use of Jamaican proverbs, including the work she undertook for the *Proverb Manuscript* which was introduced in the Preface.

Throughout the thesis my idea of ‘proverbial thinking’ encourages us to see how Bennett’s creative use of proverbs permeates all her creative practice. In my use of the phrase, I stress that the form of the proverb is malleable, resisting single meanings and straightforward conclusions, but I am also interested in the ways the proverbs help to structure knowledge and cultural expression in Bennett’s work. Identifying proverbial thinking in Bennett’s work should be seen as opening up possible interpretations rather than limiting our reading of Bennett. It opens up new possibilities for her readers and critics to interpret her work and helps Bennett to explore the richness and potential of the ‘local’, by deploying proverbs creatively in all kinds of contexts. Equally, I argue that Bennett’s proverbial thinking provides a long view of crucial moments, such as Jamaican

independence, and helps us to see how emerging ideas of Jamaicanness are in conversation with the cultural heritage of the past.

Throughout her substantial corpus of work – textual and performative – Bennett exclusively wrote in Creole. By doing so, Bennett not only challenged the privileged status accorded to poetic and cultural traditions in Standard English, associated with white colonial discourse, but she also empowered the voices and cultural expression of Jamaican people. In this way, her use of oral and scribal forms as she refashioned language was seen as an important breakthrough in Caribbean literature.⁹ Throughout this thesis I use Creole to describe Bennett’s variety of language but in doing this I note the differing terminologies that could be used. Bennett used ‘dialect’ first; yet, in the *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite suggests that ‘dialect’ is a problematic term, writing:

Dialect is the language when you want to make fun of someone. Caricature speaks in dialect. Dialect has a long history coming from the plantation where people’s dignity was distorted through their languages and the descriptions that the dialect gave to them.¹⁰

He, therefore, turns to the term ‘nation language’ as a contrast to ‘dialect’. Nation language, he writes, is ‘the submerged area of that dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean’.¹¹ Carolyn Cooper favours the term ‘Jamaican language’ which Bennett uses as the title to a monologue in *Aunty Roachy Seh*, which she then modifies in her paratext: ‘Jamaican Dialect [Jamaican Creole] developed out of the contact between African languages and English’.¹² Therefore, despite different options being available and to acknowledge a distance from the contested term ‘dialect’, I have chosen to use the term ‘Creole’ since it works as a term to describe literary language and the language spoken in social settings in Jamaica and also relates to processes of cultural transformation taking place in the Caribbean.

This introductory chapter locates Bennett within the cultural and literary environment of the period pre- and post-Jamaican independence in which she was writing and performing. It looks at how we can understand Bennett in relation to the complex identity of a folklorist and in a related way examines the key term ‘folk’. It looks at the literary environment that

⁹ *Caribbean Women Writers*, edited by Selwyn. R Cudjoe (Wellesley, MA: Calaloux, 1990), 27.

¹⁰ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London and Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1984), 266.

¹¹ Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, 266.

¹² Louise Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, edited by Mervyn Morris (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1993; repr. 2005), 1.

Bennett inhabited and the critical scene surrounding the first publications of her poetry collections. Crucially, this chapter also looks at the challenges of finding a useful and comprehensive definition of proverbs that can inform the key concept of proverbial thinking.

Bennett was a visionary who moved cultural knowledge forward by valorising Jamaican culture and showing that Creole can be a legitimate language of literary art. She contributed to the ‘process’ that Kamau Brathwaite describes as ‘the cultural process of creolisation in which various elements intermingle, to become the tentative cultural norm of the society’.¹³ Her own society, her community, was always at the heart of Bennett’s works and her persona and in so many ways her legacy is one of validation: validation of what she initially called Jamaican ‘dialect’; validation of Jamaican identity pre-and post-independence; validation of the continual importance of folklore; and validation of her own vibrant identities, performed in different personae which she created over the course of her career.

Critical Approaches to Caribbean Literature: Setting the Scene for Bennett

In the following section I set the critical scene and establish the key issues which led to the recognition of Bennett as a writer, poet and nationally acclaimed artist. This will include an overview of the developing Caribbean literary arena and includes a discussion of two publications, *Focus* and *Savacou*, which create connections between writers and critics in exile and at home. Within this, the reception of Bennett’s use of Creole in a transnational literary environment will be highlighted. To better understand Bennett’s position here, the significance of her use of Creole will be analysed from a national/international perspective which considers the broader connections between Bennett and the wider community of Caribbean writers and scholars.

Born in 1919, Bennett’s writing and performative career was starting as the Caribbean literary landscape was evolving in the 20th century, through the beginnings of critical evaluation in the 1930s, to the burgeoning of writing in the 50s, to the scholarly and critical attentions of the 1960s/1970s. To set the scene for my own study of Bennett, I follow

¹³ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens* (Kingston: Savacou Publications, 1974), 6.

Edward Baugh's study, 'A History of Poetry', which gives an overview of the development of West Indian poetry and which marks various important points in the growing awareness of the Caribbean poetic voice.¹⁴ Baugh's article begins by acknowledging the potential of post-slavery Creole in its 'simple', 'uncluttered' and 'oral composition'.¹⁵ His gaze then turns to the end of the 19th century to poets who have been regarded as pioneers in West Indian poetry, such as Egbert Martin of Guyana and Thomas Henry MacDermott of Jamaica, who, to cite Baugh, were poets who had a 'sense of mission to write a poetry *for their place*' (which of course at that time was still within the British Empire).¹⁶ In that early period, poets such as MacDermott wrote occasionally in 'dialect', and he was therefore a precursor for Bennett. Referring to this, Baugh writes that:

the recognition of dialect as a serious medium was very slow in coming, yet, interestingly enough, even though the dialect poetry of this period was no more accomplished than the Standard English verse, it was more valuable as a reflection of social realities.¹⁷

Baugh stresses the value of Creole here in terms of reflecting on social realities where he refers to the progressive move to validate the use of 'dialect' as a mode of freedom-making and independence.

Creole and the notion of folk operate together in the Caribbean in a parallel way that has created a mode of syncretic cultural expression following the forced transportation of enslaved African people across the Atlantic from the 16th century onwards. In the 1940s, when Bennett enters the literary and cultural scene, it is clear that there was a rising awareness of the desire to celebrate Caribbean and Creole-speaking literary voices. Bennett was one of the pioneers in developing this linguistic mode of validation, where, to return to Baugh's quotation above, the recognition was still slow in momentum.

Prior to Bennett, the Jamaican writer Claude McKay was a ground-breaking poet in terms of using the local vernacular in scribal poetry. I focus on McKay here as he is both similar and different from Bennett in his use of Creole. He wrote in both Standard English and Jamaican Creole, having been prompted by his friend and mentor, Walter Jekyll, to do so. Writing in the early 1900s, McKay was the precursor to Bennett; at the age of seven, she first saw 'dialect' in print form in McKay's *Constab Ballads*, and reportedly said it was

¹⁴ Edward Baugh, "A History of Poetry", *A History of Literature in the Caribbean* Vol. 2: English- and Dutch-speaking Regions (2001): 227-282.

¹⁵ Baugh, "A History of Poetry", 227.

¹⁶ Baugh, "A History of Poetry", 228.

¹⁷ Baugh, "A History of Poetry", 233.

‘thrilling’ to see the language in print.¹⁸ As we shall see in Chapter Two in the discussion around Bennett’s ‘On a Tramcar’, she was influenced by McKay and it was because of him that she and others have been able to supersede him – ‘in form if not in thought’.¹⁹ However, at that time, McKay’s writing was described as ‘uneven’ in that there was a problem of transliteration and how to present the Creole in printed text.²⁰

McKay moved to America and therefore was seen as a ‘poet of exile’; in his work he explores the relationship between home and exile, whereas Bennett, although she did migrate, returned to Jamaica and was never considered a ‘poet in exile’.²¹ As we will see, this is an important difference to note given her understanding of the ‘local’ and her persistence in writing in Creole. In acknowledging McKay’s particular exilic identity, Ronald Cummings argues that his poetic writing should be viewed as inhabiting a ‘conjunctive temporality’ or ‘co-occurrence’.²² These terms, which embody the mutuality of time and space created by the formation of Caribbean diasporas, are opened up in Stuart Hall’s essay ‘Thinking the Diaspora: Home thoughts from Abroad’ which is central to considering a new phase of diaspora formation.²³ Hall illuminates the complexities surrounding Caribbean nationhood and identity in an era of intensifying globalization where ‘poets of exile’, like McKay, wrestle with the multiplicity of their own identities. Hall writes that:

Like other globalizing processes cultural globalization is de-territorializing in its effects. Its space-time condensations, driven by new technologies, loosen the tie between culture and ‘place’. Glaring disjunctures of time and space are abruptly convened, without obliterating their differential rhythms and times. Cultures, of course, have their ‘locations’. But it is no longer easy to say where they originate.²⁴

¹⁸ Mary Jane Hewitt, “A Comparative Study of the Careers of Zora Neale Hurston and Louise Bennett as Cultural Conservators.” (PhD thesis, University of the West Indies, 1989), 26-27.

¹⁹ Winton James, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay’s Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2001): 151.

²⁰ Winston James, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice*, 142. There are various approaches to presenting the Creole in printed text even today; some adopt the Cassidy system. Cassidy in *Jamaican Talk* (first published in 1961) presented a consistent phonemically based writing system for Jamaican Creole. However, Morris acknowledges that most writers have chosen compromise where ‘the most common (if inconsistent) approach is to write the vernacular for the eye accustomed to Standard English but with various alterations to signalling Creole’. [Morris, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, viii].

²¹ It should be noted that Bennett moved permanently to Canada in the 1980s when she was in her sixties, until her death in 2006.

²² Ronald Cummings, “Caribbean Literary Historiography and the Jamaican Literary 1950s”, *Project Muse* Vol 24, No. 63 (2020): 168.

²³ Stuart Hall, “Thinking the Diaspora: Home thoughts from Abroad”, *Small Axe* No. 6 (1999): 1.

²⁴ Hall, “Thinking the Diaspora”, 10.

This disjuncture of time and space, summed up in Cumming's terms, are useful terms to remember when thinking about Bennett's conscious decision to write in Jamaican Creole, despite having been educated in the language of the coloniser, and as one who herself migrated and returned.

It was the weight of male domination in the Caribbean literary arena which prompted me to ask, 'where are the women writers?' This question led me to Bennett. In terms of understanding Bennett's place as a ground-breaking female Caribbean poet, it is important to consider the role of another poet who became an early trailblazer for women: Una Marson. An immigrant who was later to become politically progressive, Marson afforded an opening through her works for Bennett to find a foothold in the male dominated literary Jamaican scene. Marson introduced female consciousness, developing a sense of female identity through self-realisation.²⁵ Marson also experimented with Jamaican Creole, for instance in 'Quashie comes to London', which Baugh recognises as being 'perhaps the earliest treatment of a recurrent theme in West Indian literature: Caliban's encounter with Prospero's metropolitan seat of empire'.²⁶ Marson is also important for the key role she played in the development of Bennett's early career. In 1937, she returned from Jamaica to London and produced the newly launched 'Caribbean Voices' radio programme where she encouraged poets such as Bennett to be heard. Bennett benefitted from Marson's important attention to underpromoted poets at that time and continued the latter's work of making visible women's writing and critical discourse, not least through the attention she drew throughout her career as a female poet writing in the Creole. Given the relative paucity of archival sources for examining the work of writers in that period, 'Caribbean Voices' is also an invaluable resource for understanding the literary culture it did so much to promote. (I return to the significance of the programme for Bennett's career in Chapter Five.)

Alongside 'Caribbean Voices', sources such as journals and newspapers also provide an insight into the development of Caribbean writing during those decades. Baugh observes that this period of the 1930s and 1940s saw activities of groups formed loosely around the Trinidadian little magazines *The Beacon* 1931-33, and *Trinidad* 1929-30; and *The Forum*

²⁵ To recognise the need for critical attention to women writers Donnell notes in *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature*, 131 that 'her attention to women's writing before 1970 (which includes Bennett and Marson) is motivated by her desire to contest the trope of invisibility that has been ascribed to Caribbean women writers'.

²⁶ Baugh, "A History of Poetry", 237.

in Barbados. Jamaica's *Public Opinion*, a weekly paper, was also to play a leading role in promoting West Indian literature. On all three islands, literary advances were set in the context of a new socio-political consciousness, a new buoyancy of questioning and debate.²⁷ Publications such as *Bim* in Barbados (first published in 1941); *Kyk-over-al* in Guyana (1945) and *Focus* in Jamaica (1943) are also to be acknowledged as purposeful and progressive at this moment in time. The Jamaican publication, *Focus*, facilitated locally based writers but also engaged in conversations about the role of Jamaican literature and looked at it within the wider context of the emerging Caribbean literary scene. Cummings cites the four editions of *Focus*, edited by Edna Manley and published in 1943, 1948, 1956 and 1960 as a means to 'rethink the Jamaican literary 1950s'.²⁸ He notes the usefulness of 'reading relational local literary histories', which are represented in the editions of *Focus* and yet calls attention to how the narratives within the editions take up 'particular debates circulating at the time about the nature, the composition and the political and ideological purposes of Jamaican literature, including a dialogue about the relationship between and functions of writers at home and in exile'.²⁹ In pausing on the term 'dialogue' it is interesting to note how the editions of *Focus* contained poems from writers from the diaspora and this constituted a form of literary conversation which, as Cummings observes, then gave rise to questions of how the teaching of literature at University College of the West Indies (UCWI) was now being explored in the wider public sphere. In the foreword of the 1956 edition we see that, as well as being in dialogue with a wider sphere of literary focus, the purpose of *Focus*, as described by Henry Fowler, was presented as providing a 'cross section of contemporary Jamaican writing representing the work not of a group but of a young nation'.³⁰

In 1948, the same year as the second volume of *Focus* was published, *The Windrush* set sail, encouraging a new generation of writers to relocate geographically. Cummings rethinks the central impact of *The Windrush* to orientate his discussion on the Caribbean cultural diaspora in Britain balanced against Caribbean literary historiography.³¹ His argument encourages us to make links between the parallel locations for the growth of the

²⁷ Baugh, "A History of Poetry", 238.

²⁸ Cummings, "Caribbean Literary Historiography", 177.

²⁹ Cummings, "Caribbean Literary Historiography", 177

³⁰ Edna Manley, foreword to *Focus Magazine*, ed. by Edna Manley, (Jamaica: Leading Magazine Corp, May 1956): 1. The statement here challenged the view that only those writers who gathered at the Manley household were represented in the publication (see Cummings, "Caribbean Literary Historiography", 177, footnote 59).

³¹ Cummings, "Caribbean Literary Historiography", 164.

narratives from both the West Indian migratory communities and those of the Jamaican literary scene of the 1940s and 1950s where Bennett starts her career. Cummings initially explores the unidirectional gaze towards London, and the importance of the aforementioned BBC programme ‘Caribbean Voices’. He then complicates the narrative surrounding *The Windrush* to recentre and reflect back to the West Indies, including the importance already noted of the *Focus* publication representing ‘a young nation’. In particular, he reflects on the establishment of the University College of the West Indies. Notably, the English department at Mona was opened in 1950 and enrolled several scholars, such as Edward Baugh and Mervyn Morris, who were to become foundational in Caribbean literary studies (indeed, Morris is a key influence in this thesis due to his lifetime commitment to Bennett studies). Cumming’s observations prompt us to consider the unidirectional or counter directional movement between British diasporas and the indigenous Jamaican literary scene and the rich connections arising between scholars, writers, storytellers from both writers in exile and at home. Sarah Lawson Welsh also discusses the challenges raised for the emigrants as a time of intense re-adjustment and contends that:

The critical response to these ‘transferred’ voices of West Indians in Britain constitutes a fascinating social archive of popular and critical attitudes to an emergent Caribbean literary canon at its primary site of production during this period: London.³²

A further chapter by Lawson Welsh, published alongside Baugh’s article in *A History of Literature in the Caribbean*, argues that the question of West Indian literature first articulated in the 1950s and 1960s was essentially problematic, showing little recognition of the complexities attached to the term ‘nation’ and its attendant definition of ‘nation-ness’.³³ Welsh points to London as a key ‘site of production’ for Caribbean poetry and this problematisation of the ‘nation’. Bennett herself not only witnessed the migration of artists but she herself moved to London to study and it is important to keep these tensions in mind when considering Bennett’s work and her focus on the ‘local’. Lawson Welsh continues by suggesting:

³² Sarah Lawson Welsh, “New Wine in New Bottles: The Critical Reception of West Indian Writing in Britain in the 1950s and early 1960s” in *Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh (London and New York: Routledge, 1996): 261-269.

³³ Sarah Lawson Welsh, “The Literatures of Trinidad and Jamaica”, *A History of Literature in the Caribbean* Vol. 2: English- and Dutch-speaking Regions (2001): 70.

reading the nation, or versions of the nation discursively rather than essentialist 'givens' is a strategy that, when applied to the bodies of texts themselves, can be used to reveal the specificity, or sites of difference, not only between literatures, but *within* them in order to encourage acknowledgement of the plural nature of Caribbean societies and their cultural practices.³⁴

With this comparative and productive perspective in mind, it is important to consider the term 'plurality' in respect of the literary field within which Bennett is situated, the plurality upheld in Caribbean poetic aesthetics, and the plurality that I highlight in her interpretation of proverbs and their role in her work. Plurality is evident, even when the focus is on a seemingly 'straightforward' local context and highlights how Bennett's engagement with these notions is often complex. The ideas of place, the local and folk in Bennett's work are not concepts that simplify or limit understandings of identities. The local is not about a narrowing of perspective, a nostalgic retrospective view of place or people, but a way to broaden things out and understand the complexities of Bennett's work as it operates in a context of cultural 'co-occurrence', to use Cummings's phrase. The debates around the emergent Caribbean aesthetics and Bennett's place in establishing an independent, culturally relevant, and literary identity will be continuously developed in the thesis.

As a result of the creative, artistic and political momentum of the period, the poetry of the 1940s and 1950s became linked to the pressing challenge in the Caribbean to:

make things known, to bring forward and assert the value of Caribbean writing in the context of a decolonising world...[where] the struggles of the foundational generation had been to indigenise reading strategies and to encourage a closer rapport between Caribbean lives, Caribbean writings and Caribbean criticism.³⁵

To emphasise the point further, Baugh writes that:

the indigenising of 1940s and 1950s poetry was also a matter of straightforward declarations of the beauty and difference of the local landscape and its people, a difference that was sometime explicitly contrasted with the European.³⁶

The quotations from Donnell and Baugh, taken together, advocate for a claiming of local identity, local strategies, and an acknowledgement of the value of the interaction between local writing and local criticism. Baugh writes about establishing a contrast between the

³⁴ Lawson Welsh "Literatures of Trinidad and Jamaica", 70 -71.

³⁵ Alison Donnell, "The Questioning Generation: Rights, Representations and Cultural Fractions in the 1980s and 90s" in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London and New York: Routledge, 2011): 125, 127.

³⁶ Baugh, "A History of Poetry", 240.

local and the European, stressing again the freedom-making element of the local in terms of claiming cultural and national identity. However, my research has shown that there is no ‘straightforward declaration’ to be identified when looking at the notions of ‘local’, ‘Caribbean literature and poetry’ in the context of Bennett’s work. Instead, what we find are plurality, complexity, and tensions. When considering these topics in relation to Bennett, this notion of plurality is reflected in my concept of proverbial thinking where the proverbs also call into question the idea of a straightforward reading. Proverbs are flexible, known for their power to be understood in multiple contexts and as we saw in the Preface, even when Bennett offers ‘translations’ for them, their meanings are not fixed.

Louise Bennett studies, that is the study of Bennett and her work, began to emerge at a time when, as Edwards observes, Caribbean literature was strongly influenced by a politics of identity and difference as a response to colonisation.³⁷ Significant scholarly criticism of Bennett started in 1967, five years after Jamaica had gained its independence, with Mervyn Morris’s critically acclaimed essay ‘On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously’. I return later to consider the implication of the word ‘seriously’ in Morris’s title, which I have adapted in my thesis title. Morris’s article first appeared as a series in three parts in *The Gleaner* and was later printed in full in the *Jamaica Journal*.³⁸ As well as *The Gleaner*, other publications, magazines and manifestos began to be published at this time, such as those mentioned above, and also the *Caribbean Quarterly*, *Jamaican Journal* and *Savacou*. As noted, these publications incorporated debates on topics such as the acceptance of the vernacular, folk culture, race and identity which were constantly being addressed as the mood of literary criticism shifted.

One of the publications at the time was *Savacou* (a journal born out of the Caribbean Artists Movement of the 1960s). It was founded as a small cooperative venture in 1970 on the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies and was fronted by Edward Kamau Brathwaite on his return from Britain, alongside writer Andrew Salkey, a partnership that encouraged the literary channels between Jamaica and Britain to remain fruitful.

Baugh credits *Savacou* as:

making a significant contribution to West Indian poetry by promoting other, mostly younger poets – by seeking them out, encouraging and in some cases inspiring them, and publishing their work

³⁷ Norval Edwards, “The Foundational Generation” in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (2011): 111.

³⁸ Mervyn Morris, “On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously”, *Jamaica Journal*, No. 1 (1967): 69-74.

either in the journal *Savacou*, which he founded or as individual collections under the *Savacou* imprint.³⁹

Fifteen issues of *Savacou* were published between 1970 and 1979 and they encapsulate the progressive mood of the moment. I take this publication, and especially the double issue *Savacou* 3/4, 'New writing 1970: An Anthology of Poetry and Verse' published in Dec 1970/March 1971, as representative of the rise in awareness of Caribbean aesthetics in which we can continue to place Bennett. This special double issue was to cause much controversy as 'a project of canonical refashioning that sought to rethink and expand the notion of literature in the Caribbean'.⁴⁰ Brathwaite's introduction to the double issue, which he opens by citing words written by Arthur Drayton, highlights a persistent phrase woven through this particular edition: 'revolutionary questioning'. The term embodies the rising impetus towards awareness and transformation through word, rhythm, style and truth that was circulating at this time, although Brathwaite qualifies this by noting that such 'revolutionary questioning' was not propagandist or even overtly rhetorical. Rather, the phrase illustrates the desire of the artists to question the lack of recognition given to the Caribbean artists in all genres and across all mediums, and to raise awareness of the issues of validation for the Caribbean artist. In response to this double edition, Edward Baugh notes that it was 'an important historical statement, catching the pulse beat of that moment and the shape of things to come'.⁴¹ In the 'New writing 1970' issue, debates were raised concerning the anthological mix of oral-based poetics, performance poetry, and Creole poetry which gave rise to questions concerning the divisions between word and music, literature and street culture, textuality and orality. This, as Baugh observed, 'occasioned a critical fracas that brought into focus much of what was at stake in the opening up of West Indian poetry'.⁴² The 3/4 edition of *Savacou* consequently brought these questions of identity and representation to the fore when the debates surrounding this developmental moment in Caribbean critical attention centred around the anthology in terms of its representative status, its racial and cultural polemics and the aesthetic validity of the contributions.⁴³

³⁹ Baugh, "A History of Poetry", 227-282.

⁴⁰ Alison Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (London: Routledge, 2007): 27.

⁴¹ Baugh, "A History of Poetry", 258.

⁴² Baugh, "A History of Poetry", 258.

⁴³ For more about the edition's representative status and racial and cultural polemics see: Norval Edwards, "The Foundational Generation", *Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*. London and New York. Routledge (2011).

In an issue claiming to focus on ‘revolutionary questioning’, *Savacou* 3/4’s own editorial biases deserve attention and the question raised here is Bennett’s omission from the publication and the notable gender imbalance within a self-described progressive opening up of new understandings of Caribbean literature. Indeed, the clear male bias appears to contradict the publication’s mission statement, where we note the seemingly inclusive commitment to ‘bring together the work of creative writers, academics and theoretical thinkers and so provide a forum for artistic expression and thought in the Caribbean today’.⁴⁴ Laurence Breiner comments on this male orientation of the publication, observing that in *Savacou* 3/4 established figures were well represented, and yet, as we can see, Bennett and other female writers were omitted from the list of established figures.⁴⁵ As well as clashing with the publication’s proposed ‘open to all’ ethos, the gender imbalance also make us wonder how resulting omissions might limit efforts to rescue ‘submerged’ or ‘lost’ traditions. This moment surrounding the *Savacou* double edition is of key importance for Bennett studies, where her gender and her persistence in writing in Creole could be taken as excluding factors. Indeed, Bennett did not feature in any of the fifteen editions of *Savacou*.

The absence of Caribbean women writers is troubling, particularly as Bennett was by this time visible on the cultural scene. Entering this discussion, Alison Donnell points to Carolyn Cooper’s book, *Noises in the Blood* where Cooper, although not directly attaching a feminist politics and poetics to Bennett, encourages a view of Jamaican female identity as ‘that cunny Jamaican oman’.⁴⁶ Donnell argues that Cooper’s reading of Louise Bennett’s poetry offered ‘an important model for the reading of creative and vernacular feminist voices’.⁴⁷ My thesis acknowledges that Bennett situates the female voice within the long-established social dimension of male literary domination in Jamaica. However, as we shall see, her textual representations and performances of Jamaican female identity are often

⁴⁴ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Kenneth Ramchand and Andrew Salkey, ed. *Savacou: A Journal of the Caribbean Artists Movement* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Kingston and London: The Caribbean Artists Movement, 1970).

⁴⁵ Laurence Breiner, “The Ambivalent Aesthetic of Eric Roach” *Ariel: A Review Of International English Literature* Vol. 19, No. 2 (1998): 3-19. Breiner writes that there was prose of George Lamming and John Hearne, poetry of Mervyn Morris and Dennis Scott, John Figueroa, Derek Walcott, Martin Carter — but the collection was dominated by young Jamaicans (Audvil King, Bongo Jerry, Brian Meeks), and emphasised political and experimental work with roots in oral poetry, reggae, and dub. For a fuller understanding of the controversies surrounding this double issue, see Breiner’s discussion of Eric Roach and Gordon Rohlehr.

⁴⁶ Donnell, *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature*, 137.

⁴⁷ Donnell, *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature*, 137.

characterised by humour and multiple voices, which means her stance on gender is not necessarily as ‘straightforward’ as might be assumed.

Bennett’s omission from *Savacou* announces another debate in terms of the decolonising lens placed on her and Jamaica in the wider postcolonial field. It points to a lack of recognition for her overall use of Creole as a valid language within literary circles. Jahan Ramazani looks at Louise Bennett’s poetry in relation to the globalisation of English language poetry, reminding us of the ways in which, in more recent times, her work has been read as part of a wider corpus of postcolonial poetic expression.⁴⁸ However, Bennett’s use of Creole had, in her early career, attracted negative criticism and precluded her inclusion from other publications and anthologies.⁴⁹ Bennett was seen as populist in a time when Creole was being mobilised for different purposes. In the 1960s, Creole was co-opted as a medium to signify a desire for national independence and yet by the 1970s, when *Savacou* was being published, it may well be that Bennett’s dramatic monologues in poetry and performance were perceived as outmoded. However, the use of Creole for Bennett was a means to reappropriate the language which she had grown up hearing and using and to repurpose it through different creative forms. In this way, throughout her career, Bennett was part of the literary establishment but not always in a secure way. When she was writing and performing in Creole on the radio, her art was not seen as literary or worthy of ‘serious’ textual analysis. Even at the start of Bennett’s career her performances in Creole were met with mockery; Morris notes that ‘at one of her earlier performances a voice called out: ‘a dat yuh modder sen yuh a school fa!’(is that what your mother sent you to school for?)’.⁵⁰ This was because Creole was not seen as ‘fit’ for poetry, a point that DeCaires Narain makes when she writes that ‘making use of Creole in poetry [...] would involve a radical revamping of the dominant convention of the genre itself’.⁵¹ As observed above, Bennett’s consistent use of Creole appears to have contributed to a refusal to see her

⁴⁸ Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ In 1949, *A Treasury of Jamaican Poetry* neglected to include Bennett even though she had published four poetry volumes by then. In 1962, despite already being widely recognised in broadcasts such as ‘The Lou and Ranny Show’ and having published her collections, *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse* and *Laugh with Louise*, two of her poems were placed in a section called Miscellaneous rather than in the main body of *The Independence Anthology of Jamaican Literature*. She was also excluded from *Kyk-Over-Al*’s special issue of 1957 and *Caribbean Quarterly* 1958. Furthermore, she herself noted that she was ‘not thought good enough to be represented in that anthology *Focus*. See: Mervyn Morris, “Louise Bennett in Print” *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1/2, Critical Approaches to West Indian Literature, 1982): 44-56.

⁵⁰ Morris, *Miss Lou: Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture*, 8.

⁵¹ Denise DeCaires Narain. *Contemporary Caribbean Women’s Poetry, Making Style* (London: Routledge, 2009), 68.

as a ‘serious’ writer in certain quarters. It is important to note that Bennett herself sensed this difference and how it meant her creative status was in question because of her linguistic choices. She notes in an interview in *Caribbean Quarterly* in 1968 that, ‘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’.⁵² However, this notion of being ‘set apart’ pulls in different directions. By positioning herself on the basilect end of the Creole continuum, she committed constantly to promoting the value of her linguistic community and to Creole as the foundation of her creativity. At the same time, given that, historically, Creole has been perceived as a linguistic variety with low prestige, in using it, Bennett risked the power of her written work being underappreciated or dismissed and exposed herself to an uncertain and ambiguous status within the creative community.⁵³ Creole was devalued as ‘low’ style but, in *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite promotes the view that, by using Creole, Bennett is being subversive and that she is effectively undermining the power of the coloniser and validating the submerged and emerging culture.⁵⁴ This is echoed by DeCaires Narain’s statement that ‘the Creole is regarded in Caribbean culture as a language which arouses more emotion than most – it is forged out of scraps of human speech and is valued for its subversive potential’.⁵⁵ Mimi Sheller adds to this when noting the assumption that because the genesis of the Creole varieties was an emergency solution for communicating in plurilingual communities they were necessarily optimising it within a situation where Creoles were regarded as inferior in relation to other languages.⁵⁶ As such, Bennett can be claimed as a visionary, leaving a legacy behind that is founded on the prescient and consistent use of Creole as a creative and legitimate voice and identity.

⁵² Interview with Louise Bennett, *Caribbean Quarterly* (1968), quoted in Edward Kamau Brathwaite *History of the Voice: Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, (London, Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1984), 27.

⁵³ See Louise Bennett, “Bennett on Bennett” *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 1/2 (1968): 97-101.

⁵⁴ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London, Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1984).

⁵⁵ Denise deCaires Narain, *Contemporary Caribbean Women’s Poetry, making style* (London: Routledge, 2009), 226.

⁵⁶ Mimi Sheller, “Oraliteracy and Opacity: Resisting Metropolitan Consumption of Caribbean Creole,” (Paper presented to the Franklin College Conference on Caribbean Literature and Culture, 2003).

Bennett's Place in Folklore

Associating Bennett with any specific genre is less clearcut than recognising her visionary use of Creole. As we know, she was a poet, a performance poet, a chronicler, a commentator, a broadcaster, a storyteller and a paremiologist. These are all roles and forms we associate with collecting, categorising, preserving, and safeguarding folklore. Even if she did not claim the label of folklorist initially, Bennett, as with her use of Creole, was arguably ahead of her time in the Caribbean with her vision of folkloric preservation and representation. In an interview with researcher Mary Jane Hewitt, Bennett spoke of collecting 'folklore' in a conscious way in the early 40s: 'I did not call myself a "folklorist" though some American people started calling me so – later in the early 50s I was introduced as a "folklorist from Jamaica"'.⁵⁷ As Mervyn Morris reminds us, during her years working as a welfare officer, Bennett recorded folktales, songs and proverbs that provided her with a comprehensive knowledge of the culture of her own island.⁵⁸ She herself sums this up when she reminds us in an interview in 1992: 'as you know it has been my life work collecting our heritage, our folklore and songs you know...'⁵⁹ She then represented this heritage in artistic forms, in her poetry, her monologues, her storytelling and in her performances.

In simple terms, the process of collection is the tool that enables the folklorist to preserve heritage; storytellers are those who disseminate what they have collected through their art. Ultimately, I propose that Bennett can be seen as a storyteller of folklore more than a folklorist, an argument I develop through my analysis of her monologues, Anancy tales, and poetic work. Bennett's particular integration of the proverbs into her creative work is central to my thesis in that the oral nature of the proverbs links to historical modes of telling stories and sharing modes of thinking. In proposing that Bennett was a storyteller of folklore more than she was a folklorist, I argue that proverbs were also essential to Bennett's identity as a teller of stories: through her combined creative and collecting practices she both preserves and reimagines the dynamic proverb form within Jamaican

⁵⁷ Louise Bennett, interviewed by Mary Jane Hewitt, "An Interview with Louise Bennett", "Miss Lou's Fonds", McMaster archives, McMaster University, Canada [1975?]:39.

⁵⁸ Mervyn Morris, *Miss Lou: Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2014).

⁵⁹ Louise Bennett, "Louise Bennett: Jamaican Storyteller" *As It Happens*, aired 9th April 1992 (Ontario: CBC Radio, 1992), radio broadcast. [<http://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca/islandora/object/islandora%3A88>]

folklore. Some may assume that the role of the oral storyteller is becoming obsolete. However, throughout this thesis I suggest that through her particular understanding and use of proverbs — her proverbial thinking — Bennett breathes new life into Jamaican popular culture.

It is also important to understand some of the contentious debates raised by the term ‘folk’. The term has been largely over determined and disseminated from many angles and so in the following chapters we need to trouble our own sense of what the term ‘folk’ represents. Brathwaite was the first major scholar to attempt to analyse the term ‘folk’. Brathwaite’s was a binary view where the divide between the classes assigned the ‘folk’ to peasant status, distinguishing between the leaders and the peasants and labourers and highlighting the devalued status that was attached to the term. In his gloss on Brathwaite, Christian Campbell observes that what is provocative about the former’s mode of theorising is that he uses the terms ‘Afro-Creole’ and ‘folk’ interchangeably, an observation which distils the issues that surround the use of the term ‘folk’.⁶⁰ The debate reached a level of tension at the 1971 Conference in Mona when Kenneth Ramchand accused Brathwaite of ‘folking up the literature’.⁶¹ Focusing on the ‘folk’ can be a way to legitimise and celebrate ‘Afro-Creole’ cultural expression, framing it as ‘authentic’, or ‘national’ or ‘anti-colonial’ and yet the phrase ‘folking up’ the literature suggests an oxymoron, that is, is folk expression the opposite of literary expression. The idea of ‘the folk’ is not necessarily a strictly designated community in itself but rather an idea that a people use in different ways. Campbell adds his own critique on the political investments of ‘the folk’ in stating that Brathwaite ‘undertheorizes [...] the constant flux of Caribbean culture and overstates the inherent radicalism of the folk when he frames the terms “folk” and “middle classes” within a romantic (and vindicationist) dichotomy of good and evil’.⁶² In the following chapters we must be aware of the provocations that frame the cultural debate around the term ‘folk’ particularly when considering Bennett’s use of Creole. As previously observed, Creole can be seen in one sense as a syncretic mixture of European and African languages, but this is not the only way to understand Creole in a cultural frame. The contentious term remains interesting when considering how Bennett uses proverbs to communicate in very

⁶⁰ Campbell, “Folking up the Culture”, 388.

⁶¹ The Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies Conference launched the first major conversation on West Indian literature by West Indian people on West Indian soil and was a primal scene for the history of Caribbean discourse on the folk (See Campbell, “Folking up the Culture”, 389).

⁶² Campbell, “Folking up the Culture”, 388.

contemporary cross-class settings wisdoms and heritage associated with Creole-speaking populations from the Caribbean's past.

The term is further complicated when it is subsumed as a signifier for the West Indian writer. George Lamming focuses on elevating the folk through the novelist. Lamming's 1960 *Pleasures of Exile* illustrates the possibility of literature as a collective site that could elevate the status of the folk. While Lamming's work is not as extensive or as significant as Brathwaite's discourse on the folk, it is important in that it argues for 'the centrality of the folk in inaugurating and developing a Caribbean aesthetic and literary tradition'.⁶³ Essentially, this links West Indian writers to their roots, placing the 'local' at the heart of the term 'folk'. More recently Alison Donnell claims that Carolyn Cooper's 1993 study *Noises in the Blood* clears an academic space for the studying of popular culture and was instrumental in breaking down the established hierarchies between official and folk culture as well as oral and scribal discourses.⁶⁴ In advocating a contemporaneous approach to folk culture Cooper also points to Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* when she writes that:

three decades after the publication of Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile*, this historically devalued Caribbean popular culture has now become part of the fiction of multi-cultural Britain.⁶⁵

The differences between the two approaches from Brathwaite and Lamming provide a contextual framework where we can see that the term 'folk' remains problematic today. With that in mind, I return to consider Bennett's place as a folklorist and a storyteller. According to Denise deCaires Narain, Bennett's emphasis on 'folk culture' in her poetic output (and across all her works I would argue) 'results in performances of natural identity which may appear unthreateningly recuperable to nationalist agendas than other forms of literary protest'.⁶⁶ I will be arguing throughout the thesis that the unthreatening positions of her performance belie the way in which Bennett subversively redefines and indigenises Creole poetics, and that the cumulative power of her performances have 'recuperated Jamaican culture from its colonialist moorings in anthropological texts'.⁶⁷ As a further

⁶³ Campbell, "Folking up the Culture", 386.

⁶⁴ Donnell, *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature*, 206.

⁶⁵ Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan Education, 1993), 186.

⁶⁶ Denise deCaires Narain, *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry, Making Style* (London: Routledge, 2009), eBook, 28%.

⁶⁷ deCaires Narain, *Making Style*, eBook 23%.

observation, the term ‘folk’ embodies an inherent quality of preservation of traditions, in language, costumes, and local cultural legacy.

Bennett’s position as a folklorist is further complicated when we observe that she extracts items such as the proverbs from their actual contexts and re/places them into a different context, thereby reigniting the individual items (in this case, proverbs) in a different conscious space.⁶⁸ Bennett’s skill is particularly evident where she applies her knowledge of her social context and folklore to her art by this means of recreation. She achieves this through altered generational time frames, taking age-old wisdoms in stories and proverbs and reframing them in her own contemporary artforms. She embraces the art of re-creation across differing forms, from the oral medium to text. Bennett’s recreation therefore aligns with Ben Amos’s assertion that folklore becomes a process — a communicative process: ‘folklore is not “pretty much what one wants to make out of it”; it is a definite realistic, artistic, and communicative process’.⁶⁹ Bennett’s method as a folklorist is to collect, preserve, and communicate. In terms of communication, she extends this form of transition to create her own artwork. I argue that, for Bennett, the performative aspect of her art fits with this view of folklore being a communicative process. It is an artistic action which demands a response from the audience, which in turn becomes a form of social interaction.

Ben-Amos’s 1971 paper sets out theories which support the way I regard Bennett’s role as a folklorist.⁷⁰ Firstly, he argues that:

tales and songs can shift media, cross language boundaries, pass from one culture and still retain sufficient traces of similarity to enable us to recognize a core of sameness in all their versions. In sum, the materials of folklore are mobile, manipulative and transcultural.⁷¹

On the other hand, he also points out that:

folklore is very much an organic phenomenon in the sense that it is an integral part of culture. Any divorce of tales, songs or sculptures from their indigenous locale, time and society inevitably introduces qualitative changes in them.⁷²

These two points which Ben-Amos makes relate to my concerns in this thesis. My argument concerning proverbs is that they are ‘mobile, manipulative and transcultural’.

⁶⁸ Dan Ben-Amos, “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context”, *Journal of American Folklore, Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* Vol. 84, No. 331 (American Folklore Society, 1971): 9.

⁶⁹ Ben-Amos, “Folklore in Context”, 9.

⁷⁰ Ben-Amos, “Folklore in Context”, 3.

⁷¹ Ben-Amos, “Folklore in Context”, 4.

⁷² Ben-Amos, “Folklore in Context”, 4.

Bennett, as a collector and ‘translator’ of folklore, enables the proverbs to be understood by non-Creole speakers. Equally, she embraces the way proverbs can be manipulated, which I also take to mean that proverbs are malleable and can not only cross media but can cross genres and open up other interpretations. And yet, there is no doubt that by divorcing the items of folklore, such as the tales or proverbs, from their locale this does introduce qualitative changes and this plays into my focus that the proverbs themselves, as localised speech elements, add to the notion of the ‘local’ for Bennett. This will be further explored in Chapter Three.

At this point, it would be instructive to contextualise and chronologically situate Bennett in relation to other proverb scholars and collectors in the Caribbean. Boyce Davies, in her review of Daryl Dance’s *Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans*,⁷³ neatly condenses the overview of the chronology of collection and publication of Caribbean folk material into four categories.⁷⁴ The first category comprises the early collections at the turn of the century, collated in the *Journal of American Folklore*, beginning in the late 1800s and culminating in Elsie Clews Parson’s collections (1933-1943). Boyce Davies highlights the inclusion and placement of Zora Neale Hurston’s contributions in this era and also, notably, that this North American effort seemed to occur contemporaneously with some internal, colonial efforts which resulted, for example, in the collections of Walter Jekyll, Izett Anderson, Frank Cundall, and later Martha Beckwith. Boyce Davies places anthropologists such as Herskovitch and Abrahams in the second category (1940-1960s) who worked on larger collections of folklore throughout the Caribbean. But it is in the third category, which Davies names ‘the era of independence’, that Louise Bennett sits and where her ‘untiring work in Jamaica (is) to be recognised’.⁷⁵ In this review, Boyce Davies uses the comparison of the external colonialist versus the internal nationalist, the latter of which sums up the duality of Bennett’s colonially educated yet inherently nationalist upbringing and is a further contribution to recognising the complexity of her works. To complete the list, Daryl Dance’s anthology, *From My People: 400 Years of African American Folklore* (2002), is placed in the fourth category that Boyce Davies identifies, within the context of the pioneering Afro American/Caribbean connections illustrated

⁷³ Daryl Dance, *Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

⁷⁴ Carole Boyce Davies, “Review of *Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans* by Daryl C. Dance”, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1988): 438–441.

⁷⁵ Boyce Davies, “Review of *Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans*”, 438.

through Neale Hurston, although Dance's connections do not run so deep.⁷⁶ This category embodies the contemporary interest in Caribbean folklore and yet notably within Dance's publication there is no full chapter given over to proverbs, an omission that causes Boyce Davies to comment 'there are some categories, like proverbs, that any student of Caribbean folklore would have liked to see, especially given the number of early collections of proverbs'.⁷⁷ My thesis answers Boyce Davies' request that more attention be given to proverbs. Unlike Dance, who takes a generalist approach to the elements of folklore in her own collection, I approach Bennett's works through a proverbial lens and in doing so, position the proverb as a collectable and standalone element. As seen, Boyce Davies places Bennett in the third category, in the 'era of independence' where, as Donnell observes, 'the publications in Creole by Louise Bennett signal the kinds of literary innovation and cultural nationalism that are most readily associated with the 1960s'.⁷⁸

My thesis also engages with Cooper's observation that Bennett 'has long recognised the evocative power of Jamaican proverbs as the locus of folk philosophy'.⁷⁹ I expand on this observation in that my focus on proverbs allows me to argue for an understanding of how Bennett uses the power of the proverbs in her work as storyteller, which I have already argued is a term which describes Bennett more productively than that of a folklorist. By referring to the *Proverb Manuscript*, I can make new claims regarding proverbial interpretation and the impact of this on Bennett's creative work. I also defend the focus on the local in Bennett's work through the creative localities constructed in Jamaican proverbs. As I have already noted and will return to again, an idea of the local is central to Bennett's work, not just in her choice to use Creole but in the centring of Jamaica in all her writings and performances – and the proverbs sit within this reading of her works as contextually reliant on an understanding of her particular local focus on Jamaican social and historical context.

We have seen that Bennett's perceived status as a folklorist needs to be considered by recognising the symbiotic relationship between Creole as cultural expression and the term

⁷⁶ See Abrahams, 'Afro American folk culture' (Publication of American Folklore Society, 1978) as a convenient marker of collections documented up to this point; also Davies' comment that the bulk of work in this particular generation is being carried out by Caribbean people themselves through institutions in Jamaica specifically like the Afro Caribbean institute founded in 1972 coordinated by Beverly Hall Alleyne, the Folk bank with Olive Lewin and a number of individual scholars in the field.

⁷⁷ Boyce Davies, "Review of *Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans*", 441.

⁷⁸ Donnell, *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature*, 43.

⁷⁹ Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 45.

‘folk’. I turn now to consider the use of the Creole language as a vehicle of folklore performance. Bennett featured regularly on the radio and Belinda Edmondson observes that radio personalities were seen as ‘beloved quotidian presences in the lives of the Caribbean middle classes, but emphatically and distinctly their work was not meant for international consumption’.⁸⁰ Edmondson’s discussion in *Caribbean Middlebrow* centres on the issues of the evolving middle classes of the Caribbean of which she sees Miss Lou as being representative.⁸¹ She talks about the containment of Bennett through being understood and defined through a middle-class reception. Edmondson may well be correct in suggesting that Bennett was contained by way of a middle class reading. On the other hand, if Bennett was contained by it, this does not necessarily undermine the radical localism that Bennett achieves; or perhaps there is compromise, as the notion of localism circulates within a particular hegemonic system where Creole has been accommodated but will not disrupt the connected structures of power, class and language. It would seem that Edmondson still wants to celebrate Louise Bennett and champions the middle-class speaker to find their way back to Creole but she also recognises the cultural tensions associated with Creole. In Chapter Two, I analyse Bennett’s first poem in dialect, ‘On A Tramcar’ where Bennett mediates between classes by claiming the liminal space between the road and the tramcar itself, that is, the division between the Jamaican middle classes and the Jamaican market women.

Collectors versus Creators

Given the importance of the *Proverb Manuscript* in the following chapters for developing an understanding of Bennett’s proverbial thinking, it is essential to consider how Bennett’s identities as collector and creator influence each other. Bennett was a committed collector of folklore material, including proverbs, which we see collated in the *Proverb Manuscript*. But it is equally important to note that she used the proverb form creatively to make space for Jamaican cultural wisdom and heritage within her own artistic output. In creatively

⁸⁰ Morris, “On Reading Louise Bennett”, 87.

⁸¹ Belinda Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure Culture and the Middle Class* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009).

using the proverbs to speak for the lives and history of her own people, Bennett differs from other collectors who preceded her. Versions of some Jamaican proverbs, but not all by any means, can be found in print in other substantial collections similar to Bennett's own *Proverb Manuscript*.⁸²

The rise of folklore studies within the 20th century can be associated with Martha Warren Beckwith. Beckwith's contribution to the importance of folklore was immense and in advancing an understanding of Bennett's position as a collector one must recognise the value that Beckwith gave to the field in terms of collecting, recording and interpreting materials, in particular those from Jamaica. At the time Beckwith came to the fore as a champion for folklore studies as a subject in its own right, the folklorist label was merged with that of anthropology. She conceived of folklore as 'an umbrella term for many forms of traditional practice worthy of focused study such as dance, music, narrative, art and belief'.⁸³

However, while Beckwith and Bennett prioritised the importance of proverbs, both assume different approaches to the act of collecting. As an anthropologist, Beckwith assumed a scientific approach and indeed she wrote that she strongly believed that 'folklore should be studied as a scientific discipline'.⁸⁴ This stands in contrast to Bennett's artistic and creative approach. Bennett was not interested in scientifically analysing the proverbs she collected, although the categorisations under moral and thematic headings in the *Proverb Manuscript* do show the form of taxonomy that appealed to her. By placing the proverbs under certain headings, Bennett is adroit in analysing characteristics – a point that forms the focus of my argument in the following chapters.

One of the most pertinent collections that Beckwith produced was her *Jamaica Proverbs*, published in 1925.⁸⁵ This predecessor to Bennett's own collection is vital, not only for its existence but for comparative reasons.⁸⁶ It contains 972 proverbs, indexed alphabetically by

⁸² These include Martha Beckwith, *Jamaica Proverbs*, 1925; Izett Anderson and Frank Cundall, *Jamaica Proverbs*, 1927; Walter Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Story*, 1966 and Llewellyn Watson, *Jamaican Sayings*, 1991.

⁸³ Simon J. Bronner, "Martha Warren Beckwith and the Rise of Academic Authority" in *Following Tradition* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1998): 237.

⁸⁴ Hilary Sparkes, "Pioneers in the Realms of Spirits: A Comparison of Zora Neale Hurston's and Martha Beckwith's Writings on African Caribbean Folk Religions", *Journal of American Religions*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Penn State University Press, 2016), 272.

⁸⁵ Martha Beckwith, *Jamaica Proverbs* (Poughkeepsie, New York: Vassar Cooperative Book Shop, 1925).

⁸⁶ It is also presented by Vassar College in a collection entitled *Folk Games of Jamaica* – which records songs, games and music, with the intertitle page headings of "field work in folklore".

the first word in the proverb.⁸⁷ In her introduction, she creates a table where she lists the 275 allusions to animal life and which classes they belong in. The fact that Beckwith attempts to categorise the proverbs and provides the symbolic meaning of the use of animals, illustrates that she is probing deeper into proverbial allusions. In this, Beckwith identifies the inherent commentary proverbs make on the social context of the environment, but as noted above, she offers no further analysis in this collection. Beckwith was known for her two-fold approach to the subject of folklore; from Franz Boas (her mentor) Beckwith adopted the idea of folklore as a reflection of culture and especially the proposal of artistry as a relative concept explored historically within a culture.⁸⁸ Here we see the beginning of the movement towards the artistic creativity which Bennett embraces to reflect the deeper nuances of the local Jamaican culture.

Bennett embraces the collective identity embedded in the traditional stories, music, movement and dance, beliefs, customs and material culture of Jamaica. She collected the orally transferred stories and proverbs and songs. However, significantly she transfers this value of folklore heritage into her own art by means of personal interpretation, in her poetry, her performances, and her monologues. In doing so, she created her own identity as an author and performer; in effect, she was creating a paradoxical collective yet individual identity for the everyday Jamaican person. The renowned folklore scholar Alan Dundes recognises that folklore is ‘one of the ways individuals define their own identity’.⁸⁹ And Richard Bauman is seen to capture the collective nature of folklore in his statement ‘Folklore is a function of shared identity’.⁹⁰ Within the parameters of these two general claims, we can see that Bennett blends both into her own art to create a collective yet individualised notion of identity. It seems that Beckwith was also aware of this and wanted to expand the perimeters of the folklore status when she made the bold statement, ‘Anyone today will admit the value of folklore to art’.⁹¹ Bronner notes that by saying this Beckwith challenged previous scholarship and called for folklore to be created as a new “modern” study out of art and science, literature and anthropology, history and psychology, geography and sociology –in a new disciplinary tradition.⁹² This clearly lays the

⁸⁷ Beckwith, *Jamaica Proverbs*, 7.

⁸⁸ Bronner, “The Rise of Academic Authority”, 245.

⁸⁹ Cited by Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989; repr. 1992 and 1996), 2.

⁹⁰ Dundes, *Folklore Matters*, 8.

⁹¹ Bronner, *Following Tradition*, 249.

⁹² Bronner, *Following Tradition*, 249.

groundwork for Bennett's artistic and creative approach more than with earlier collectors (such as Cundall, Jekyll, and those listed in Beckwith's own works) who laid stress on the act of collection rather than an analysis of the use of the folkloristic elements thereafter. The distinction between collectors who collect for academic research and those, such as Beckwith, who attempt to analyse the material collected is marked. As I already noted above, Bennett, in terms of her repetitive momentum of collect, preserve, communicate, then advances the construct by using the collected material in her own creative processes as part of her art.

This difference between the practices of collector and creator is noticed by Hilary Sparkes in her 2016 article, where she raises several issues pertaining to Beckwith's approach and attitude when studying the folklore in Jamaica. Sparkes writes that,

Although the practice of anthropologists paying their informants was not unusual at the time, Beckwith was criticised for paying random people, often children, whom she encountered on her journeys around Jamaica, to sing songs or recite tales. This might lead to some of the informants providing material which would net the most financially with little or no concern as to its authenticity.⁹³

This raises questions of the validity of the sources Beckwith used and points to a suggested weakness in her practice of fieldwork. Beckwith's attitude is again called into question by Sparkes where she notes that Beckwith considers:

the white western culture as superior, even though her stated aim was to record data and analyse her research findings in a scientific manner, with its implication of objectivity.⁹⁴

The so-called disciplinary objectivity which Beckwith claims in her research, being a white western 'outsider', juxtaposes with Bennett's insider, knowledgeable use of Jamaican folklore to work creatively between collecting and creating. The main difference between Beckwith's and Bennett's approach is captured in two phrases in the quotation above – 'scientific manner' and 'implication of objectivity'. To take the second phrase from the quotation above ('implication of objectivity'), Beckwith's position as an outsider would have been amplified by her own way of framing her work where she claimed that 'her aim was to remain a detached observer of events'.⁹⁵ This sense of detachment is perhaps relevant for most collectors who record and collate without personal investment. However,

⁹³ Sparkes, "Pioneers", 270.

⁹⁴ Sparkes, "Pioneers", 270.

⁹⁵ Sparkes, "Pioneers", 267.

as an artist, such as Bennett, investing in the people and the culture is necessary when re/imagining the element into another art form.

One further example of a proverb 'collection' that is important when considering Bennett as a creator rather than a collector is seen in Carolyn Cooper's appendices to *Noises in the Blood*.⁹⁶ Cooper's Appendix 1 contains a list of the proverbs identified in Bennett's poems in *Jamaica Labrish* and *Selected poems*; these are categorised under the headings of i) Animal (21) and ii) General (26). Appendix II is a list of general proverbs she takes from the collections of Beckwith and Cundall mentioned above. Cooper entitles this second Appendix 'Jamaican proverbs: a gender perspective' which aligns with the feminist direction she takes in her book. She writes:

In that body of Jamaican folk wisdom transmitted in proverb, Anancy story and riddle, is the genesis of an indigenous feminist ideology: the paradigm of a submerged and fated identity that must be rooted up, covertly and assiduously.⁹⁷

Cooper activates the proverbs from Bennett's poetry to substantiate her arguments in her discussions on the 'cunny Jamma oman', where she highlights the female sensibility in Bennett's poetry. Cooper argues that the existential 'dungle' or rubbish heap Bennett refers to in 'Jamaica Oman' becomes the locus of female transformation in the folk iconography:

For 'Oman luck deh a dungle'
Some rooted more dan some
But as long as fowl a scratch dungle hearp
Oman luck mus come!⁹⁸

The proverbs in Appendix II of *Noises in the Blood* are placed under headings as follows: Female characteristics (psychological and physiological) — the largest number of proverbs is quoted here: old women; women and children; women and men; men and children; gender, class and colour. Cooper's use of the proverbs differs from that of Bennett; Cooper refers to the proverbs to expound her own theories of indirection and female sensibility in Bennett's poetry whereas Bennett orders the proverbs in her manuscript according to gender-neutral terms. As I will be arguing through the following chapters, Bennett's

⁹⁶ Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 200-204.

⁹⁷ Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 48.

⁹⁸ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 24.

writing can rarely, if ever, be described as ‘straightforward’ and her stance on gender is embedded in a more open way when reading the proverbs. I acknowledge Cooper’s argument that there is a subversive female iconology in Bennett’s works but reiterate that my emphasis in the thesis is to examine the impact of the malleability of proverbs within their various creative forms.

The review of previous collectors given above acknowledges that collectively these earlier collectors preserved valuable knowledge of folklore heritage. We can now see that Bennett’s place as a collector but also a creator is unique. With the *Proverb Manuscript* she sustains the momentum of collecting, preserving, and communicating, and as noted above, she then advances the construct by using the collected material in her own creative processes as part of her art.

Bennett’s Writing Career

The following overview of Bennett’s writing career reveals her journey towards acceptance of her place within Jamaican literary culture and the progression of critical evaluation of her work. The various editorial approaches to publishing her work also illuminate an important cultural shift as the use of Creole becomes a means to validate a nation’s identity through the period of decolonisation that forms the backdrop to much of Bennett’s writing career. In terms of Bennett’s poems, it is possible to date some of them contextually to the periods pre- and post-independence in 1962, but we cannot date others because of lack of relevant records. The 1942 publication of her poems necessarily includes work which predates Nettleford’s 1966 edition.⁹⁹

The publication of Bennett’s poetry collections began in 1942 with *(Jamaica) Dialect Verses*.¹⁰⁰ Sherlock’s foreword pre-empted the excitement that would have surrounded this first official text-based record of Bennett’s collected verses and is worth transcribing in full as this publication is rarely accessible to readers.

⁹⁹ Many of her monologues are dated in the archives and will be explored in Chapter Three.

¹⁰⁰ Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Dialect Verses*, compiled and published by George R. Bowen (Kingston: The Herald Ltd, 1942).

Recent years have witnessed the publication of a number of works in Jamaican dialect – works like Miss Sibley’s “Quashie’s Reflections,” Mrs. Durie’s “One Jamaica Gal,” and John Canoe’s “Country Cousin.” Now, Miss Louise Bennett gives us a number of poems in dialect. She, herself, has recited many of these on public platforms, and they have rightly won for her increasing popularity; now they are presented in more permanent form, and we can appreciate again their wit and the intimate knowledge of our ways of living and thinking which they reveal... So, in Miss Bennett’s verses, we catch some of the flavour of Jamaican life. Her quick, clever sketches of “de dry-lan refugee”, of the Street Crier with her fresh eggs, “tree week now he ha’ dem,” and of Mass John “Come Back from Pinnacle” are excellent; not since Claude McKay have we had better verse in Jamaican dialect.¹⁰¹

Until now, Bennett’s poems had been heard on public platforms, but now they became available to be read on the pages of this book. This permanent form on the page, however, raises the question about the representation of dialect on the page, a point I discuss in detail in my final chapter on Bennett’s performances whilst exploring Dora Ahmed and Shondel Nero’s discussion of authenticity and spontaneity.¹⁰² Nonetheless, at this stage of Bennett’s career, accessibility to the text afforded by the first collection of poems allows her audiences, as per Sherlock’s quotation, ‘to appreciate their wit and the intimate knowledge of our ways of living and thinking’. It is the intimacy of Bennett’s experience that speaks from these first published pages, and which readers of today can still appreciate. This first volume was quickly followed in 1943 by *Jamaican Humour in Dialect*, once again with a foreword by Sherlock.¹⁰³

Alongside Bennett’s published volumes of poetry, from 1943 the regular appearance of her poetry in *The Gleaner* expanded her print presence into newspaper form.¹⁰⁴ The presence of her poetry in the newspaper reflects Sherlock’s observation of a certain accessibility to her work, as newspapers are cheaper and more populist than books, and this presence in newspaper form works together with Bennett’s performances to widen her visibility. As we will see later in relation to her radio career, Bennett had an astute understanding of how various media platforms created visibility and accessibility. Janet Neigh writes that

¹⁰¹ Philip M. Sherlock, foreword in Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Dialect Verses*, compiled and published by George R. Bowen (Kingston: The Herald Ltd, 1942), np.

¹⁰² Dohra Ahmad and Shondel J. Nero, “Productive Paradoxes: Vernacular Use in the Teaching of Composition and Literature”, *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition and Culture*, Vol. 12 (2011): 69-95.

¹⁰³ Louise Bennett, *Jamaican Humour in Dialect* (compiled and published by George R. Bowen: The Herald Ltd, Kingston, 1943).

¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately, further scholarship of her column in the *Sunday Gleaner* is limited as the microfilm rolls at the National Library of Jamaica are missing and similarly at The *Gleaner* company (from 1943-1947) where her column was recorded.

Bennett's poems were not published in the literary section of the newspaper but placed seemingly at random amongst political articles, which makes them appear as fillers. For instance, her poems were often advertised on the front page beside the banner title suggesting that the editors presented it as entertainment to sell papers and to produce "community appeal".¹⁰⁵ They were subsidised by advertisements for everyday items like soap and Red Stripe beer, which Neigh observes placed Bennett's poetry 'more within the economy of print capitalism than poetry of her era is typically situated'.¹⁰⁶ Arguably this may have devalued Bennett's poetry as being some sort of commodity, but on the other hand, the poems were being read within everyday contexts by Jamaican people, which supports a view of poetry becoming less of an elite or exclusive literary form. Once again, Bennett seems to break down boundaries through the placement of her poetry as entertaining extras.

As her career continued, from 1948 her poems started to appear in the left wing, anti-colonialist paper *Public Opinion*, instead of the *Sunday Gleaner*. Neigh further notes that newspaper companies published her 1940s books in small print runs (her first book by the *Herald* and the following three by *The Gleaner*).¹⁰⁷ (*Jamaica Dialect Verses* was published in 1942; *Anancy Stories and Poems in Dialect* was published in 1944 as a composite collection and in 1949 *Mis' Lulu Sez*, a collection of 159 poems, was published with several poems from her other collections.¹⁰⁸ In 1950, she was involved in a collection of *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*.¹⁰⁹ Bennett herself produced and self-published a volume called *Laugh with Louise* which was printed possibly in 1961 as a pot pourri of Jamaican folklore with poems included.¹¹⁰

Although I examine Bennett's poetry across a range of publications, I will also be examining the impact of Louise Bennett's use of proverbs within the two most recognised

¹⁰⁵ Janet Neigh, "Rhythmic Literacy: Poetry, Reading and Public Voices in Black Atlantic Poetics" (dissertation, Temple University, 2010), 17

¹⁰⁶ Neigh, "Rhythmic Literacy", 17.

¹⁰⁷ Neigh, "Rhythmic Literacy", 17.

¹⁰⁸ The information on *Mis' Lulu Sez* is taken from Morris, *Miss Lou*, 17, where he notes that she published it herself but strangely he does not list it at the back of his book under the section 'Louise Bennett in Print'. I cannot find a copy of this book although references to 'Mis Lulu Sez' refers me to the Kingston: Gleaner Co, 1949 and a collection of dialect verses.

¹⁰⁹ Louise Bennett et al, *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*, introduction by Philip M. Sherlock (Kingston: Pioneer Press / The Gleaner Co. Ltd., 1950). It is not clear whether in the edition whether Bennett co-authored this publication. Sherlock wrote the introduction and presents it as a collective endeavour.

¹¹⁰ Louise Bennett, *Laugh with Louise: A Pot Pourri of Jamaican Folklore*, foreword by Robert Verity. (Kingston: The Institute of Jamaica, reprint by Lithographic Printers Ltd., 1961).

publications of her poetry collections, *Jamaica Labrish*, published in 1966,¹¹¹ and *Selected Poems* published in 1982.¹¹² These collections are the most easily accessible of the works listed above and Nettleford and Morris have been key to establishing the importance of Bennett's poetry. Therefore, it is useful to give an overview of the different approaches to the editing process and the debates that stem from these publications.

Morris's 1963 seminal article 'On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously' championed Bennett, asking that she be recognised as an accomplished poet and furthermore calling for a collection of Bennett's poems which chooses the best of her poems. This was answered by Nettleford's publication of *Jamaica Labrish*. This 1966 edition then became the subject of a dialogue on editorial practices that ensued between Morris and Nettleford; first between the two editors and then Morris in his article "Bennett in Print" which answers his own previous article 'On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously'.¹¹³ Through this progressive critical evaluation we can see how the practical criticism of Bennett's poetry evolves. Morris initiates the discussion with his incremental critique of Bennett and criticises Nettleford's choices as the editor of *Jamaica Labrish*. The publication of *Jamaica Labrish* leads Morris to make two claims that:

Miss Bennett's literary reputation is not well served by *Jamaica Labrish*, and secondly that Miss Bennett needs to have her work conveniently available in print, since although some aspects of her verse are clarified and/or enhanced in performance there are others more fully appreciated by a reader savouring a text.¹¹⁴

Morris refutes Nettleford's choice to present a collection of all of Bennett's poems, since it includes even those which are 'apprentice' pieces such as 'Writing Home' with its 'inept inversion':

I is not working now buy ah
Jine in a labour set
An ah 'ope to keep awn striking
Till some esteem jab ah get.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, with notes and introduction by Rex Nettleford (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1966; repr. 1973 – 95).

¹¹² Bennett, *Selected Poems*, edited by Mervyn Morris. Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1983; repr. 2005.

¹¹³ Mervyn Morris, "Louise Bennett in Print" *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1/2, Critical Approaches to West Indian Literature, 1982): 44-56.

¹¹⁴ Morris, "Louise Bennett in Print", 44-56.

¹¹⁵ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 116.

Morris argues that this is not Bennett at her best and, by taking this stance, he clearly wishes to defend Bennett's reputation as a valid literary figure; he does not agree with weaker poems being included and states that 'of literature we require something more: the good poems by Louise Bennett use language with notable precision, cunning, force'.¹¹⁶ But there is a counter position which allows for the inclusion of such poems. My opinion is that *Jamaica Labrish* serves a wider purpose by collecting in one place most of Bennett's poems which previously were mostly published in newspapers or collections with small print runs and are hard to locate today. In this way *Jamaica Labrish* can be seen first and foremost as a volume of preservation which justifies the inclusion of nearly all of her poems, regardless of what might be understood as their 'literary quality'. Morris attacks Nettleford's casual dismissal of the relevance of literary criteria but recognises the value of his introduction to *Jamaica Labrish* where he 'sketches in the historical background to the poems, of briefly relating the work of Louise Bennett to the imperatives of performance and recommending attention to the scholars of Jamaican language'.¹¹⁷ At this point, Morris concedes that Nettleford's introduction furthers the context and the questioning of Bennett's place in the literary world. It is accepted that editors will have their own taste on what are the best poems, but Nettleford was above all striving to 'give an overview of her art and artistry'.¹¹⁸ With *Jamaica Labrish*, Nettleford disregarded Morris's request for a collection in which the best poems are chosen by editing a volume which would reveal Bennett in her multiple roles as entertainer, as a valid literary figure and as a documenter of aspects of Jamaican life, thought and feeling.

On the other hand, in a little heard recording at a conference held in Beacon Books on 14th June 1983, Morris talks about the upcoming publication of his new collaboration with Louise Bennett on a volume of her selected poems.¹¹⁹ In his speech he clearly lauds the collection by Nettleford, acknowledging that it gave an overview of Bennett's as someone who documented life as a poet and also that it was an 'irreplaceable volume as it had a vast amount of Louise Bennett's work in one place'.¹²⁰ However, Morris went on to explain that *Selected Poems* would be a smaller volume than *Jamaica Labrish* and could be defended here, as above, as meaning the 'best poems presented to people in a book'.¹²¹ He argues

¹¹⁶ Morris, "Louise Bennett in Print", 45.

¹¹⁷ Morris, "Louise Bennett in Print", 47.

¹¹⁸ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 10.

¹¹⁹ Mervyn Morris, "Louise Bennett's poetry", George Padmore Institute, London, (1981): audio cassette.

¹²⁰ Morris, "Louise Bennett's poetry", 1981. Audio cassette.

¹²¹ Morris, "Louise Bennett's poetry", 1981. Audio cassette.

that if a poem is read in a book the point is not that it is confined to print (which is a separate and complex issue in itself) but that poems in print need to ‘work’ in book form enough to interest the reader. In *Selected Poems*, there is opportunity to study the techniques in print where something might be missed in performance, and Morris’s textual apparatus encourage this interrogation. Bennett was a performer and as Creole is oral in tradition it lent itself to performance. However, Morris continues by arguing that Bennett started to write before she performed and so he makes the basic point that ‘a lot of Louise Bennett is available to anyone who likes to read poetry, so we should pay more attention to her on those terms’.¹²² In the following chapter, I will borrow interpretations from Morris’s accomplished analysis of the poems ‘Proverbs’ and ‘Dutty Tough’ presented at this talk. Morris was concerned with evidencing Louise Bennett’s considerable poetic skill when analysing the poem on the page and it was further decided that her poems should be used in schools. In an interview with me in 2017, Morris explained that with *Selected Poems* he was trying to:

foster accurate reading (textual analysis if you like) which necessarily involves some level of contact with Louise Bennett’s heritage and that I became more aware that many of her poems might be useful for social studies discussions.¹²³

Consequently, in the 1982 edition of *Selected Poems* there are notes, commentary and teaching questions attached to provide guidance for school pupils. However, Morris is also quoted as saying that ‘in the end I did something much bigger. It is suitable for schools, but also suitable for work at a higher level’.¹²⁴

In terms of editing Bennett’s poetry collections, Morris and Nettleford edited their volumes thematically rather than chronologically, perhaps due to the mystery already surrounding the bibliographic history of Bennett’s writing. Rex Nettleford collated the poems in *Jamaica Labrish* under four broad headings: ‘City Life’, ‘War-time’, ‘Politics’ and ‘Jamaica Now and Then’. However, some of the poems do not fit easily into the broader headings and arguably Morris’s breakdown of the poems into smaller sections is more successful. Morris presented the poems in *Selected Poems* using a quoted line from each set of poems which he presented in groups according to content, such as ‘hard-time a beat

¹²² Morris, “Louise Bennett’s poetry”, 1981. Audio cassette

¹²³ Mervyn Morris, interviewed by Aileen Lobban “Miss Lou and Me” in emailed responses to the author, 9th February 2017.

¹²⁴ Mel Cooke, “Mervyn Morris extends literary hand to writers – ‘On Reading Miss Lou Seriously’ first published in 1964”, *The Gleaner*, 8th February 2010.

we’ or ‘She hope den caution worl-map.’ I queried whether the choice of grouping was his choice or Bennett’s, to which Morris replied: ‘I did the grouping of poems and then found I could name each group with a quotation from one of the poems’.¹²⁵ In earlier publications, the poems are either indexed alphabetically by name (*Jamaican dialect verses*); by contributor, as in Bennett, McKay or Marson in *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*; or under headings such as ‘Remember When?’ And ‘Verses and Songs’ in *Laugh with Louise*.

As the reading and knowledge of Bennett increased over the years, Morris became her foremost champion in such a way that Etherington, in 2016, perceptively notes in his ‘reply’ to Morris’s 50-year-old landmark article in Caribbean literary criticism:

it is only when reading across Morris’ body of criticism, as he brought the same seriousness to bear on the range of post-colonial Caribbean poetry, that the new poetic materials acquire their sense of historical importance - the critics sensitivity is a seismograph of cultural spirit”.¹²⁶

It is within this broader arc of critical work that we must retrospectively read that first bold statement in 1963 which heralded Morris’s lifelong duty of care to present Bennett as the poet he first recognised. His book, *Miss Lou, Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture*, is described by Edward Baugh as ‘the crowning product of Mervyn’s engagement over the past 55 years’.¹²⁷

Morris’s seminal article of 1963, ‘On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously’, was the first presentation of a serious analysis of Bennett’s poetic writing and her place within the emergent canon of Caribbean literature.¹²⁸ Up to this point Bennett had not been taken seriously as a poet — she had been accepted as an entertainer but had been considered in her poetic role almost as ‘a local joke’ as she was ‘just doing dialect’.¹²⁹ Six decades later, I will be responding to Morris’s entreaty to read Louise Bennett seriously by examining all the genres she works in through the lens of proverbial thinking. The *Proverb Manuscript* offers an invaluable source to explicate the deeper allusions and insights of her proverbial thinking and I will illustrate how that is absorbed into her creativity. The seamless use of the proverbs in her writing and performances shows a skill that only a ‘serious’ artist

¹²⁵ Mervyn Morris, “Miss Lou and Me” interview with Aileen Lobban, 2017.

¹²⁶ Ben Etherington, “On Scanning Louise Bennett, Seriously”, *Journal of West Indian Literature*, Vol 23, No. 1 / 2 (April 2016), 20.

¹²⁷ Edward Baugh, “Morris presents ‘Miss Lou: Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture’”, report of book launch of Morris, *Miss Lou: Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture*, *Jamaica Gleaner*, 12th February 2015. <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20150212/ent/ent1.html>

¹²⁸ Morris, “On Reading Louise Bennett”, 69-74.

¹²⁹ Morris, “On Reading Louise Bennett”, 69-74.

would be capable of, and Bennett qualifies as one such artist. The following research shows how the transference of one proverb from one poem into another allows us to consider the rich thematic linkage in Bennett's work and also appreciate the foundational place of proverbs in her work. This method provides me with a different approach where I show that the poems and other genres can speak to each other proverbially. As I demonstrate throughout the thesis, proverbs are mutable in form and meaning, and the proverbial overlay from poem to poem, and genre to genre allows multiple interpretations and criticism to be explored. This opens up many possibilities for a new and exciting critique in the following chapter where a particular proverb inhabits one poem but can also be activated in another poem even when it is not explicitly referenced there. This prompts a re-imagining of the 'job of poetry' in a new nation that is itself changing and moving forward.¹³⁰

Proverb Definition

Over the decades there has been much debate as to the definition of the proverb by scholars such as Alan Dundes and Wolfgang Mieder who were co-editors of the 1981 anthology *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb*.¹³¹ Notably, and rather intriguingly due to the richness of this source, neither Dundes nor Mieder, in their vast studies of folklore, researched Jamaican proverbs.¹³² In the 1981 collection of essays, Dundes quotes Archer Taylor's early and pessimistic statement concerning the fact that the proverb has never been adequately defined.¹³³ The statement in question constitutes the beginning of Taylor's 1931 seminal book on proverbs:

The definition of the proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking. An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial as no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ The notion of the 'job of poetry' will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

¹³¹ Wolfgang Mieder and Alan Dundes, ed. *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1981).

¹³² Wolfgang Mieder, email message to the author, August 19th, 2015.

¹³³ Alan Dundes, "On the Structure of the Proverb", *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb*, ed. by Wolfgang Mieder and Alan Dundes (New York: Garland Publishers, 1981), 44.

¹³⁴ Archer Taylor, *The Proverb* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931).

In fact, in a personal remark to Dundes, Taylor claimed that in a way his whole book constituted a definition of the proverb, thus revealing the complexity of defining the proverb.¹³⁵ In response, Dundes submitted that even a tentative definition of a proverb should be useful to any form of proverb research, either in researching a single proverb or in searching for national character traits in the proverb corpus of a single culture.¹³⁶ Many scholars have given definitions of the proverb and continue to discuss the aspect that Dundes observes of a cultural communality latent in proverbs. For instance, Beckwith, in the introduction to her collection of *Jamaica Proverbs* collection does not attempt a formal definition but generalises on the everyday commonality and usage of the proverb, claiming that the proverbs express the justifications of the ‘vicissitudes of life’.¹³⁷ Early in the paremiological debate, in his essay entitled ‘The Wisdom of Many and the Wit of One’, Taylor notes that a proverb belongs to many people.¹³⁸ This notion that proverbs belong to many people is repeated by Mieder in his discussions concerning the collective nature of proverbs in his book *Behold the Proverbs of a People*.¹³⁹ In this book, he cites, as a general working definition, Stuart Gallagher’s statement that ‘a proverb is a concise statement of an apparent truth which has (had or will have) currency among the people’.¹⁴⁰

This common inheritance or the sense of group identity, is one which we see Bennett embracing in her work. Commonality as a means of communication through proverbs is a notion that Mervyn Morris also agrees with, and he offers a succinct interpretation of the use of proverbs which serves as an anchor for my own analysis. He writes that:

in Bennet’s poems (whether in print or performance) proverbs often serve to widen the significance of an incident or situation; because they represent the distillation of generations of experience, proverbs, appropriately placed, often remind us that the immediate difficulty or the immediate occasion for joy is not entirely new and that the present moment is part of the flow of communal experience.¹⁴¹

Morris’s interpretation of the use of proverbs is one that I will be using in my own analysis. For instance, my own expansion of poetic interpretation through proverbs, in

¹³⁵ Dundes, “Structure of the Proverb”, footnote 7, 62.

¹³⁶ Dundes, “Structure of the Proverb”, 43.

¹³⁷ Beckwith, *Jamaica Proverbs*, 5.

¹³⁸ Archer Taylor, “The Wisdom of Many and the Wit of One”, *The Wisdom of Many, Essays on the Proverb*, ed. by Wolfgang Mieder and Alan Dundes (New York: Garland Publishers, 1981), 3.

¹³⁹ Wolfgang Mieder, *Behold the Proverbs of a People: Proverbial Wisdom in Culture, Literature, and Politics* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014).

¹⁴⁰ Mieder, “Behold the Proverbs”, 21.

¹⁴¹ Morris, *Selected Poems*, xxiv

referring to the *Proverb Manuscript*, echoes Morris's observation that the proverbs 'widen the significance of an incident'. The historicity that is embodied by proverbs is neatly captured in his phrase the 'distillation of generations of experience' but Morris also wishes to recognise the immediacy of proverbial usage. As we look at Bennett's creative proverbial experiments it is helpful to remember that the 'present moment' of any proverbial expression will also be 'part of the flow of communal experience'.

In looking at Bennett's use of proverbs, Carolyn Cooper gives a more concise definition than Morris. She summarises Bennett's use of proverbs as follows:

Thematically, the proverb provides conclusive evidence of the socially recognised truth of the argument that a particular Bennett persona articulates.

Structurally, the metaphorical proverb employs graphic imagery derived from everyday Jamaican life as the vehicle for social commentary,

In both subject and structure the metaphorical proverb affirms Bennett's umbilical connection to that matrix of oral Jamaican folklore.¹⁴²

This twofold theory of theme and structure embraces the idea that there are two basic assumptions that proverb scholars make: one, that proverbs express truths about cultural identity and values; and secondly that these truths are accessible from the proverbs either through an understanding of its metaphorical expression or its non-metaphorical language. There are questions that arise concerning these assumptions such as, for instance, questioning the presumption of truth in the face of translation issues, oral authenticity and interpretative issues. These assumptions also raise the question as to whether truth can be accessed from the language of the proverb alone without knowledge of the culture and the context. These issues are, therefore, approached by scholars in differing ways. There are text-orientated scholars, linguists focusing on grammatical standards of the speech item to determine meaning, performance-orientated scholars and those who adopt a sociolinguistic perspective. I suggest that one can adopt an amalgamation of all of these when studying the proverb and I take a contextual approach in analysing Bennett's proverbial usage, which relies upon the study of the wider context of the speech event, as proposed by Ruth Finnegan.¹⁴³ It is important not to focus on the wording of the proverb alone and not to take it in isolation. Nowadays, as Mieder explains, it is almost a cliché to point this out, but

¹⁴² Carolyn Cooper, "Noh Lickle Twang: An Introduction to the Poetry of Louise Bennett", *World Literature Written in English*, Vol 17, No. 1. (1978): 317-327.

¹⁴³ Ruth Finnegan, *Studying Oral Texts* (N.P.: Callender Press, 2013), 19.

it took a long time for anthropologically-oriented proverb collectors to go beyond mere text and look at the use and function of the proverbial material in actual speech acts – ‘modern scholars trained in the theoretical aspects of speech acts or performance look at proverbs as part of active verbal communication’.¹⁴⁴ Bennett’s performance lifts the words from the page, and it necessarily follows that the proverbs become verbalised “speech acts” in themselves. Bennett approaches her performances as an art form and concerns herself with preserving the social and cultural factors of her native Jamaica. For this reason, I would query Finnegan’s assertion that performance is not important to the nature of the proverbs:

unlike stories and songs, the performance does not generally seem to be of importance. Rather, proverbs rely for their effect on the aptness with which they are used in a particular situation and on the style and form of words in which they appear.¹⁴⁵

In other words, for Finnegan, it is important not to focus on the proverb as a text in isolation but instead on the effectiveness of proverbs which relies on their verbal structure and application but not specifically on the performance context. My response is that the proverb is an intrinsically performative form. The importance of ‘aptness’ and ‘site-specificity’ makes the use of proverbs creative performances rather than merely quotations and should be evaluated in Bennett’s case as such. I will be returning to consider Bennett’s creative performances in detail in Chapter Five where I will explore more fully the connection between Bennett’s performative practice and her proverbial thinking.

Cooper’s second premise — that structurally, the metaphorical proverb employs graphic imagery derived from everyday Jamaican life as the vehicle for social commentary — suggests that Bennett provides a commentary on her environment through the use of proverbs. I agree with this statement in terms of the use of proverbial imagery, and I would suggest that Bennett’s poetic imagery is focused on observed detail from everyday life. According to Philips, ‘at the heart of all creative writing (particularly poetry) is the image, the basis for which is the word/ symbol’, but this applies to Bennett’s poetry in a particular

¹⁴⁴ Wolfgang Mieder, “Proverbs and Poetry are Like Two Peas in a Pod: the Proverbial Language of Modern Mini-Poems” (conference paper, The Third Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs, International Association of Paremiology, Tavira, Portugal, November 8th – 15th 2009).

¹⁴⁵ Ruth Finnegan, “Oral Literature in Africa”, in *World Oral Literature Series* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers CIC Ltd., 2012): 388.

way.¹⁴⁶ Bennett does not dwell on figurative imagery but instead dwells stylistically on observation, dialogue, and proverbs. The proverbs provide rich pictures through animal imagery such as ‘Dog wag him tail fi suit him size’¹⁴⁷ or ‘cock cyaan beat cock eena cock own yard’¹⁴⁸ where the audience can picture the dog or the cock fight. Equally, pictures of homestead and warmth are conjured up within the moralistic proverb ‘Ef yuh no go a man fire-side, yuh no know ow much fire’s tick a bwile him pot’.¹⁴⁹ In my opinion there is a scarcity of figurative imagery across Bennett’s writing but I propose that, including the imagery provided by the proverbs, Bennett’s collective poems create one comprehensive image. In other words, she paints a collage of Jamaican life over the corpus of her poems. I will return to this notion in Chapter Two. With this approach, one may argue that imagery is still at the heart of her writing, but that Bennett’s is a plural and indirect approach to image. This approach mirrors Caribbean culture itself which is drawn to plurality and diversity, and this is a quality which I will illustrate is also evident in proverbs.

In shifting to take a more thematic approach to proverbs, it is important to consider how the proverb relates to folklore and how it represents a speech element within the field of folklore. Scholars such as Brathwaite, Ford Smith and Cooper have pointed to the importance of orality on Caribbean cultures which they identify as the locus of a self-defined critical perspective emerging from Caribbean people’s experience. Hodges, however, is aware that the use of proverbs in Caribbean oral art is one that carries risk:

Proverbs have not had the same status that they had in precolonial Africa; they have been part of a folk culture that Jamaicans were once taught to execrate and many still try to distance themselves from. Consequently, the kind of imaginative concrete proverbs that would lend a speech power and authority in Africa are just as likely to have the opposite effect in Jamaica. So, using one in oratory or poetry is a calculated risk.... a risk that Louise Bennett has been taking for more than fifty years.¹⁵⁰

Bennett takes this calculated risk and in so doing negates the adversity that Hodges notes — this thesis defends Bennett’s use of proverbs in oratory or poetry and claims her as a visionary in addressing the danger. There is also a danger in reading a proverb in a

¹⁴⁶ Marlene Norbese Philip, “The Absence of Writing”, in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido. (New Jersey: African World Press, Inc. 1990; repr. 1994), 272.

¹⁴⁷ See the poem ‘Independence’ (*Jamaica Labrish*, 170; *Selected Poems*, 129).

¹⁴⁸ See the poem ‘Nyaga Yard’ (*Selected Poems*, 113).

¹⁴⁹ See the poem ‘Proverbs’ (*Jamaica Dialect Verses*, 35; *Jamaica Labrish* 217; *Selected Poems*, 59).

¹⁵⁰ Hugh Hodges, *Soon Come: Jamaican Spirituality, Jamaican Poetics* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 67.

culturally insensitive/inappropriate way. Returning to consider how folklore has to be read through the lens of the ‘folk’, and the complexities of that term, Dundes states that the concept of ‘folk’ itself may be helpful in the study of identity and continues by defining the ‘folk’ as ‘any group of people who share at least one common factor, be it a common occupation, language or religion, i.e. a group which will have some traditions which it calls its own’.¹⁵¹ A member of such a group would know the common core of the traditions of the group and therefore create part of their own and the group’s identity. The use of proverbs, therefore, invokes a community which shares a communal wisdom, even when the user is distanced from their perceived homeland. Bennett believed that Jamaican culture (and the insistent proverb) contained within it the wisdom to deal with a changing world and her corpus of work challenges perceptions that proverbs and folklore are not relevant today. This is equally validated by Hodges’s observation that Bennett ‘restored the authority of the proverbial voice by showing that it was capable of talking about contemporary Jamaica’.¹⁵²

Ultimately, Wolfgang Meider’s definition of the proverb emphasises traits that I return to throughout this thesis:

A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation.¹⁵³

I also rely on Meider’s definition of the proverb as ‘a sentence of the folk’. In addition, I return to the terms within the definition given by Neal R. Norrick in his monograph, *How Proverbs Mean*.¹⁵⁴ Norrick draws together terms used by scholars who, throughout the years, have repeatedly identified certain defining characteristics of proverbs. His succinct summation is as follows:

Proverbs are consistently described as self-contained, pithy, traditional expressions with didactic content and fixed poetic form.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Dundes, *Folklore Matters*, 11.

¹⁵² Hodges, *Soon Come*, 67.

¹⁵³ Wolfgang Mieder, *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season; Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age (International Folkloristics)* (N.P.: Peter Lang Publishers, 2012), 24.

¹⁵⁴ Norrick, “How Proverbs Mean”, 32.

¹⁵⁵ Norrick, “How Proverbs Mean”, 32.

These particular terms form the grounding for my examination of proverbial thinking in Bennett's works where each genre encapsulates one or more of the qualities referred to in Norrick's terminology.

This first introductory chapter has presented Louise Bennett as a folklorist, storyteller and an artist. The focus of the thesis is Bennett's use of proverbs in her poetry, monologues, the Anancy stories and performances. In each chapter the *Proverb Manuscript* offers a rich source of material to expand the reading of the impact of the proverbs.

In Chapter Two I explore how an ever more 'serious' reading of her poetry is prompted first through an analysis of her poetic techniques, including the inclusion of proverbs; then I argue that one can use implied proverbs to forge links between certain groups of poems and create a comparative categorising framework to Morris and Nettleford's editions. These analyses are expanded with reference to the *Proverb Manuscript* and the interpretations afforded through the moral and thematic headings under which the proverbs are placed.

I continue in Chapter Three by looking at Bennett's published and unpublished monologues, where the greatest use of proverbs is seen. Bennett made a point of requesting that the proverbs in each monologue be listed at the end of each piece – with some having as many as thirteen. In this way, the proverbs provide a parallel commentary to the content of the monologues. I follow the trajectory from the recording of *Miss Lou's Views* to the textual representation of *Aunty Roachy Seh* through observing the significance of changes in media forms at that period. In this chapter, I also examine one of the unpublished monologues held in the archives at McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada, in order to show that Bennett's interests in proverbial thinking extend through to her unpublished corpus of work. One of her more famous poems, 'Dutty Tough', is included in this unpublished monologue and here I have identified two extra verses which will have rarely been seen as these verses were not published in her poetry collections. This is an unexpected and intriguing discovery.

In Chapter Four, using Bennett's *Proverb Manuscript*, I illustrate how the insertion of implied proverbs into the Anancy stories can expand current interpretations of Bennett's work. The chapter circles back to the topic of folklore itself, discussed in the present chapter. To forward this discussion of folklore and the teller of stories, I discuss the notion forwarded by Jahan Ramazani that Anancy is Bennett's mythical avatar, which links to

ideas of the past and present Jamaican identity. Furthermore, in this chapter I propose that the Anancy stories themselves can be read as elongated proverbs that subsume the proverbial qualities highlighted by Norrick.

Chapter Five focuses on the ‘voice’ of Louise Bennett and explores her identity as a performer and the multiple characters and personae that animate her performances. I include an analysis from the LP *Yes M’ Dear*¹⁵⁶ where I identify the links she makes between language, travel and home to create a framework for her performance. I also analyse a rare short clip from the National Jamaican Library of Bennett discussing proverbs.¹⁵⁷ This is framed within the argument that proverbial thinking underpins all of Bennett’s performances. This chapter also attends to the notion of ‘performability’ and the paradox of ‘live’ or scripted and rehearsed performances.

The overall shape of the chapters broadly follows an arc from the textual representation (Chapters Two/Three/Four) to oral and performative representations of proverbs (Chapters Three/Four/Five). I recognise that most of Bennett’s works are importantly oral and performative, but in this thesis I examine her poetry through their printed forms. The monologues and Anancy stories are discussed through both scribal and oral media and the performances through the oral and aural. This thesis offers both a close reading of the textual representations of Louise Bennett’s work, and a critical framework of ‘proverbial thinking’ through which to recognise Bennett’s connected creative practices. My belief is that identifying Bennett’s proverbial approach, through her specific use of proverbs, in close conjunction with her own *Proverb Manuscript*, constitutes a new reading of her works. I use the moral and thematic categories in the *Proverb Manuscript* to advance a deeper understanding of Bennett’s use of the proverbs in certain poems and monologues that has not yet been explicated.

¹⁵⁶Louise Bennett, *Miss Lou, Yes M’ Dear*, Island Records, 1983, LP.

¹⁵⁷National Library of Jamaica, “‘When Trouble Teck Man, Pickney Boot Fit Him!’ - Miss Lou Talks Jamaican Proverbs”, YouTube Video, 4:06, Sept. 7, 2012.

Chapter Two

‘After all, proverbs are the poetry of the people!’:¹⁵⁸ The Impact of Proverbial Thinking within Louise Bennett’s Poetry

Scholars have long recognised the importance of proverbs for Bennett’s poetry, but none has yet offered an in-depth study of her use of this form and then compared the place of proverbial thinking in her poetic practice to her other creative practices. In this chapter I will demonstrate how proverbs are key to understanding Bennett’s poetry. I will argue that she creates a multi-layered poetic art form, and I will illustrate how the proverbs expand our readings of the poetic text through the multiple meanings they offer. Bennett was aware of the importance of folklore material as a means of capturing the concerns and interests of a community, including the importance of proverbs. As a result, she presents poetry and proverbs as intimately connected art forms within a communally shared linguistic and cultural heritage. This view is supported by Klive Walker, who observes that Bennett, whilst expressing the social concern of everyday people, ‘did not invent the Jamaican language or its spicy metaphors and proverbs, (but) must be credited for elevating it to an art form’.¹⁵⁹

The following chapter also leans on an analysis of Bennett’s *Proverb Manuscript* to provide a wider understanding of her literary use of proverbs. The *Proverb Manuscript* offers a unique and nuanced source text to contextualise and advance a reading of Bennett’s poetry. The *Proverb Manuscript* shows the inter-relational quality of proverbial thinking identifiable in Bennett’s work. As previously noted, in the *Proverb Manuscript* Bennett organises proverbs under moral and thematic headings, such as *Greed*, *Ambition*, *Caution* and offers ‘translated’ meanings of the proverbs in Standard English. As I will demonstrate, an examination of this taxonomy and interpretation of proverbs offers a suggestively open reading of their impact on Bennett’s poetry. Scholars such as Mervyn Morris and Carolyn Cooper have considered her explicit use of proverbs within her poetry.

¹⁵⁸ Janet Sobieski and Wolfgang Mieder, eds., “So Many Heads, So Many Wits”: *An Anthology of English Proverb Poetry (Proverbium)*, (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont, 2005), xiv.

¹⁵⁹ Klive Walker, *Dubwise: Reasoning from the Reggae Underground* (London, Ontario: Insomniac Press, 2005), 73.

I want to extend this critical inquiry to show that proverbs inevitably intersect with and shape Bennett's poetry, and that a wider proverbial thinking informs her poetic practice.

Reframing Bennett's Poetry Through Proverbial Thinking

In this critical evaluation of how Bennett's use of proverbs extends the possibilities of interpreting her poetic art, I will be referring to her two most recognised poetry publications discussed in Chapter One: *Jamaica Labrish* published in 1966, and *Selected Poems* published in 1982.¹⁶⁰ The two publications taken together offer 209 poems; 47 poems are duplicated in both and 34 poems formerly unpublished in book form or out of print are included in *Selected Poems*. Out of these 162 poems collated over both volumes by Nettleford and Morris, 28 poems use a total of 51 proverbs. It is those 28 proverbial poems that form the basis for the analyses that follow as I consider the explicit and implied use of proverbs within Bennett's poetry. *Selected Poems*, as the later volume, includes 18 poems with proverbs inserted, 11 of these poems being repeated from *Jamaica Labrish* with 7 new poems which contain 10 new proverbs. Carolyn Cooper, in Appendix II of *Noises in the Blood*, lists 48 proverbs in total but my analysis over the two volumes has identified 50 proverbs.¹⁶¹ The two proverbs absent in Cooper's Appendix are: 'dog wag him tail fi suit him size'; and 'de same sinting weh sweet man mout/wi meck him lose him head'.¹⁶² In providing an Appendix of proverbs used in Louise Bennett's poetry we see Cooper involved in the act of collecting and preserving folklore in the same way as those earlier collectors such as Jekyll and Beckwith. The fact that Cooper recorded the proverbs means that she, too, notes the importance Bennett places on proverbs and is alerting the reader to that. There is no 'translation' given in the Appendix but in most instances the meaning is discussed within the text of Cooper's chapter. Her in-text explanations of the 'translation' of each proverb aid a non-Creole speaker or one not familiar with Jamaican proverbs to engage more fully in her arguments, which centre around the proverb as

¹⁶⁰ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish: Jamaican Dialect Poems*. Ed. Rex Nettleford (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1966); Bennett, *Selected Poems*. Ed. Mervyn Morris (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1982).

¹⁶¹ Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan Education, 1993), 200.

¹⁶² See 'Independance', Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 130/ *Jamaica Labrish*, 169; 'Tan a Yuh Yard', *Selected Poems*, 122/ *Jamaica Labrish*, 93.

metaphor in Bennett's poetry. Cooper's argument will be explored further later in the chapter.

An analysis that is attentive to proverbial thinking firstly allows an analytical review of Bennett's poems through proverbs which are *explicitly* written into her poetic texts. Secondly, this approach allows an exploration of the links forged between poems through proverbs that are *implied* but not explicitly written into her poems. These distinctions have enabled me to identify three areas of proverbial use through which I can explore how the proverbs provide a wider and more significant reading of the poems. Each approach will be considered in detail throughout this chapter.

The first approach I take illustrates how proverbs can form a structural framework as, for example, in the poem 'Proverbs' where multiple proverbs are explicitly placed within the verse lines.¹⁶³ This leads to a unique layering effect within the poetic narrative wherein the structuring power of proverbs dominates the poem. A second approach examines how Bennett employs a proverb as a core element to a poem where the poem circles around the proverb, that is to say where the poetry relies upon the inherent qualities of the proverb to enhance the poetic narrative. An example of this technique, which I analyse in detail later, is the poem 'Wartime Grocery'.¹⁶⁴ Bennett borrows from the imagery inherent in the central proverb, 'Jackass say de worl' noh level', and harnesses it to flesh out the poetic narrative.

In the two areas of proverbial use, referred to above, that is as structuring device and as integral core of a poem, both rely upon the presence of an explicit proverb within the poems. In reframing her poetry for a new critique, I also propose a third approach which considers the absence of proverbs in Bennett's corpus of poetry. If proverbs do not appear in all of Bennett's poetry why then should we still prioritise the influence of proverbial thinking in her poetic practice? To respond to this, I argue that the poems can be implicitly related to proverbs even when the latter are not explicitly embedded in the poems; as such, by approaching the poems through the principle of proverbial thinking, the poems can be seen to form a conversation across Bennett's collections. As with my analysis of the explicit use of proverbs in Bennett's poetic work, I will be referring to the *Proverb*

¹⁶³ Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Dialect Verses*, compiled by George R. Bowen (Kingston: The Herald Ltd, 1942), 35; *Jamaica Labrish*, 217; *Selected Poems*, 58.

¹⁶⁴ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 83.

Manuscript as an essential source for exploring the cross transference of proverbs by implication.

Approaching Bennett's poetry proverbially also opens multiple opportunities to see the impact of folklore elements in her poetry. Anand Prahlad captures the excitement and power of proverbial thinking when he writes: 'when my great grandmother or my grandmother or my mother or some of the older people used a proverb, there was something about it that made me stand still and ponder and sort of feel that I was part of a magical moment in time'.¹⁶⁵ This evocation of feeling 'part of a magical moment in time' also encapsulates an emotional response to the immense span of generational wisdom passed down in the proverbs. In his book *Reggae Wisdom* Prahlad further reflects on the paradoxical place of proverbs which 'assist in maintaining a precarious balance between hopefulness and realism... The key to staying alive lies in life's ever-present potential for transformation and transcendence'.¹⁶⁶

It is this precarious line between 'hopefulness and realism' across which Bennett balances the proverbs in her poetry that I bring into my discussion. Both these statements by Prahlad crystallise elements of the nature of proverbs, which lie, as he notes, in the inherited wisdom of generations but also rely on the ability to transform. Proverbs help us understand the world as it is, but also offer ways to survive, thrive, challenge and transform the worlds we live in. This idea of transformation is key to my argument that the power of proverbs — and by extension the proverbial thinking to which they give rise — offers the creative artist a multiplicity of meanings with which to experiment.

Prahlad's infectious hopefulness originates from the validation brought by the everyday integration of proverbial wisdom that has been passed down through communities over generations. To borrow Carolyn Cooper's phrase here, 'the essence of a proverb is its immediacy of access to members of the community'.¹⁶⁷ Sharing a communal folklore heritage can be integral to the identity formations of a society and the presence of proverbs assists in representing the realities of a society that shares an understanding of them. Commonality is integral to the relationship of Bennett's poetry and proverbs, where the proverbial element embodies the commonality of the folk, that is 'the people' that Mieder

¹⁶⁵ Michael Keulker, "An Interview with Anand Prahlad", *African American Review*. Vol. 43, No. 4. (2009): 658.

¹⁶⁶ S.W. Anand Prahlad, *Reggae Wisdom: Proverbs in Jamaican Music* (USA: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 110.

¹⁶⁷ Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 38.

refers to in the titular quotation: ‘*After all, proverbs are the poetry of the people!*’¹⁶⁸ By integrating proverbs into her creative art, Bennett is promoting not just a sense of cultural identity through the language she uses, but she is championing the traditions of Jamaican heritage as part of a living literary and communal conversation. Not only does Bennett use Creole to undermine the position of colonial Standard English, but she fully values the wealth of oral folklore of her heritage, highlighted specifically by her use of proverbs. Her poetry presents a communal, cultural “writing.” In essence, she engages a community of readers/audiences in a Creole conversation.

To elaborate on this notion of a literary conversation framed in traditional expressions, it is helpful to return to Neal Norrick’s definition of proverbs outlined in the introductory chapter. In his definition, proverbs are consistently described as self-contained, pithy, traditional expressions with didactic content and a fixed poetic form.¹⁶⁹ To interrogate this further, Norrick considers how the traditional nature of proverbs correlates closely with their status as items of folklore. He writes that:

the correlation between traditionality and folklore status comes out clearly in Abrahams 1969 definition of folklore as ‘traditional items of knowledge which arise in recurring performance’...since folklore is traditional and recurring it is viewed as authorless, sourceless and also as non-literary, non-learned. Further in as much as proverbs are linguistic items, the recurring performances in question must be verbal (even if they are later recorded in writing).¹⁷⁰

Norrick observes the traditional aspect of proverbs in the framework of their repetition through recurring performance, their authorless nature and the oral nature of the performances. These observations now move the discussion on to consider the linguistic and performative nature of the proverbs and help us when considering why and how Bennett incorporates proverbs within her poetry.

As highlighted in Chapter One, the traditional wisdoms from older generations were initially passed down orally, and the emphasis Norrick gives to transmission of a non-literary proverbial form through oral channels accords with the debates surrounding the move from oral to text that scholars have continually debated within the field of Caribbean studies and across the body of Bennett’s work. Norrick’s parenthetical comment on ‘writing’ also raises questions as to the collectability of proverbs in written form, although

¹⁶⁸ Janet Sobieski and Wolfgang Mieder ed., “*So Many Heads, So Many Wits*”: *An Anthology of English Proverb Poetry (Proverbium)* (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont, 2005), xiv.

¹⁶⁹ Norrick, “*How Proverbs Mean*”, 32.

¹⁷⁰ Norrick, “*How Proverbs Mean*”, 39.

the shortness and the self-contained nature of proverbs allow them to be more easily remembered and would support more accurate representations in text. In the collections mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, the proverbs were written and recorded from field work and from listening to sources. Proverbs remain essentially speech elements within the field of folklore, and Bennett embraces oral forms in performance and in the written textual form in her poetry. Her live performances, which I deal with in the final chapter of this thesis, emphasise how proverbs come alive in spoken form as part of the living culture that Prahlad proposes. Bennett thereby manages the perceived schism between oral and written, and in utilising proverbs she creates a space for this ‘traditional item of knowledge’ in preserving, validating, and shaping the cultural identities and poetics of Jamaican people.

Lisa Tomlinson elaborates on Bennett’s skilful balance between oral and written form:

In reintroducing and legitimizing oral folk knowledge during a time when such a literary approach was often seen as inferior, Bennett’s use of this approach, across the span of the written form, allowed her to speak directly to Jamaicans, thus promoting self-pride and a holistic sense of cultural identity.¹⁷¹

The description of a ‘holistic sense of cultural identity’ is key here. In this respect, Bennett was a visionary; she accepted the challenge at the time to champion the Jamaican ‘dialect’ (as she named it in her earliest publications), which was itself seen as inferior, utilising it in both performance and in the crafting of written representation. Carolyn Cooper also perceives that Bennett was ahead of her time in the Caribbean;

She (Bennett) has long recognised the evocative power of Jamaican proverbs as the locus of folk philosophy. She weaves this wealth of cultural inheritance and knowledge into her artistry and the application of proverbs demonstrates a cross fertilisation of that inheritance within the construct of her poems.¹⁷²

The cross fertilisation of inheritance that Cooper refers to allows Bennett to bring the wealth of generational wisdom provided by the proverbs into her poems and Cooper hints here that ‘folk philosophy’ — or we might say proverbial thinking — is a dynamic transformative part of Bennett’s poetics. Bennett’s use of the proverbs reinforces the idea

¹⁷¹ Lisa Tomlinson, *The Afro-Jamaican Aesthetic: Cultural Retention and Transformation Across Borders* (Amsterdam: Brill 2017), 17–18.

¹⁷² Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 45.

that multiplicity is central to reading her poems. In the quotation above Cooper calls this ‘the evocative power of Jamaican proverbs’.¹⁷³

It is helpful then to focus on the choices Bennett makes to incorporate the proverbial speech elements into her poetic art. Notably, it is indeterminable whether Bennett drafted poems around the proverbs, or whether she incorporated the proverb whilst creating a particular poem. Her extensive knowledge of proverbs leads me to speculate that she had the dexterity to incorporate the relevant proverb whilst she was creating the poem — this corpus of proverbs was part of an extended vocabulary on which she could draw as she drafted her work. To date there are no existing drafts or working manuscripts of her poetry. The presence of the proverbs creates a synergistic relationship between her poetry and proverbs which leads to the re-valuing of proverbs as spoken art forms and seeing poetry as an important site of proverbial expression. This encourages the reader to reimagine the complementary relationship created between the poetry and proverbial thought. In incorporating the speech elements of proverbs, Bennett blurs the boundaries of both the oral representation of Creole, and the oral origins of proverbs with the written textual representations of vocal performance. Cooper places Louise Bennett as a ‘Caribbean artist consciously incorporating features of tradition oral art into the written literature’,¹⁷⁴ and Tomlinson summarises the cultural context that we should remember where ‘proverbs permeated day-to-day living. They served not only as a philosophical system but also as a non-scribal mode that would later find its way into Jamaican literature and music’.¹⁷⁵

With this discussion of oral and textual representation in mind it is expedient to first evaluate the broader purposes of Bennett’s poetry within the context of ‘day-to-day living’ in Jamaica.

Bennett the Poet: The ‘Job’ of Poetry

Writing in 1965, Edward Lucie-Smith comments on the propulsion behind Bennett’s poetic drive, stating that Bennett ‘went a long way to proving that a large part of the job of poetry

¹⁷³ Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 45.

¹⁷⁴ Cooper, *Noises in The Blood*, 39.

¹⁷⁵ Tomlinson, “The Afro-Jamaican Aesthetic”, 16.

in a new nation is not to make or break images but to tell the truth so that it sounds true'.¹⁷⁶ Here Lucie-Smith sidesteps modernist poetic practices of making it new to instead position Bennett as a poetic truth-teller able to give voice to a new nation. A year later, in his 1966 publication, Nettleford expands on this, writing that we must assume that 'all Jamaican poets have at one time or another understood that challenging role of their art, but not many of them have quite found out how to realise it'.¹⁷⁷ He notes that Bennett herself went back to basics by understanding that she lived within oral traditions, and she took on the challenge in her role as an artist to communicate to the people in multiple forms as a poet. Lucie-Smith's notion of the job of poetry being 'to tell the truth so that it sounds true' is meaningful to my focus of considering Bennett's role as a poet as well as critics' perceptions of her motivations in this context. We see this in Bennett's use of Creole to validate a new truth, and when she uses techniques within her poetry to point to certain truths, such as the turn to humour, an often distanced authorial presence, and through the use of proverbs and proverbial thinking. Nettleford incorporates the above quotation in *Jamaica Labrish* to substantiate his point that we must read Bennett's work against the background of her society. In her role as a documenter, Bennett did not look internally but rather externally to create her own poetic voice, with an ear to the voices she heard within her Jamaican community. In her poems, she commented on social relations by representing the voices of people through dramatic monologues. Morris writes of Bennett that 'most of her poems were tied to specific events', but he continues by arguing that they have 'significance beyond the immediate occasion of their origin, especially, as Lloyd Brown has pointed out, 'their focus is less on the specific topics of the 1940's [...] and more on the continuing modes of perception and communication which they dramatize'.¹⁷⁸

The specificity of the context which Bennett writes about — everyday events in Jamaica — builds a picture of the connected nature of communal experience across her poetry. What is also significant about her poetic output is her attention to characters, how they can voice their place in their world and how poetry can frame these 'modes of perception and

¹⁷⁶ Edward Lucie-Smith, quoted in Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 10, Footnote 5 – from an article entitled 'Recessional', *Sunday Times*, October 3, 1965.

¹⁷⁷ Nettleford, notes and introduction to Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish* (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1966; repr. 1973 – 95), 10, 11. Here Nettleford acknowledges Morris, who notes the same dichotomy. Nettleford further suggests a comparison with the dialect poems of Claude McKay, who I will be discussing later in this chapter.

¹⁷⁸ Lloyd W Brown, *West Indian Poetry* (Boston Twayne Publishers, 1978) quoted in Morris, *Miss Lou*, 64.

communication' that Lloyd Brown notes.¹⁷⁹ The poet, through irony and incisive observation, points out truths that can be generalised to other human foibles or situations.

Bennett's use of proverbs is integral to her poetic approach to the 'everyday'. And as proverbs are part of the collective voice of the people, they also become part of the 'job' of poetry. For this reason, the job of poetry can be examined through the interplay that Bennett creates between poetry and proverbs. This relationship provides multiple ways to understand Bennett's own recurring concerns and interests in the culture and heritage of Jamaica. Proverbial poetry is informed by social experience and practice, and for Bennett it enables a non-partisan critique of those experiences and practices. Bennett's focus on listening to and reframing different voices allows proverbs to fulfil Mieder's claim that they are 'the poetry of the people'. In Bennett's poetry, the commonality of the proverbial heritage creates a means to reclaim truths passed on through ancestral voices where proverbs open out layers of historicity and interpretation from within a poetic construct.

The phrase 'layers of historicity' is one that I use to emphasise the idea that the proverbs are calling back to the past, with each proverb layering echoes of the voices of those who have lived and communed before. Being authorless, the proverbs retain a sense of being related to the wisdoms of older generations even as they remain relevant in contemporary contexts. The voices coming through are reflected in the multiplicity of the voices within Bennett's poetic narratives and this is also something to consider when looking at Bennett's characters and personae, especially Aunty Roachy and her use of proverbial knowledge in the monologues. Essentially, the notion of historicity asks us what qualities of the past we understand to be relevant and perhaps challenges us to frame the past in particular ways. Prahlad's holistic understanding is of the proverb as 'a lived part of the culture'.¹⁸⁰ Bennett incorporates into her own poetic and cultural commentaries this aspect of a traditional "living culture" which is embodied in the proverbs and thus she creates multiple layers to her commentary: the layer of the present, and the inherited layers of the past. As we have seen, many scholars have addressed the aspect of communality latent in proverbs and Bennett's works relate poetry to this sense of communal group identity. Bennett stabilises the shared needs and the identity of her own community through the relationship she creates between proverbs and her poetry.

¹⁷⁹ Brown, *West Indian Poetry*, 111.

¹⁸⁰ Michael Kuelker, "A Life in Proverbs: An interview with Anand Prahlad," *African American Review*, Vol. 43. No. 4 (2009): 657.

Of the different genres associated with Bennett, poetry is undoubtedly the most familiar to readers and to scholars. It is therefore surprising to note the lack of critical attention given to the relationship between this form and proverbs. In Chapter One, I discussed two major Jamaican critics who have identified the importance of proverbs in Bennett's poetry: Carolyn Cooper and Mervyn Morris. In the introductory chapter, we saw that Cooper lays out a comprehensive view of different ways that proverbs recur in Bennett's poetry, outlining that the metaphorical proverb is first a vehicle for recognising truths and secondly employs imagery that is embedded in Jamaican everyday life. Cooper continues by giving specific examples of the different uses of proverbs. For instance, she agrees with Norrick's definition that proverbs have poetic features such as repetition, rhyme, alliteration, and she notes that by employing such poetic techniques the potency of the proverbs is sustained.¹⁸¹ She also observes that proverbs may be mnemonically devised, and this forms the fundamental constituents of primarily oral cultures such as Jamaica. Her examination of proverbs then diverts to examine more fully the oral nature of the proverb, citing Velma Pollard's theory that 'the proverb carries the width of thought in ordinary discourse'.¹⁸² This is a point I observe: part of the job of poetry is to reframe the everyday voices of the people. Pollard, in a separate critique, expands on her observation on ordinary discourse.¹⁸³ In this narrative she reactivates the notion of the folk as

the tradition that accounts for the lifestyle and the way of seeing things peculiar to the people who form the bulk of our Caribbean population ... a tradition that has evolved out of the historical social and economic hodgepodge that has been the Caribbean situation.¹⁸⁴

She acknowledges that the oral element of the proverb sits within the wider perspective of the historical Caribbean situation, where poetry and proverbs inhabit not just the everyday ordinary discourse of the Jamaican culture, and encourages us to consider a wider Caribbean frame of time, space and place.

In one of Bennett's localised poems, 'Nyaga Yard', Bennett celebrates the everyday Jamaican folk and their home of the 'yard'.¹⁸⁵ The proverb employed in the poem is 'cock

¹⁸¹ Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 38.

¹⁸² Velma Pollard, quoted in Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 39.

¹⁸³ Velma Pollard, "The Dust; a tribute to the Folk", in Lalla, Barbara, D'Costa, Jean, and Pollard, Velma. *Caribbean Literary Discourse: Voice and Cultural Identity in the Anglophone Caribbean* (New Brunswick: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 122-130.

¹⁸⁴ Pollard, 'The Dust', 122.

¹⁸⁵ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 113.

cyaan beat cock eena cock own yard’ which appears in the first line of the poem.¹⁸⁶ The proverb, with its repetition of ‘cock’ three times in short succession, encourages us to think about identity and belonging, and the ramifications of internal fighting or defending territory. Bennett’s judicious use of the proverb in her poem mitigates what could be seen as social and political tensions which are raised within the poem as to ‘is who for yard Jamaica is?/who dah beat up who?’¹⁸⁷ Published in 1948 in *Public Opinion*, the poem effectively questions who the yard belongs to during a time when Jamaica was a British colony. The lines that follow reclaim and revise the language of colonial racialised thinking and racism, promote the Jamaican people within terms of black pride and excellence:

Tink omuch different race a people

Eena dis islan,

An tink who is de greatest

Cricketer – a nayga man!

...

In riches an in poverty,

In honour an disgrace,

De greates and de lower yah

Spring out a nayga race.

So, nayga people, carry awn;

Leggo yuh talents broad.

Member de place a fi-yuh-

¹⁸⁶ My interpretation of this proverb is that someone cannot better another in their own environment. It does not appear in the *Proverb Manuscript*.

¹⁸⁷ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 113.

Jamaica is nayga yard.¹⁸⁸

The last line in particular addresses the notion of national belonging in terms of race and class, positioning Jamaican identity within the complex metaphor and reality of the ‘nayga yard’ and ‘cock own yard’. Bennett reclaims a pejorative term used to describe the living space of enslaved people in Caribbean plantations, repositioning Jamaican identity as founded in black experience rather than defined by colonial values or white power. The meaning of ‘yard’ is given further complexity through the proverb that recognises the ‘yard’ as a place of belonging but also potentially dispute and conflict. We see this as an example of Bennett addressing serious issues with humour and irony. She distances the speaker by using the popular wisdoms imbued in the authorless proverb to combat the potential tension that the poem raises.

In the following quote, Cooper argues that the proverb ‘cock cyaan beat cock eena cock own yard’ (as it is used in Bennett’s poem) not only asserts proverbial authority, it also:

expresses metaphorically and euphemistically a socio-political statement that might appear inflammatory were it baldly presented as merely the individual’s personal opinion and not a truism confirmed by popular wisdom.¹⁸⁹

The contrast between the metaphorical proverb and the literal poetic list of Jamaican people who have been successful (Bennett lists sports, arts, medicine and education) perhaps also creates a form of poetic tension by including a proverbial statement that addresses the physical tension in the ‘yard’. Here Cooper’s essay is critically important as it begins to draw attention to the impact of proverbial thinking in Bennett’s works. It illustrates how Bennett’s poetry can raise controversial ideas but also attends to how

¹⁸⁸ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 113/114. See Carolyn Cooper for a historical and contemporary reading of the poem. It gives the information that the poem was published in 1948.
<https://Jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20120812/cleisure/cleisure3.html>

¹⁸⁹ Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 41.

Bennett mitigates these ‘inflammatory’ tones by drawing on the ‘popular wisdom’ and complex expression embodied in proverbs.

Jahan Ramazani, in his extensive chapter on Bennett in *The Hybrid Muse*, does not examine her use of proverbs as such.¹⁹⁰ However, if we focus on proverbs as ‘metaphorical’, as per Cooper’s approach, and perhaps take into consideration Pollard’s wider approach of time and place, then Ramazani’s discussion becomes relevant when discussing the relationship of proverbs and poetry in Bennett. Within a global perspective Ramazani’s book responds to the historical neglect of postcolonial poetic achievements. Ramazani contends that this inattention stems from the view that the perceived signalling of personal expression of feeling and emotions from colonised poets was an inadequate paradigm from which to approach this issue. To help us place Bennett’s works in this context, he argues that postcolonial poets have now expanded the English canon by infusing hybridised poetry with vibrant poetic techniques, which, significantly, he explicitly associates with Bennett: ‘to read a poem of Louise Bennett is to feel plunged in the oral strategies of Jamaican gossip, the wit, the puns, insults of West Indian “broad talk” or performance rhetoric’.¹⁹¹ Here the emphasis is again on the oral, and the living Jamaican language which we saw Anand Prahald express in the introductory chapter. However, Ramazani’s discussions on metaphor, which he approaches as a principal discursive site of postcoloniality, is arguably too broad to apply to a specific examination of proverbs in Bennett’s poetry. He places the terms ‘displacement’, ‘transfer’ and ‘migration’ under the known discussions on metaphor, where the etymology of the word ‘metaphor’ is derived from the Greek for ‘transference’ and constitutes the metaphor of movement in space, either literally or as a transference in context. Cooper’s definition targets the latter notion, where the proverbs in Bennett’s work are metaphorical by transference of meaning in context – that is to say a widening of the interpretation through association. I also read the metaphorical proverb in Bennett’s poetry as transforming within context, to which I can now add further interpretations through referring to the *Proverb Manuscript*. With this I can give attention to the proverbs in a wider sense and consider the range of ways which Bennett deals with proverbial thinking across all her works.

Another renowned Bennett scholar who approaches her poetry in detail is Ben Etherington. He responds to Morris’s call to read Louise Bennett seriously in his own 2016 article,

¹⁹⁰ Ramazani, ‘Irony and Postcoloniality: Louise Bennett’s Anancy Poetics’, *The Hybrid Muse*, 103-140.

¹⁹¹ Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse*, 18.

parodied in the title ‘On Scanning Louise Bennett, Seriously’.¹⁹² In this article, fifty years after Morris’s seminal essay, he acknowledges that Morris made a critical intervention, but that his essay should be read together with the 1982 essay ‘Louise Bennett in Print’, which accompanies the publication of *Selected Poems*. Etherington is aware that most critics were pushing against the perceived print bias of Morris’ ‘serious’ reading and debating the structure of Bennett’s poetry in terms of scansion and rhyme. From this point, Etherington develops his own argument that Bennett’s poetry can be understood by rhyme rather than scansion, within an oral presentation. Etherington, although glancingly referring to folklore in general terms, focuses his interest on the formal poetics of Bennett’s style. His argument points out that:

one of the most distinctive points of differentiation between intonation of Jamaican Creole and that of standard English is the distribution in Creole of weight towards the ends of words.¹⁹³

His viewpoint is that an audience should read/listen to Bennett’s poetry concentrating on movement towards rhyme. Etherington concludes that these ending rhymes give force to Bennett’s cultural politics but that this is not a politics of reactive rebellion, rather an assertive poetics built around a programme of ironizing colonial culture and developing cultural confidence through a common-sense affirmation of the Jamaican language.¹⁹⁴ Once again, the attention of this critic is on everyday Jamaican language and his interest is on how this is performed by Bennett.

A brief discussion of one further scholar who focuses on Caribbean poetry is pertinent here in the debate regarding Bennett and ‘the job of poetry’. Denise deCaires Narain discusses ‘the lure of the folk’ in her chapter on Louise Bennett in *Caribbean Women Poets: Making Style*.¹⁹⁵ This sustained account of Caribbean women’s poetry centres on the ‘belatedness’ of the arrival of the female poets in a male-dominated field. Framed in this gendered perspective, DeCaires Narain interrogates the notion of literary mothers, the performance element of Creole and specifically examines how Bennett brought the local language into the foreground of West Indian cultural life, writing that ‘Bennett’s work is celebrated as

¹⁹² Ben Etherington, “On Scanning Louise Bennett, Seriously”, *Journal of West Indian Literature* Vol 23, No. 1-2 (2016). Of course this article title references the title of Morris’s 1967 essay “On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously” which I explore in Chapter One.

¹⁹³ Etherington, “On Scanning Louise Bennett, Seriously”, 31.

¹⁹⁴ Etherington, “On Scanning Louise Bennett, Seriously”, 31.

¹⁹⁵ DeCaires Narain, *Making Style*, 51-89.

being unequivocally West Indian'.¹⁹⁶ Her focus concerning the folk is presented in a discussion on the use of the dialect where she writes that:

Louise Bennett's appeal is that she makes ordinary Jamaicans the subject of her poetry and in her poetic voice which claims its authority in the indigenous language and its associated values [...] the emphasis in the ability of the writer to mimic the folk resulted in a stress, in fiction particularly, on Creole as a spoken language.¹⁹⁷

The issue with the use of Creole in poetry is more involved and leads to a need to critique the conventions of the genre itself. As we saw in Chapter One, one of the issues debated in *Savacou* 3/4 was the decorum of poetry, or what should be printed. The fact that Bennett was omitted from the journal clashes with DeCaires Narain's observation that Bennett 'endorsed text which attests to her belief in the multiple interpretations; rehearsals and representation of the stories'.¹⁹⁸ DeCaires Narain's framing of her chapter on Louise Bennett through use of sections entitled 'Mudder Language', 'Man of Words in West Indies', 'From Stage to Page' allows the reader to see that her discussion of Louise Bennett and the lure of the folk follows a gendered approach, but within that it is largely concerned with how her poetry is represented in language, both in text and in performance. Notably, there is no mention of specific details concerning Bennett's use of proverbs, or an analysis of the structure of her poetry. In this way, DeCaires Narain's approach to the relationship between the folk and Bennett feels more generalised and takes in a wider framework than Cooper and Morris. Overall, my conclusion from engaging with critical readings of Bennett's poetry is that there still remains a gap in scholarly attention to the significance of proverbial thinking in this form and this is a gap which this thesis addresses.

As members of the audience or readers we must approach a Bennett poem from the viewpoint of the speaker, which in Bennett's poems is not reliable. The humour and irony that she uses can misdirect the reader but can also deflect from her own standpoint. In *How Proverbs Mean*, Norrick concentrates mainly on linguistics, but in his chapter on 'Proverbs as traditional items of folklore', he comments on the ambiguity arising from the lack of authorship associated with proverbs.¹⁹⁹ He notes that whilst the authoritative, didactic nature of proverbs carries an authoritative directive force, at the same time the speaker here is 'let off the hook': by involving 'tradition and the community as a whole, the speaker

¹⁹⁶ DeCaires Narain, *Making Style*, 51.

¹⁹⁷ DeCaires Narain, *Making Style*, 65-67.

¹⁹⁸ DeCaires Narain, *Making Style*, 58

¹⁹⁹ Norrick, "How Proverbs Mean", 28-30.

disappears as an individual agent but imposes the weight of social sanction'.²⁰⁰ We might say that Bennett is 'let off the hook' as an individual agent, both through using different personae but also by weaving in authorless proverbs. She draws upon the weight of tradition within her culture for sanction and gains authority from the use of proverbs within her poetry.

The rhetorical technique of using the voices of different personae is seen often in Bennett's poetry; for instance, we hear the mother's voice and her misdirected pride in 'Uriah Preach'.

Fi-me fambly is no peaw-peaw,
Me daughter Sue dah teach;
An when rain fall or parson sick
Me son Uriah preach.

Him teck awn Teacher Brown, for when
Him was a Lickle tot
Teacher beat him one day because
Him call Teach 'Top Knot'.

So Riah get him revenge now,
For him stare straight pon Brown
An she, 'Let him dat sittet on
De house top no come down.'

So when chuch-member mel me
Ah doan answer till it reach
A rainy day when parson stay home
An Uriah preach.²⁰¹

The mother in this poem is proud of her son Uriah who is a substitute preacher. However, he abuses his position by attacking the enemies of his family from the pulpit. His mother appears to applaud this unchristian behaviour, and the wit and humour in Bennett's poem draws us in to enjoy the mother's impish delight. In this poem we see an example of

²⁰⁰ Norrick, "How Proverbs Mean", 29.

²⁰¹ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 66.

Bennett distancing herself from being critical, and yet the technique of using another's voice allows her to poke fun at the sanctimonious preacher and, in addition, to point out the dangers in manipulating the lessons in the bible for personal revenge.

Another technique used to distance from the authorial 'I' is to write poems in the form of letters. Kei Miller's research on the epistolary practices of Jamaica (and West Indies) is helpful here.²⁰² He writes: 'letters, as private communication, are usually written and read silently'; this stresses the absence of the addressee and writer.²⁰³ Several of Bennett's poems constitute letters where the voice is that of the letter writer. (This will be explored in the later discussion of the triplet of poems surrounding Jamaican independence.) Miller argues that the letter, as a genre that is usually intended to be read silently by the addressee, imposes a biased cultural understanding. In a Jamaican context with higher levels of illiteracy, he explains that letters had to be read aloud more often — or performed to be precise — meaning that the reception and performance of the letter then became a kind of 'domestic theatre'.²⁰⁴ Miller observes that, in Louise Bennett's case, epistolary poems are not just documents but occasions for speaking. She was writing poems for performances and therefore gives her characters the permission and the means to get up and talk freely, in other words she gives them the ability to orate.²⁰⁵ Miller's term 'domestic theatre' creates an opportunity to reflect on the performability of the letters within domestic arenas, within homes and communal spaces, where people would receive letters from relatives abroad which would be read out loud to a gathering. This immediately brings relatability to Bennett's poetry and, from a wider perspective, promotes the communal act of reading as marking the transition of oral societies to cultures of the written word. As we know, Bennett understood that she lived in an oral tradition and because of this, performance is as important a dimension of her poetic practice as the printed word. Using the poetic style of dramatic monologue, written in the form of speech, allows her to converse with her audience through poetry as if she is talking to her audience. The looseness of the form plays into her poetic voice as one of immediacy of conversation — to be read off and on the page. The shift from page to spoken form is discussed in detail in Chapter Five, where I examine how Susan Gingell encourages the reader to "re-oralise"

²⁰² Kei Miller, "Jamaica to the World: A Study of Jamaican (and West Indian) Epistolary Practices." (PhD thesis, Glasgow University, 2012).

²⁰³ Miller, "Jamaica to the World", 90.

²⁰⁴ Miller, "Jamaica to the World", 92.

²⁰⁵ Miller, "Jamaica to the World", 98.

the text which engages the reader almost physically in the process from reader, listener, to speaker. Gingell's argument is that the reader, listener, speaker, viewer, needs to move on from the silent reader of the printed word.²⁰⁶ Miller identifies one other area where distance is created through letters: he notes that the letter is always a product of distance but that for Louise Bennett, the distance and separation is not the kind produced by transnational migrations but rather rural to urban migrations within the national space. Here we see a parallel with the notion of localisation within the national space that Bennett brings to her poetry. Although Bennett herself does not conventionally fit the profile of emigrant "writing back" to her homeland and thereby emoting a kind of double consciousness, there is nonetheless duality in her artistic presence: the duality of consciousness of authorial distance versus artistic investment; the duality of the individual versus the plurality of the poetic strategy of personae; and the duality of her own colonial education (text-related) versus her choice to write in Creole (first and foremost an oral form of communication). By concentrating on the textual representation of proverbial discourse in Bennett's poetry in this chapter, I seek to extend Cooper's focus on the 'verbal techniques' of Jamaican oral art forms and oral literature. The juxtaposition of oral and scribal is summed up in Morris's contribution to this ongoing debate and his insistence that 'Bennett's art is both oral and scribal; the forms are not mutually exclusive'.²⁰⁷ My perspective accords with Morris's observation (outlined in the introductory chapter) where he advocates that there remain opportunities related to studying Bennett's techniques in print.

'On a Tramcar': Listening to 'Dialect' and the Absence of Proverbs.

Scholars of Louise Bennett will be familiar with the poem 'On a Tramcar' and its status as the origin of her decision to write in Creole, a fact highlighted by both Morris and Cooper.²⁰⁸ As we saw in the previous chapter, Bennett was greatly influenced by Claude McKay who first wrote in Creole in 1909 and Bennett follows him from the 1930s onwards. Like him, Bennett was educated under the colonial educational system which did

²⁰⁶ Susan Gingell, "Coming Home Through Sound: See-Hear Aesthetics in the Poetry of Louise Bennett and Canadian Dub Poets." *Journal of West Indian Literature* Vol. 17, No. 2 (2009): 7.

²⁰⁷ Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 39.

²⁰⁸ Morris, *Selected Poems*, xi; Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 41.

not provide her with the freedom of language to represent communal everyday interests of Jamaicans in her poetry; instead, she chose to show this through writing in what she initially calls ‘dialect’. Bennett explains this decision in her 1968 interview with Dennis Scott:

From the time I was quite young, I wanted to write. At first I started to write things about birds, and bees and trees. But then I realized that I was not doing what I really wanted to do. There was life going on around me and people living their lives, and what I was writing had nothing to do with what was really happening around me. So then I started to take a greater interest in people—to listen to what they were saying and how they were saying it, and the first dialect verse I wrote was about a tramcar.²⁰⁹

What is important to note is that when Bennett wrote her first dialect poem as a teenager of nineteen, it was as a direct consequence of wanting to write about people, through listening to their voices, through listening to what they were saying and doing. ‘On a Tramcar’ was her first poem written in Jamaican ‘dialect’ and is included in her inaugural book of poetry, (*Jamaica*) *Dialect Verses*, published in 1942 (see Appendix 1, Figure 5/6).²¹⁰ For Bennett, however, this step she took was not just about writing in Creole — it was about viewing poetry as ‘human-centred’ in some important way. This was the moment she began to listen to the people around her, the content of their everyday chatter, and to the way they were using the vernacular to communicate. This is the origin of not only Bennett’s use of Creole, but of her lifelong position as observer and commentator on the everyday. In using Creole from this point forward, Bennett engendered new forms of critique and discourse.

However, it is notable that in ‘On the Tramcar’ Bennett did not initially turn to proverbs. Bennett’s framing of this early vernacular poem, published in its entirety in the 1942 edition, would have afforded the perfect occasion to claim space for a targeted proverb to be used in an educational manner or as part of new poetic idiom. The poem starts with the description of the actions taken by the market women when the poetic speaker gets on board. The first lines are as follows:

Preadout yuhself deh Liza, wan

Dress ’oman dah look like sey

²⁰⁹ Dennis Scott, “Bennett on Bennett: An Interview with Louise Bennett,” *Caribbean Quarterly* Vol. 14, No. 1 / 2 (1968): 97–101.

²¹⁰ Bennett, *Jamaica Dialect Verses*, 30. Strangely, this poem is not included in either *Jamaica Labrish*, or *Selected Poems*.

She se' de li space side a we

An want foace harsel e en deh.²¹¹

On a socio-political level, this could be read literally as the market women making no room for a middle-class woman such as Bennett's 'wan / Dress –oman dah look like sey'. However, the condensed expression of this phrase feels reflective of proverbial speech where a multiplicity of meaning always underpins what is said. Even though there is no proverb in this first poem in the dialect, the sense hovers that there is more than one interpretation of the language — the connotation of the poshness and the schism in class between them and this 'dress-up' woman would not be lost on the market women, in their chatter, and the tension of the moment. This creates a poetic space for a social commentary that is essentially unsaid but understood in the context of the situation and environment of the tram. The commonality that enables the understanding of proverbs links to the commonality of the language that Bennett uses to explore the world of the market women.

Furthermore, the framing of this poem in Creole can be viewed metaphorically as making no room for the Anglophone language associated with those not from the working class. In Bennett's first steps to reclaim the language of the Jamaican people as a cultural marker, the absence of a proverb could be seen as a marker of the dominance of the coloniser's language over the language of the colonised; this is not to say that proverbs are seen as essential components of authentic Creole. However, the absence of proverb in this first dialectal poem perhaps evidences the instability of the moment and illustrates that Bennett's initial focus is to explore writing creatively in Creole. The notion of instability applies to the juxtaposition of the Standard English of Bennett's education and her desire that is now present to write in the Creole — in other words, the redefining of colonial dominance in vernacular terms. In response, Bennett's later use of proverbs in her poetry can be seen as reclaiming even more space for the colonised by remapping the relationship between proverbs and poetry. Proverbs impose a greater influence on Bennett's thinking as her use of the vernacular is solidified. In this early '(Jamaican) dialect verse' Bennett claims a national voice in the public sphere, one of empowerment and social redress.

²¹¹ Bennett, *Jamaica Dialect Verses*, 30-31. Janet Neigh takes the transport vehicles in Kingston as microcosms for performative examples of modernity, mobility and migration (see Janet Neigh. 'The Lickle Space in the Tramcar in Louise Bennett's Feminist Postcolonial Poetics.'" *Journal of West Indian Literature* Vol. 17, No. 2 (2009), 5-16. I will be discussing Bennett's performative art in Chapter Five in terms of the dichotomy and issues of oral and scribal representations of her works. In this chapter, I take the textual representation of the poems and the poems, with full realisation that both are oral in origin.

For Janet Neigh, the mobility of the tram allegorically represents the cultural progression of the dialect spoken inside the vehicle and the heralding of independence.²¹² Consequently, in Bennett's poem, the 'li'(little) space of the tramcar becomes a microcosm for the state of Jamaica, through a Kingston-centred lens. While Neigh concentrates on the space inside the tram and the clash of class and social issues within the 'theatre space' of the tramcar, I argue that there is another space that is equally important. That is the liminal space between the street and the tramcar itself. This represents not only the divisions between class and gender but also creates the threshold between divisions of coloniser and colonised, where the physical crossing over from the status quo of colonial dominance captures the social instability of everyday life at this national moment of tension in approaching the end of colonial rule. It also represents the division between the Anglophone and the Creole and captures the decisive movement taken by Bennett to take subversive control through language. Therefore, by examining the issues of representation in the poem 'On a Tramcar', Bennett's work shows she is choosing Brathwaite's 'nation language' at a crucial time. Inclusiveness and exclusiveness is part of the process of identity construction: it is through the knowledge of the self and the discovery of others that an individual develops a feeling of belonging and security. The exclusion of the 'wan dress 'oman' from the community of the market women in the tram car gave rise to Bennett scrutinising her own position and may point to her decision to create her own identity as a writer in the language of the people. The decision to write in Creole embodies the politics of representation that Bennett makes when she chooses to claim the language of the people in her poetry. Bennett listened to the proverbs being spoken around her and it is in the framework of transformational listening and multi-layered performance that proverbs take their place as a form of creative practice. The following sections discuss the influence of the proverbs and the different approaches proposed above to examine the centrality of proverbial thinking in Bennett's poetry.

A Skeleton of Proverbs: Poetic Structure and Framing Techniques in 'Proverbs'

In the poem 'Proverbs', Bennett showcases the proverbs in line with the first approach I advanced at the beginning of this chapter. In this poem the proverbs form a structural

²¹² Neigh, "The Lickle Space", 5-16.

framework to the poem.²¹³ In stark contrast with the absence of proverbs noted in her first dialect poem ‘On A Tramcar’, this is a poem that is uniquely constructed around proverbs as an explicit part of content.²¹⁴ ‘Proverbs’ was published in the 1942 edition of (*Jamaica Dialect Verses* in the same volume as ‘On A Tramcar’, where the juxtaposition of these two poems in the same collection shows Bennett now claiming the folk element of proverbs as a fundamental part of her poetic voice. The (re)claiming of the proverbs in this poem strongly underscores Bennett’s progressive desire to write with a greater focus on the people in her community, in a language and poetic style that embodies their heritage. The title of the poem itself proclaims the attention she is drawing to this complex and layered relationship between proverb and poetry.

Both Morris and Cooper have identified the idea of a skeleton framework of proverbs in Bennett’s poems but have not explored in detail the specificities of proverbial constructs across the entirety of her poetic works. The printed layout of ‘Proverbs’ in the 1942 edition leads to a recognition that Bennett would have thought structurally, in a traditional sense [Appendix 2, Figure 7]. In terms of the functionality of this publication, concerns such as cost and printing materials at that time would have led to a more compact layout where separate poems would share the same space on a page, similar to that of a magazine or journal format. However, in this edition, either intentionally or by chance, the poem is presented in its entirety on one page. Notably in the later editions of *Selected Poems* and *Jamaica Labrish*, the poem runs over page breaks and shares space with other poems. With this in mind, I take the first presentation of the poem in the 1942 edition to highlight how the proverbs are emphasised by each stanza break. With the poem structured in this way, we can see how proverbs act as the skeleton holding it together.

The sequence of proverbs, however, also creates a jolt in the flow of reading the poetic text which in turn causes the reader to pause in following the story of the orphan. Notably, the proverbs start to question the poem, not only in terms of contextual interpretation, but from within the poetic structure. A three-tiered layered effect can now be seen/heard in ‘Proverbs’ where the proverbs provide a bone structure to the poem within each consecutive stanza; in between these bones, the story of the orphan and her change in circumstances is developed. Then, it is also possible to consider a further layer of analysis

²¹³ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 58; *Jamaica Labrish*, 217; and *Jamaica Dialect Verses*, 35.

²¹⁴ Cooper notes that this poem was first published in the *Sunday Gleaner* in 1943 (see *Noises in the Blood*, 43) but since I have purchased the 1942 first edition of Bennett’s published poetry, I can override this date stamp by noting the inclusion of this poem in the inaugural edition.

by using the *Proverb Manuscript* to expand on the interpretation of the narrative and allow the reader to view the orphan's progress from the wider proverbial perspective that is the focus of my thesis.

A fundamental reading of the poem 'Proverbs' is that it deals with the memory of a dead parent. In terms of the authorial 'I' discussed above, Bennett's poetry is generally dramatised in different kinds of voices. In 'Proverbs', Bennett uses the first-person voice of the orphan, who uses traditional Jamaican proverbs that carry with them the collective memory and 'the width of thought in ordinary discourse' — I reiterate here the phrase from Pollard which Cooper used in her discussions on the commonality of the proverbs.²¹⁵ This automatically draws the orphan (and the reader's perspective of the orphan) into the collective identity of her people. Notably, we see the young lady turning for guidance to the proverbs as she enters a hostile world where catastrophe has befallen her. Her reliance on proverbs mirrors an interest in proverbs that the Jamaicans have turned to through generations. It is interesting to note, therefore, that Bennett presents this particular proverbially-led poem in the voice of the young girl, where historically the proverbs have been the province of elders. Yet, the poetic voice in 'Proverbs' is even more complex than this. At the start of a stanza, it is the disembodied voice of the mother that the reader hears, teaching the child lessons from the proverbs. Is the mother omnipresent? Or is it a more autonomous role? A voice is present, sometimes explicitly framed with quotation marks, but the voice is also indeterminable, which adds to the question of who the author/ speaker of the proverbs might be, reflecting the authorless nature of proverbs.

In placing the proverbs in different positions in each stanza, Bennett uses different visual and aural effects of proverbial thinking within the narrative. If we follow Bennett's sequencing of her proverbial framework, we see first how the poetic text in each stanza is built around the proverb (which I have emboldened for clarity in the following extracts) and can appreciate the skeleton effect in the poem overall. Secondly, when we see the categories under which Bennett places the proverbs in the *Proverb Manuscript* we also gain a wider reading of the orphan's story and character. The categorisations of the proverbs in the *Proverb Manuscript* adds complexity to a reading of this poem, where proverbs are often placed by Bennett under two or more headings.

²¹⁵ Pollard quoted in Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 39.

In the first verse, Bennett establishes that the orphan's situation has changed;

'When ashes cowl dawg sleep in deh';²¹⁶

For sence Ma dead, yuh see,

All kine o' ole black nayga start

Teck liberty wid me.

The focus of this proverb is the presence of the fire which keeps people/ animals away when it is burning; however, when it cools there are no barriers. In this case, the orphan now feels exposed to particular dangers, dangers that she imagines in relation to racialised and social hierarchies. The reading of the poem is strengthened by the proverb where the element of the changing nature of the fire draws attention to the 'temporary nature of power' ('and of life', as Morris further poses).²¹⁷ Using the *Proverb Manuscript* we can build a layered reading of this proverb and also think through the meanings and associations that Bennett explicitly recorded. In the *Proverb Manuscript*, Bennett places this proverb under two category headings of *Change* and *Class*. Bennett's first categorisation of the proverb fits with the translated meaning of the proverb given above — that a change in circumstances has occurred. In the following line it is evident that the orphan's mother has died. Importantly, by referring to the second categorisation of the proverb in Bennett's *Proverb Manuscript* (*Class*), I can now expand the interpretation of this proverb within the context of the poem itself. By placing the proverb under the category of *Class* (which may not be an obvious interpretation here), Bennett now interrelates the categories and allows the reader to realise, from the outset, that the change in circumstances in which the orphan finds herself now also relate to a change in status/ class. The translation given by Bennett for this proverb 'when ashes cole dog sleep in deh' under the heading of *Class* in the *Proverb Manuscript* is 'when one has lost his high position any one can take liberties'. In noting that the mother afforded the child a higher position in society and with that a form of protection from anyone taking liberties, we can better understand the change of situation that occurs when the mother dies. This allows a fuller reading of the orphan's predicament which can then influence an interpretation of the rest of the stanza and the poem itself. As Cooper observed earlier, Bennett is interested in

²¹⁶ 'Wen ashes cowl dawg sleep in deh'; circumstances alter cases/ when one has lost his high position any one can take liberties (*Change 1 and Class 28*).

²¹⁷ Morris, *Selected Poems*, 158.

the imagery within the proverb. In the second stanza she uses an animal image to conjure up a picture of a dog with fleas.

Me no wrap up wid dem, for me

Pick an choose me company:

Ma always tell me seh: **'Yuh sleep**

Wid dawg yuh ketch him flea'.²¹⁸

The proverb, 'yuh sleep wid dawg yuh ketch him flea', expresses how the orphan tries to disassociate herself from an imagined 'common' people. A tension is created here around status and division where the perception of common people is pejorative and does not easily embrace community spirit. This also refers to the upturning of social order in which the orphan finds herself as a result of her change of status. Bennett categorises this proverb under the linked headings of *'Consequence and Results'* and *'Weakness'*.²¹⁹ Here, Bennett draws an interesting relationship between victim or perpetrator. In effect, the placement of the proverb under these two headings asks the question as to whether the ensuing situation is the result of the circumstances that the orphan finds herself in, or whether it is her own attitude of weak self-righteous snobbery that exacerbates the situation. Therefore, where the verse gives a poetic interpretation of the proverb — that it is important to pick and choose company — Bennett's categorisation of this proverb provokes questions of interpretation when read with the poetic narrative and leads into so many dispersed directions. Bennett herself recognised the multiplicity of proverbial interpretation and used her knowledge of this to expand the poetic interpretation.

As the poem progresses Bennett exposes the hypocritical nature of the speaker in that she continues to be polite to her neighbours yet she sees herself above them:

Ah teck time gwan me ways an doan

Fas eena dem affair,

Me tell den mawnin, for **'Howdy**

²¹⁸ 'Yuh sleep wid dawg yuh ketch him flea'; one who keeps bad company then evil will befall you (*Consequence 7 – see Results and Weakness*).

²¹⁹ This proverb is categorised by Bennett under the heading *Consequence* (see *Results and Weakness*).

An tenky bruck no square'.²²⁰

The proverb emphasises how saying 'howdy' (hello, how do you do) and 'tenky' (thank you) 'bruck' (breaks, harms) no one. However, this focus on everyday politeness is in tension with the criticisms of the new neighbours that the poetic speaker voices throughout the poem. In requesting politeness or kindness from others, we could also note that from the opening of the poem, the speaker fails to offer it herself, revealing herself to be someone who does 'fass eena dem affair'.

Interestingly this proverb is not in her collection and this is a notable omission as she uses it in this poem, and in the monologues. Perhaps it has become so ingrained in everyday speech that it was an oversight.²²¹ Bennett uses proverbs within the rhyme scheme and since she is free about the placement of proverbs and lineation, where her poems might be strict in some respects (rhyme scheme, stanza length) she is relatively flexible about using a proverb over two lines. As we see several times in this poem, proverbs are not discrete and do not always require a single line.

The dual categorisation of the proverb in the following stanza allows the reader to further pick up the disingenuous nature of the orphan's visits to the parson:

Sometime me go a parson yard

Sidung lickle an chat –

'Ef yuh no go a man fire-side, yuh no know

Ow much fire-stick a bwile him pot'.²²²

The juxtaposition between the headings in the *Proverb Manuscript of Association and Knowledge* is an interesting one. The orphan has gone to glean knowledge, but also to acquire vicariously the associated and reflected status of the parson by gaining knowledge of the inner sanctum of his home. In context, it is the elders who hold respect in Jamaican

²²⁰ 'Howdy an tenky bruck noh square'; Saying please and thank you won't harm anyone (not included in the manuscript).

²²¹ The absence of particular proverbs in the *Proverb Manuscript* could warrant further examination.

²²² 'Ef yuh no go a man fire-side, yuh no know ow much fire-stick a bwile him pot'; If you don't associate with others, you can't learn anything about them (*Association 1/ Knowledge 7*).

society in Bennett's time and here, because of the interplay afforded by the two categorisations, we see the orphan either disrespecting or manipulating that relationship.

As we can see in the stanza above, the dual interpretation informed a more complex reading of the orphan's motivation. In this final illustration of the proverbial skeleton, I can illustrate, by referring to the *Proverb Manuscript*, that by using one single proverb Bennett not only includes a traditionally recognised interpretation, but that it can be widened into a fivefold lesson of moral behaviour:

But when me go look fi parson
Me ongle talk bout me soul,
For Ma use fi tel me; **'Sweet mout fly
Follow coffin go a hole'**.²²³

The proverb in the *Proverb Manuscript* is classified under *Ambition* (see *Caution, Class, Character and Greed*). By recognising this proverb's placement under the heading of *Ambition*, the reader is prompted to consider how this category might inform a reading of the orphan's actions. The translation Bennett gives under *Ambition* (pursuit of luxury may lead to ruin) illustrates the consequences of pursuing luxury to the furthest degree; but the Creole words of 'sweet mout fly' are most descriptive of greed, where notably the translation Bennett gives under this category is that the proverb 'refers to those who will stop at nothing to get what they want'. This gives a more pointed insight into the motivation of the orphan. Bennett also places this proverb under the category of *Caution* which contains a moral lesson for the orphan, that is to say these two 'sins' of ambition and greed are to be handled cautiously. Furthermore, the proverb, being also placed under *Character*, now questions the character of the orphan which we have seen is dubious. Cooper's comment on this stanza is that the speaker is using this proverb to absolve herself of all culpability.²²⁴ The use of the proverb for personal absolution questions the orphan's principal motive in speaking to the parson and adds a qualifying tone to the poem. Bennett also applies the category of *Class* to this proverb. This reflects the theme of social standing and the issues of class integration that underlie the poem in its entirety, reflecting the relevance of the deeper interpretation of category of *Class* embedded in stanza 1. As we

²²³ Sweet mout fly follow coffin go a hole; pursuit of luxury may lead to ruin (*Ambition 7* (see *Caution, Class, Character and Greed 3/47*)).

²²⁴ Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 44.

can see, these different categories add to the dispersal of meaning embodied by the proverbs across the poem.

In review, the categorisation of the proverbs in Bennett's *Proverb Manuscript* attracts a multiplicity of proverbial interpretation and adds to a reading of the three tiers of structure, story and interpretation. The framing of the poem between the skeleton of proverbs allows the reader/ listener to connect the proverbs to the poetic narrative. But the proverbs also operate independently from the story being told. Visually and audibly, the presence of proverbs highlights the commonality of the oral nature of both the proverbs and Bennett's poetic voice. This advances the idea of the meta questioning of the poetic form where the proverbs question the poetry from within the poetic narrative. Furthermore, as this study illustrates, Bennett's poetry demands of its audience to be more than a reader and speaker; they must also be a listener and a viewer.

The Proverb as a Core Element to a Poem: The Reciprocal Relationship of Proverb and Poetry.

It is clear that the proverbs in the poem 'Proverbs' discussed above dominate the entire poetic structure. In the following examples, the poems circle around the proverb using the proverb to generate the poetry; however, in this case, the proverb does not dominate the entire poetic structure. Sometimes, the balance between proverbs and poetry is seen to vacillate, for example, in 'Wartime Grocery'. In this particular case the proverb does not dominate the poem visually as such but dominates the particular stanza it is presented in.²²⁵ The proverb comes in the third stanza of nine; the first two stanzas set the scene where Miss Vie is seen to be frustrated at not being able to buy milk and yet Miss Pam's servant could buy four big tins of milk for her mistress. In placing the proverb in the stanza immediately following these two scene-setting stanzas, Bennett evaluates the injustice of this and uses the proverb to highlight the generality of the predicament of inequality.

²²⁵ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 83.

Jackass say de worl' noh level ²²⁶

Koo how Miss Pam she fat!

She noh need milk, wen me side o' her

Me fava mawga rat! ²²⁷

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.²²⁸ 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 — 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 layout of the stanza itself mirrors the stratification of the Jamaican class system from rich down to poor, overarched by the general comment provided by the weight of the proverb in the first line. It is here that the proverb sits in a dominant position and verbalises the main message around which the poem is generated. Notably, the fact that the proverb is placed at the beginning of the stanza brings into focus the generalised theme of inequality and juxtaposes the specific conflict between Miss Pam and the 'I' of the poem: it brings the proverb into a personal relation with the voice of the speaker. The proverbial statement contextualises the stanza by making a generalisation of inequality pertaining to a wider group. It relies upon the present moment being part of the flow of communal experience, as Morris observed.²²⁹ The proverb creates a broad base for the stanza which then narrows down into a specific group.

As the stanza continues Bennett names a single person who is identified with the richer class of people — in this case it is somebody who is fat in times of food scarcity: 'Koo

²²⁶ 'Jackass say de worl' noh level'; things are not evenly distributed (*Justice* 3; *Character* 109).

²²⁷ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 83.

²²⁸ It is interesting to note that in her first publication of poems in 1942, Bennett entitles this poem 'War Time Condition' and the line in the first stanza reads:

Ef yuh noh well use to de Chiney man,
Yuh keahn get milk fe buy.

By 1966 in *Jamaica Labrish*, she has changed the title to 'Wartime Grocery' and the lines read,

Ef you noh well use to grocery man
You kean get milk fe buy!

This is possibly a move to a more generalised term to represent all grocery stores rather than a specific one.

²²⁹ Morris, *Selected Poems*, xvi.

how Miss Pam she fat!’ Here, Bennett uses a singled out and named persona, Miss Pam, to embody a group identity and represent the privileges of the rich. In the following line, Bennett continues to comment on the irony that although Miss Pam does not need milk she is still able to purchase it: ‘She noh need milk, wen me side o’ her’. The balance of this line, created by the comma, highlights the comparison to follow in the last line of the stanza: ‘Me fava (resemble) mawga rat!’ The term ‘mawga’ is found in several proverbs in the *Proverb Manuscript* under headings of *Character, Class and Conceit, Need and Necessity*; for instance, in the *Proverb Manuscript*, Bennett records proverbs such as: ‘ mawga cow a bull mama’; a poor person can have high connections (*Class*, 15) and ‘mawga dog nebber pass ole bone’; those in need are not choosy (*Need and Necessity*, 24). In these proverbs Bennett applies many meanings to the word ‘mawga’, such as ‘ poor’, ‘ needy’, ‘lowly’, ‘hungry’ and ‘humble’. Each of these descriptions can be applied to the line in this stanza, ‘me fava mawga rat’, where the speaker declares she resembles a rat. Notably, in these particular proverbs in the *Proverb Manuscript* , the word ‘mawga’ is used to describe an animal. The placement of the word ‘rat’ at the end of the last line is not a triumphant final word but rather emphasises the status of the speaker within the stratification of the stanza. Here, returning to consider Cooper’s argument concerning the metaphorical status of proverbs, the use of animals prompts us to think starkly about human social relations, as the speaker compares themselves to an implied poor, needy, lowly, hungry, humble animal.

The fact that the speaker is unnamed could imply that the poorer classes are unimportant, but this is countered in the poem by giving the role of authoritative speaker to someone not from an elite class. 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 by selling two commodities at once; the poor are unable to buy the minimum that is required, in this case milk. Miss Pam’s servant has already bought four tins of milk. It is this injustice that the stanza replies to, with the proverb at the start announcing one response to the issue. This exemplifies how a proverb can not only generate the theme of the poem around which the poetic text circles but can also dominate one stanza within the poem. In sum, Bennett’s particular placement of the proverb directs the reader’s attention to the weight it carries within that one stanza.

As observed throughout this chapter, proverbs need to be interpreted in terms of the ‘humanness’ that is at the centre of Bennett’s poems. Cooper identifies the relationship

between the themes that the proverbs embody from Jamaican life and the structure created in imagery which draws from that Jamaican environment and heritage. She writes that ‘in both subject and structure the metaphorical proverb affirms Bennett’s umbilical connection to [the] matrix of oral Jamaican folklore’.²³⁰ Here the notion of the proverb being born into the Jamaican folklore genealogy solidifies the relationship between tradition and folklore that was noted by Norrick.

The use of a proverb allows the poet to reimagine the representation of the community. In the poem ‘Wartime Grocery’ discussed above, Bennett deals with the issues that concern her community and uses her poetic narrative skills to represent them both realistically and hopefully. In approaching her poetry through proverbial thinking, Bennett encompasses the issues at the heart of her community where, as seen, the proverbs add another layer to her poetic constructs. Bennett listens to the multiplicity of the voices and issues and creatively blends this within the relationship of proverb and poetic construct. She brings the weight of validation of the proverbs into her poetic narrative and directs this at current themes of the everyday. In other words, it is not the poem or the proverb alone that acts as a vehicle for Bennett to provide a social commentary but the complementary relationship both genres have with each other.

An example of a poem which circles around two proverbs is the poem ‘Sweetie Pie’.²³¹ In this poem we find an element of proverbial misdirection where a picture of Sweetie Pie has been built up so that the expectation is that the subject is a young child. However, he turns out to be ‘one big strong – muscle man/dah run fi fifty bole!’ (around 50 years old). Two proverbs, ‘Donkey tink him cub a race horse’²³² and ‘John crow tink him pickney white’,²³³ comment on the misguided perception of Sweetie Pie created by the poetic text itself, alerting us once again to the reciprocal relationship of poetry and proverb. The proverbs are not only placed in the first and last stanza to reinforce the poem’s interests in perception, but both also highlight the double meaning that can lie behind a proverb — ‘the illusion’ as Morris describes it in the following quotation:

The startlingly different reality prompts the reflection that people hang on to the illusions they need: the point is made in the proverbs that open and close the poem.²³⁴

²³⁰ Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 37.

²³¹ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 52.

²³² ‘Donkey tink him cub a race horse’; refers to those who overrate what belongs to them (*Boastfulness*, 10).

²³³ ‘John crow tink him pickney white’; refers to those who overrate their relations (*Boastfulness*, 13)

²³⁴ Morris, *Selected Poems*, 156, footnote 38.

The poem illustrates how parents can often have an inflated and boastful view of their children and their capabilities, for example where the donkey unrealistically thinks his progeny is a racehorse. Furthermore, there is a deeper illusion in the proverb, ‘John crow tink him pickney white.’ This refers to a bird whose chicks are born white, but which turn black as they grow up. In reality, they present first as one thing but soon change to their natural form, thus breaking the initial illusion. This proverb is also placed in the *Proverb Manuscript* (in addition to *Boastfulness* as noted above) under *Selfishness*, with the additional translation of ‘John crow tink him pickney white’ which refers to overrating one’s relations (*Selfishness*,4). A racialised reading of this proverb can be applied but now we can also read into the poem the notion of a selfish parent who wishes others to be impressed by their child. Bennett frames the poem ‘Sweetie Pie’ with the two proverbs which imbue the poem with an illusory undertone, illustrating once again the skill with which she uses the proverbs to inform the poetry. In this case, the illusion inherent in the second proverb creates a symbiotic relationship with the poem in terms of the revelation at the end about Sweetie Pie.

A final exemplary poem where Bennett places the proverbs at the start and at the end of a certain poem is ‘Dutty Tough’.

Sun a shine but tings not bright;
 Doah pot a bwile, bickle no nuff;
 River flood but water scarce, yaw;
 Rain a fall but dutty tough.

The last stanza turns this around:

Sun a shine an pot a bwile, but
 Tings no bright, bickle no nuff.
 Rain a fall, river dah flood, but
 Water scarce and dutty tough.²³⁵

The stanzas at the start and the end of the poem are reversed and the effect of this, as Morris writes, is to turn the poetic narrative ‘away from the individual into the communal

²³⁵ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 27-28.

expression of proverbs'.²³⁶ It puts that particular moment in a wider perspective in time but 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 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.

As I noted in the introductory chapter, in June 1981 — notably before *Selected Poems* was published — Morris gave a talk in Beacon Bookstore in London. The recording is sometimes unclear, but it is possible to hear Morris talk about the latest work that was going to be published from a collaboration with Bennett on a volume of her selected poems.²³⁷ In this, he gives an astute gloss on the placement of the proverbs where he notes that they are more available to the reader rather than the listener. Morris's observation is that the proverbs in this poem are fundamentally sad, and in performance Bennett communicates this. However, it is unlikely that most of us would receive in performance the detailed skill with which the proverbs are placed. For instance, it is worth noting that in the last stanza the wording of 'rain a fall/ but dutty tough' is broken. Bennett does not do this in any other poem, and the effect here might be to make the reader pause to consider the jolt of discomfort this creates. To expand on this, Morris urges us here to notice that the proverbs are arranged so that in line 1 the proverb is positive, and in line 2 it is negative, positive in line 3 and negative in line 4. The tone of the poem is changed because of the rhyme schema and ballad form where lines 2 and 4 rest naturally, with a break after 2 and then 4 so that when you put a negative in lines 2 and 4 this comes across with more pathos.²³⁸ The technique that Bennett employs here, of placing the proverbs in opposition, encourages the reader to re-engage in the proverbs and to observe the different emphases created. The stress is in the last stanza, on the words 'Dutty tough' meaning that no matter what, the ground remains too hard — in other words, the harshness of life for a labouring class Jamaican will not ease. By framing a poem about hard times within the generational tradition of proverbs, this poem becomes transferable and applicable to other times and

²³⁶ Morris, *Selected Poems*, 144.

²³⁷ Mervyn Morris, "Louise Bennet's Poetry", George Padmore Institute, London: audio cassette (1981).

²³⁸ Morris, "Louise Bennett's poetry", 1981.

spaces. It is a deliberate technique used by Bennett to harness the timelessness and timeliness of proverbs. In this poem the individual and the communal come together to face a shared experience.

‘Jamaica Oman’ explores a similar context of hardship where the focus is on the composite woman figure and Bennett explicitly incorporates the proverb ‘for oman luck deh a dungle’.²³⁹ The poem circles around the proverb which comes in the penultimate stanza and translates to mean that if a woman waits long enough her luck, which is hidden at the moment, will be rediscovered and therefore she should keep persevering:

For ‘Oman luck deh a dungle’,
Some rooted more dan some,
But as long as fowl a scratch dungle heap
Oman luck mus come!²⁴⁰

The proverbial message is surprisingly understated because of its placement but also because it comes after the poetic narrative has praised the inner strength found in all women. One might have expected it to be the precursor to Bennett’s argument rather than the summation. However, as I noted previously, the stanzas of Bennett’s poems often preempt the proverb and offer an explanation of the meaning incorporated in the proverb. In this poem the narrative leads up to the proverb, claiming space for Jamaican women in general by loudly pronouncing in the first stanza:

Jamaica oman cunny, sah!
Is how dem jinnal so?
Look how long dem liberated
An de man dem never know!
Look how long Jamaica oman
-Modder, sister, wife, sweetheart-
Outa road an eena yard deh pon

²³⁹ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 23; ‘for oman luck deh a dungle’; women scratch out their own luck (*Luck*).

²⁴⁰ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 24.

A dominate her part!²⁴¹

This address, which lists four specific roles of women, including the mother, encompasses all women and the struggles which therefore apply to all womankind. It draws attention to that notion that indirection is the quintessential attribute, or dubious distinction of the crafty Jamaican woman of whom, Cooper claims, Bennett is herself a prime example.²⁴²

This is a gendered poem and various critics, such as Cooper, advocate for a strong feminist reading of Bennett's works. Cooper's voice is part of the larger argument about 'the excesses, irreverence and slackness of Jamaican cultural forms, embodied in Creole language, with its sexual punning and subversions', and referenced in the ethos of the dancehall.²⁴³ However, deCaires Narain suggests that it would be true to say that 'while Bennett makes almost exclusive use of female speakers, there is very little overt reference to the sexual'.²⁴⁴ In evaluating Cooper's approach, I suggest that the issue of genderedness in Bennett's poetry can be navigated by considering how Bennett turns to the Tante figure. The maternalistic figure of Tante invokes learning at a mother's knee which we associate with female nurture and the passing on of a certain type of knowledge. The Tante figure is key to understanding Bennett's relationship with the folk, where the folk element is also to be understood in the gossiping (labrish) of the women. Therefore, when we access her poetry through the lens of gender we can recognise the subtle ways in which knowledge is passed between women. By embedding proverbs such as 'Oman luck deh a dungle' at the core of her poems, Bennett presents an important way in which she works through a female gendered approach. This articulation of proverbs by women can be viewed through a wider sociological lens where historically women have discussed female issues with each other in maternal spaces.

I noted earlier in the thesis that deCaires Narain comments on the 'subversive potential of the scraps of human speech' from which Creole is forged.²⁴⁵ Of course, the proverb also reveals some of what deCaires Narain has identified. The proverb embodies the notion of luck – that women make their own luck, and yet the poem illustrates that the women

²⁴¹ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 23 (notably this poem is not in *Jamaica Labrish* so this suggests it postdates the publication of this collection).

²⁴² Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 47.

²⁴³ DeCaires Narain, *Making Style*, eBook 29%.

²⁴⁴ DeCaires Narain, *Making Style*, eBook 29%.

²⁴⁵ Denise deCaires Narain, *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry, making style* (London: Routledge, 2009), 226. Here I am referring back to p.36, footnote 55 of the thesis.

succeed through their own hard work and wit: Bennett shows us women working things out in female-only spaces in order to survive, despite and unbeknownst to the men.

From de grass roof to de hill-top
In profession , skill and trade,
Jamaica oman teck her time
Dah mount an meck de grade!
...
Some backa man a push, some side-a
Man a hole him han,
Some a lick sense eena man head,
Som a guide him pon him plan!
...
So de cunny Jamma oman
Gwan like pants-suit is a style,
An Jamaica man no know she wear
De trousiz all de while! ²⁴⁶

It is good to remind ourselves here that proverbial speech can broach subjects that are often not spoken about literally; by using the metaphorical and earthy proverb which locates women's 'luck' in the midden, Bennett draws on the concept of proverbial thinking to consider the issues surrounding the gender imbalance which the poem is addressing. This notion of the female transmission of proverbs can now be understood as representative of an approach to Bennett's creativity through proverbial thinking.

²⁴⁶ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 23.

On the other hand, Carole Boyce Davies's study of proverbs looks at the gendering in proverbs in general and cautiously generalises of proverbs that 'it may be fair to say that the proverb is one of the most important sources of documentation of bias against the female'.²⁴⁷ The apparent limitation on the stereotype of women presented in the term 'female' here is further complicated when Boyce Davies continues to note that there appears to be a preponderance of 'man proverbs', despite this being also read as generic mankind. Boyce Davies writes that,

there is a definite masculine character to the proverbs themselves and these refer to and define the experiences of the male gender — human and animal as normative, which is distinct and separate from how women are introduced in proverbial wisdom.²⁴⁸

This bias also appears across the body of proverbs in Bennett's *Proverb Manuscript*. However, the commonality and the metaphorical nature of proverbs can suggest a less binary approach, where the fluidity of the proverb allows a more generalised approach; in this way the genderedness of the proverb becomes less fixed. The formulation of proverbs can leave the proverb open to interpretation, for instance the placing of animals as the subject connotes either gender. Bennett uses proverbs such as 'play wid puppy, puppy lick yuh mou'; familiarity breeds contempt (*Class*, 21); 'wen horse dead cow fat'; there will be more grass for the cow (*Affluence*, 7; *Reaction*, 8) where the animals could relate metaphorically to both a male or female representation. Returning to the 'mawga rat' in the poem 'Wartime Grocery', we are guided to read this as female within the context of the speaker, even though a rat is non-gender specific. Similarly Bennett uses generic proverbs, such as 'duttu water put out fire'; everything has its use (*Character*, 68) and 'but time longer dan rope'; nothing continues forever (*Patience and Time*, 1) Again, these proverbs are non-gender specific, thematic and draw on popular wisdoms. In noting these examples of non-gender-specific proverbs, we can adopt a reading of the proverbs which is fluid and open, and which undermines the notion that proverbs can automatically be read as creating fixed norms, in this case in terms of gender.

²⁴⁷ Carole Boyce Davies, "Woman is a Nation" in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (New Jersey: African World Press, Inc 1990, second printing 1994):166.

²⁴⁸ Boyce Davies, "Woman is a Nation", 166.

A Proverbial Conversation: Questioning the Absence of an Explicit Proverb

In the previous sections I have argued that Bennett's poems can be constructed around the explicit presence of proverbs. My arguments have highlighted how proverbs can be integral to a wider interpretive understanding of her poems where the proverbs can instruct from within the poetic text. I turn now to a discussion where the absence of an explicit proverb asks different questions of Bennett's poems.

The communication of proverbs by implication creates another form of proverbial thinking in Bennett's poems, where an implied proverb becomes an enabling factor in the poet's work. Equally, this allows for an alternative categorising approach whereby the poems can be grouped through the associations of a particular proverb. The concept of implication is borrowed from Carolyn Cooper. In her gloss on the poem 'Jamaica Elevate', Cooper states that 'at the root of the poem is the cautionary Jamaican proverb, "the higher monkey climb, the more him expose himself"'.²⁴⁹ The proverb warns of pride coming before a fall and, although the proverb is not used in the specific poetic text, Cooper's use of the word 'root' alludes to the concept of embeddedness.

I pause here to explain this concept since this forms the basis of my discussion of implied proverbs throughout my thesis. In the poem 'Jamaica Elevate', Jamaica has gained independence and is trying to appear worthy of this new status:

So many tings happen so fas an quick
Me head still fell giddy!
Biff, Referandum! Buff, Election!
Baps, Independence drop pon we!
...
We tun Independent nation
In de Commonwealth of Nations
An we get congratulation

²⁴⁹ Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 181. "The higher monkey climb, the more him expose himself"; people that desire fame or power should be prepared to have every aspect of their lives examined.

From the folks of high careers:
We got Consuls and Ambassadors
An Ministers and Senators
Dah rub shoulder an dip mout
Eena heavy world affairs.²⁵⁰

Morris points out that the word ‘drop’ in the first quoted stanza above, implies that Independence was something that happened to Jamaica rather than something the nation achieved themselves.²⁵¹ This reflects the irony that underlines the poem, where the poem continues by relating all the incidental things that Jamaica is proud of:

We defence is not defenceless
For we got we half a brick,
We got we broken bottle
An we coocoomacca stick.²⁵²

...

We got we owna Stadium,
We owna Bank fi save,
We owna National Anthem
An we owna flag a wave.²⁵³

When we read the poem, as Cooper has done, we hear the implied warning of the proverb: while Jamaica climbs in status the more it becomes elevated yet the more it will be exposed. The proverb warns of the attention from the ‘folks of high careers’ where this attention may highlight weaknesses and potential problems. The monkey figure in the implied proverb at the ‘root’ of the poem (‘the higher monkey climb, the more him expose himself’) allows us to visualise the dangers of climbing higher and higher at greater risk of exposure and of falling. In this case, as stressed, the proverb is implied rather than

²⁵⁰ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 124/5.

²⁵¹ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 185, note 8.

²⁵² Coocoomacca is a tree noted for its hardness.

²⁵³ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 126.

explicitly incorporated and this allows me to further explore the proverbial conversation across Bennett's works and the notion of proverbial thinking throughout the thesis.

Cooper's concept of an implied proverb allows a fuller understanding of Bennett's poetic practice by acknowledging that the nonvisible, silent presence of a proverb or proverbs can be activated by the language and thematic force of the poem. Reading through the lens of proverb implication depends upon an open approach to reading Bennett. To be attuned to proverbial thinking in Bennett's poetry involves not just identifying the explicit proverbs in her poems but recognising the multiple layers of interpretation that can be opened through proverbial implication. Furthermore, questioning the absence of proverbs in her poetry complicates the narrative around the colonial moment during which Bennett was writing and allows me to mount a discussion as to the development of her poetic and proverbial identity within the narrative of Jamaican and Caribbean literary history at that particular time.

To explore the mutability of proverbs, I return to the poem, 'Wartime Grocery' where the exemplary proverb from this poem is 'Jackass say de worl noh level'.²⁵⁴ Bennett was concerned with issues that affected her community, and one of those, as already seen in the section above, was the hardships caused by inequality and injustice.

In Morris and Nettleford's editions, the poems are placed in sections thematically, or by using one line from a poem and linking other poems through that line, also thematically. My proposal diverges from their thematic links or poetic sentences to create groups of related poems that respond to the logic of Bennett's proverbial thinking. I propose that groups of poems can also be linked through proverbial transference, where a number of poems respond to a particular proverb.

For example, I have placed three other poems into a group where the proverb, 'Jackass say de worl noh level' creates a proverbial link between them. In this first grouping, the poem 'Rice Gawn'²⁵⁵ does not contain an explicit proverb but the proverbial wisdom from 'Jackass say de worl noh level' taken from 'Wartime Grocery' can be inferred. This exemplifies how 'implied' comes to mean both connecting to unvoiced but known proverbs and reimagining the characteristics of proverbs for poetic purposes. A link can be

²⁵⁴ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 83.

²⁵⁵ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 85.

created between ‘Rice Gawn’ and ‘Wartime Grocery’ through the proverb which comments on the theme of scarcity and of price wars. In a personifying move, similar to the anthropomorphic drive of proverbs, Bennett gives ‘Rice’ a humanised character:

Rice sey, dem pass dem place fe want

Control a swell like she

From one an six to ten pence! Wat

A piece of libaty!

Bennett points out that it is those in authority who are the ones making decisions and controlling prices, to the detriment of the ordinary person:

Authority control all price

Dem teck off an put awn;

Authority go fas wid Rice

And Rice get bex an gawn.²⁵⁶

The proverb, ‘Jackass say de worl noh level’ is relevant to the poetic narrative of ‘Rice Gawn’, widening an interpretation of the poem to include its central concern with inequality. The humour within the proverb links to the humour in the poetry: in this case, the fact that the jackass is a figure of ridicule, and a figure of levelling between humans and animals, and Rice’s resistance to ‘Authority’. Here one could again debate Cooper’s observation that ‘the use of animal imagery in the proverbs to describe human characteristics suggests the ontological continuum of the human and animal worlds’.²⁵⁷ This notion of zoomorphism is substantiated by Prahlad who correlates the images of animals with people in actual social contexts, often with negative connotations.²⁵⁸ The juxtaposition of nature and commerce is represented in the poetic imagery creating a further tension. This could align with a reading where Bennett places the proverb ‘Jackass say de worl noh level’ not only under the expected heading in the *Proverb Manuscript of Justice*, but also under *Character*. She interpreted and therefore categorised this proverb in terms of a potentially problematic perception of the Jamaican people to feel hard done by

²⁵⁶ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 85.

²⁵⁷ Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 43.

²⁵⁸ Anand Prahlad, *African American Proverbs*, 66.

or to place the blame for their misfortune on others rather than take ownership of it themselves.

The personification of rice in ‘Rice Gawn’, where the figure of Rice becomes a proverbial character with a voice, allows for comedic relief from the seriousness of the food shortage. ‘Rice sey’ (repeated at the start of stanzas 2 and 3) encourages Bennett, and consequently the reader, to dress up the subject of hardship brought about by the scarcity of the commodity into a picture of Lady Rice herself, captured in a cage, being undersold and complaining bitterly before she disappears. She accuses the authorities of having stepped over the line in controlling a ‘swell’ like her. Clearly, in this poem, the more serious message conveyed is the need for basic food which is being priced out of the reach of the poorer classes. Bennett’s skill in couching this situation in humour becomes all the more effective — humour, for Bennett, disguises the sharpness of many situations. Throughout her poetry, she employs humour to underpin the theme of hardship, inverting the fact of hardship with an injection of hilarity to deliberately destabilise the hegemony of the coloniser. As she herself notes: ‘I have found a medium through which I can pretend to be laughing’.²⁵⁹

Another poem which attracts a link through the proverbial reading of ‘Jackass say de worl noh level’ is ‘Soap Vacation’.²⁶⁰ As the poem’s title tells us, Bennett is highlighting the lack of soap and the need to find alternatives for cleanliness since soap has gone on holiday. Once again, soap takes on the nature of a proverbial character, which Bennett uses to comment on the scarcity and the consequential hardships ensuing for the poorer classes:

Ef Mums can gawn pon holiday
Soap can teck vacation!
‘Guinea – gole’ gawn look fe Sunlight!
‘wite-soap’ gawn a fairy – lan’,
‘Rainbow’ gawn a heaven, dung to
‘Blue soap’ gawn pon vacation.

²⁵⁹ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, ix.

²⁶⁰ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 86.

Ackee -skin and ashes is me
Dutty clothes dem only hope
For me hear Pooto dah-tell Jane
Sey dem meck good washin-soap.
...
Me haffe try out evertin,
Me kean sidung an mope
Me noh able fe surrender
All me clensiniss to soap!²⁶¹

This prompts a link to the proverb ‘Jackass say de worl noh level’ regarding the hardship in general but pointedly comments on the situation for the less wealthy people who are forced to make soap out of ackee skin and ashes because of the shortage. The mention of Pooto and Jane draws in a personal note relating to individuals who are forced to turn to home grown alternatives since they cannot afford to buy soap which has become a luxury item. Despite the hardship of trying to keep clean, Bennett achieves a lighter touch with the comic picture of inanimate soap bars travelling off to look for a sunny climate to relax in.

In a third poem, “When Trouble tek man”, the individual proverb ‘Jackass say de worl’ noh level’ can once more be activated to provide a wider reading of hardship and prompts a reading of social inequality since the poem itself revolves around a higgler (street vendor) who is of lower status. This poem also has its own proverbs bookending it, where the titular proverb is used at the start of stanza one:

When trouble teck man, pickney boot
Fit him – an dat is tru

And stanza 13 ends with:

Before me tumble dung me hole macca

²⁶¹ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 86.

So ah sell off everyting!²⁶²

The first framing proverb sets the scene that when faced with troubles, a man will try anything (a child's boot will fit him). The poem constitutes a satirical look at false pride through the eyes of a street vendor. The vendor's young relative is out of job as a nurse so the only thing that the vendor can teach her is what she herself knows. She takes her out on the street to cry her wares beside her, but the girl only cries out 'Me too!':

Me start fi call out – 'Ackee! Pear!

Ripe plantain going poo!

Me have breadfruit! Hear de gal backa me

'Me too! Me too! Me too!'²⁶³

This is amusing to start with but the vendor gets angry at the girl:

Yuh tink yuh too igh fi call out:

An anodder sinting to:

Tickya people go hear yeh seh, 'Me too'

An tink me dah sell YUH! (my stress).²⁶⁴

The humour in this poem is unmistakable but the commentary is still serious — this is the vendor's only means of livelihood. The twist comes at the end of the poem with the insertion of the proverb, 'before me tumble dung me hole macca', which is translated as 'choose the lesser of two evils'.²⁶⁵ The irony is that the girl, knowing that she did not like 'higglarin', chose to do what she hated and managed to sell everything before she left. Bennett's inclusion of the relevant proverb to make this final twist highlights the dexterity of her poetic ability. The proverb is seamlessly incorporated into the stanza, bracketed by the rhyming scheme of *abcb* and bringing with it the weighted wisdom of the proverb:

Hear har to me, 'Ah call out, mah,

²⁶² Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 31.

²⁶³ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 31.

²⁶⁴ This poem is further explored in Chapter Five in terms of performance where the humour is brought alive through Bennett's dramatic and vocal skills.

²⁶⁵ 'before me tumble dung me hole macca'; choose the lesser of two evils (*Precaution*, 2).

Doah ah doan like higglarin;
Before me tumble dung me hole macca,
So ah sell off everyting'.²⁶⁶

The selection of poems above has exemplified how a proverbial connection might be made between sample poems under a singular proverb such as 'Jackass say de worl' noh level'. The significance of proverbial thinking manifests itself in the way that proverbs become part of Bennett's poetic practice, even when the proverb itself might be absent in a poetic text. The two-fold definition in Bennett's *Proverb Manuscript*, and the interesting placement of this proverb, 'Jackass say de worl' noh level', under the heading of *Character* as well as *Justice*, opens an interrogation of the multiple interpretations to which the use of this proverb and its implied meanings give rise.²⁶⁷ Attention is drawn to the implication that a person who is hard done by might also make this an excuse creates a different interpretation towards the attitude of the person towards hardship. The common theme of hardship is underlined with Bennett's attitude of humour in order to deal with such hardships. Julie Pearn observes that 'she (Bennett) uses laughter both as a curative emotional release and as an expression of mental freedom'.²⁶⁸ And yet Bennett herself writes, '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'.²⁶⁹

A Proverbial Conversation: The Triplet of Independence Poems

In this final section I present one other sample framework where connected readings can be made between three poems through proverbial implication. This group of poems — 'Independance', 'Independence Dignity', and 'Jamaica Elevate' — reflects on

²⁶⁶ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 32.

²⁶⁷ 'Jackass say de worl' noh level'; refers to one who makes excuses for his own actions (*Character*, 109)

²⁶⁸ Julie Pearn, "Poetry as a Performing Art in the English-Speaking Caribbean." (Ph.D. thesis, University of Sheffield, October 1985), 3.

²⁶⁹ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 'Introduction', xxv.

independence, the new nation and the changing moment that the Jamaican people were facing as the dismantling of the colonial legacy began.

In the poem ‘Independance’,²⁷⁰ Bennett expresses her concern about whether Jamaica is ready for independence.²⁷¹ Notably her spelling and wordplay of the title word ‘Independance’ suggest an ambiguity in the reading of this title. In the poem, ‘Independence Dignity’ which I analyse later, she presents a picture of crowds dancing in the street as Independence was celebrated — ‘we dance out street/ from night till soon a mornin’.²⁷² Returning to ‘Independance’, we see that Bennett’s concern is that the people will be led a merry dance in gaining their independence. This concern is again raised in the closing stanza where the repetition of the first line ‘Independance wid a vengeance!’ shows Bennett stressing the fact that gaining Independence may have a weightier impact and longer lasting consequences than some might have expected:

Independance wid a vengeance

Wonder how we gwine to cope

Jamaica start smoke pipe, ah hope

We got nuff Jackass rope! (Tobacco).²⁷³

The ambiguous tone of this poem is also shown in the line ‘ah hope/ we chin can stan de strain!’ which echoes colonial dismissals of colonised nations’ readiness for independence because of their ostensibly less developed economies and socio-political structures. We also see here the weight of meaning held in Bennett’s succinct but pointed poetic writing with its clear echoes of the proverb form.

Within the lines of her poems on independence there is multiplicity of meanings which aligns with an approach provided by proverbial thinking —in this case, it is the three proverbs that are embedded in this poem ‘Independance’ which complicate the understanding of the dance, but also illustrate the prescience that Bennett shows in being concerned how Jamaica would cope with being an independent nation. Her inclusion of

²⁷⁰ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 169; *Selected Poems*, 129.

²⁷¹ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 169; *Selected Poems*, 129.

²⁷² Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 127.

²⁷³ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 129.

these two proverbs — ‘wen dog mawga him head big’²⁷⁴ and ‘wen puss hungry hi nose clean’²⁷⁵ — seems to illustrate a certain disquiet that an independent Jamaica might feel a need to assert itself as bigger or more significant than it is. With the use of these two proverbs, Bennett therefore comments on becoming big headed, especially when the consequences are unknown. The first proverb — ‘wen dog mawga him head big’ — is echoed in the second, which follows immediately in the next line of the stanza, ‘And wen puss hungry hi nose clean’. This particular proverb serves to show that no one knows what this change of national status is going to entail and therefore one should be prepared. The doubling up of these proverbs one after the other is used by Bennett to couple together the two points and to provide a two-fold warning from inside the poem: Bennett’s listeners/ audience are asked to consider this momentous moment in history from another angle and to be prepared and cautious even when celebrating. As in most of the proverbial poems I have discussed, building the poem around the proverb gives us a prior explanation of, or context for, how the interpretive, didactic use of the proverb within the poem is to be used. The use of the proverbs reveals Bennett’s reservations as to how Jamaica will cope post-independence, and yet this also has to be read within the positivity of the titular ‘dance’ which counterbalances the weight of her warnings. The warning is also carried in the third proverb in this poem, ‘Dog wag him tail fi suit him size’; people act according to their ability (*Limitations*, 18). The heading *Limitations* is key to understanding the message of this proverb in the context of this poem and, as we shall see, by proverbial implication in the poem ‘Jamaica Elevate’.

The notes of caution, which are mobilised in the proverbs discussed above, can be referenced in the epistolary poem, ‘Independence Dignity’ in which the narrator writes to ‘cousin Minnie’ in the form of a letter which starts ‘Dear Cousin Min, yuh miss sinting/ yuh should be over yah’.²⁷⁶ We see Miller’s point of letters being written to and from relatives abroad where, in poetic form, the letter writer is writing to tell her cousin what she is missing in the independence celebrations. Although the subject matter itself allows for a natural link, so too does the argument of reframing the proverbs used in the poem above — ‘wen dog mawga him head big’/ ‘And wen puss hungry hi nose clean’/ ‘dog wag

²⁷⁴ This is translated in the *Proverb Manuscript* as ‘poor but pompous person’ (*Conceit*, 1). As we have seen there are various interpretations given in the *Proverb Manuscript* for ‘mawga’ but in this particular proverb it is translated in the *Proverb Manuscript* as given.

²⁷⁵ Wen puss hungry hi nose clean; his sense of smell is keen when he is hungry (*Caution and Precaution*, 22) The overall meaning is that something is about to arrive and he should be preparing for it.

²⁷⁶ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish* 170; *Selected Poems*, 127.

him tail fi suit him size and match him stamina'. As I noted above, 'Independence Dignity' which does not include a proverbial element, portrays the feeling of excitement and joyous celebration as the people take to the streets to celebrate gaining independence. The singing of the National Anthem, 'Jamaica land we love' (the two lines of the anthem are incorporated in the poem itself) brings a sense of national identity and respect, even from unruly Jane, and stirs patriotism in 'fan lazy bwoy who spen him time a – kotch up Joe shop wall'. Bennett includes these individuals such as unruly Jane who is normally unmanageable but even she stands up straight and sings out ' Teach us true respect for all!' and Joe, who usually spends his time lolling against the shop wall doing nothing, and yet he also stands up to call out 'stir response to duty's call !' In this way Bennett brings the individual voices into relief and by doing so, she brings the reader 'onto the streets' with the people who are moved to patriotism. The expression of the poem is one of a patriotic community celebrating hope and a new start.

This poem is joyously celebrating independence, except for the clue given to the reader in the first stanza with the word 'capture':

Dear Cousin Min, yuh miss sinting,

Yuh should be over yah

Fi see Independence Celebration

Capture Jamaica.²⁷⁷

Morris emphasises the word 'capture', inviting us to wonder if it is ironic that Jamaica, in celebrating its independence, is perhaps being captured again by some new unnamed force, as it was by the historical captors of the past, namely the Spanish and English.²⁷⁸ Another possible reading is that Jamaicans might be captured by their own pride and ignorance, a reading that of course provides a notable contrast with the 'dignity' of independence highlighted in the poem's title. This reading also accords with the wisdom of the implied proverb from 'Independance', 'dog wag him tail fe suit him size an match him stamina' (Jamaica should have remained content with what it was); and equally, referred again from 'Independance', the proverb 'wen dog mawga him head big' (watch out for pride — pride before a fall). In that one word, 'capture', then, Bennett pre-empts contemporary debates of colonialism and post-colonial disillusionment and, in a poem seemingly of celebration, we

²⁷⁷ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 127.

²⁷⁸ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 187.

constantly see the multiple directions provided by proverbial thinking reflected in the rich ambiguity of her poetry. Overall, the transference of the proverbs opens out an underlying feeling of caution and consideration about this historical moment. Without attention to the proverbs and Bennett's proverbial thinking, the tone of the poem belies this deeper concern.

The last poem in this thematic triplet on independence is 'Jamaica Elevate'.²⁷⁹ With no explicit proverb in the text, it is linked directly by topic to the other two poems in the triplet, but also by the link forged by the implication afforded by overlaying the proverbs from 'Independance'. This cross reading of the poems illustrates the notion that proverbial implication can cascade through different poems, and in so doing, brings a multitude of possible interpretations. In other words, a proverb can be transposed and implied through contextualisation. This prompts an open and interesting proverbial conversation across the poems in the groups.

Like 'Independence Dignity', 'Jamaica Elevate' is written as a letter. Drawing 'Independance' into a proverbial conversation with 'Jamaica Elevate' allows us to identify an implied application of the proverb transmuted from that poem ('wen dog mawga him head big') and to note how the people appear again to be becoming boastful — 'spred the news to frien an family, how Jamaica elevate'. This line is the concluding line of the poem and leads to a sense that this epistolary message is leaving the page to go out into the world:

Biff, Referandum! Buff, Election!

Baps, Independence drop pon we!

....

We tell Russia we don't like dem,

We tell Englan we naw beg dem,

And we meck Merica know

We is behine dem.

...

²⁷⁹ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 174; *Selected Poems*, 124.

So yuh see how we progressin,
Gi me love to Cousin Kate,
Spread the news to frien an fambly
How Jamaica elevate.²⁸⁰

The rhythmic speed of the poem is notable and could be said to reflect the speed with which these events have happened. This stylistic implication is also mirrored by overlaying the second proverb in 'Independance': with the reading of the proverb 'wen puss hungry hi nose clean', the concern is that one does not know the consequences that could follow a certain act and the speed with which it might occur.

The central focus of 'Jamaica Elevate' celebrates Jamaica gaining a black governor general (Sir Clifford Campbell) which Bennett couches in humour:

De fus day hin picture print de
Paper drop out o me han
Me heart go boop me balk out
'something bad happen to John'

She continues to say that it was not John at all, it was the newly appointed governor general — the nomenclature momentarily taking over his identity; equally here Jamaicans could identify with one of their own acquiring a position of high authority:

jus like one o we own family
De very same complexion...
... a true bawn native son.²⁸¹

In effect this man personifies the elevation of the people of Jamaica. But perhaps there is a twist in interpreting Bennett's real understanding of the situation if we allow the third proverb from 'Independance' to be overlaid — 'dog wag him tail fi suit him size and match him stamina'. This replicates the tone of warning which we see in all three poems. The rhythm of the proverb mirrors the speed of the poetic lines which peremptorily list

²⁸⁰ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 175; *Selected Poems*, 126.

²⁸¹ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 175; *Selected Poems*, 126.

Jamaica's accolades such as, 'we got we owna Stadium/ we owna Bank fi save/ we owna National Anthem/ an we owna flag a wave'.²⁸² The implied proverb warns that perhaps this historical moment should be approached with a more measured celebration. Its inference subtly colours the humour that underpins this celebratory poem and Bennett is seen still to be reserved, presenting the facts in a detached, almost rote-learned way, which suggests a need for caution.

Throughout this chapter Bennett's continued use of proverbs presents an opportunity for scholars of today to better understand the relationship between this form and her poetry in an exciting and innovative way. I have identified this relationship to be a fluid, relational one, perhaps not always explored in earlier proverbial understandings. Indeed, in attending more closely to Bennett's proverbial thinking, and thereby moving the critical gaze away from a fixed understanding of proverbs as a self-contained form, one could suggest that Bennett may have been testing out the movability of the proverb genre through her different creative usages of it, that is to say by encouraging a more mutable, fluid approach to proverbial meaning in her poetic art. I have also shown that identifying proverbial linkage through cross readings of different poems and via proverbial implication allows an understanding of proverbial usage to be redefined. This attention to proverbs and proverbial thinking in Bennett's poetry is ultimately transformational in that it allows for a use of proverbs that has not been seen in previous proverb collections, which necessarily adhere to a narrowness of form and perspective. As we shall see in the following chapter on the *Aunty Roachy Seh* monologues, the impact this critical approach has is no less enriching when we shift to analysis of a creative form for which Bennett is also well known.

²⁸² Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 126.

Appendix 1

Illustrations from Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Dialect Verses* (1942), 30 - 31.

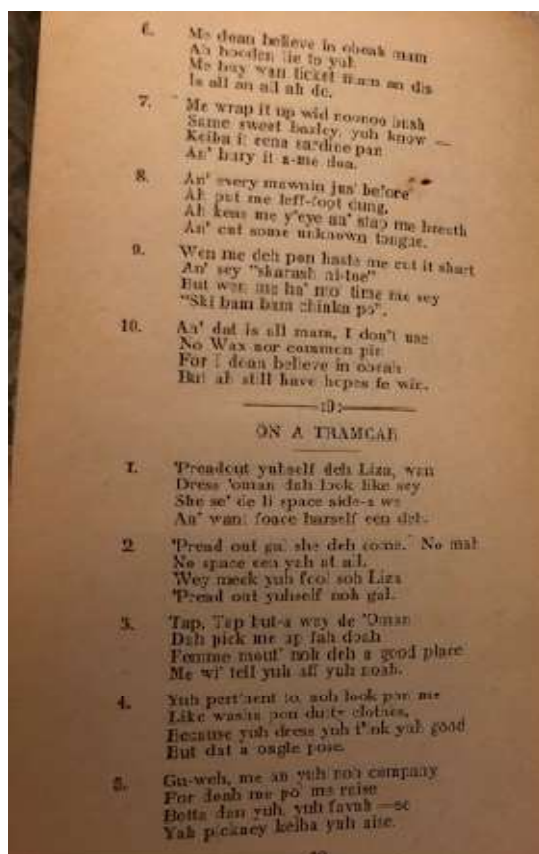


Figure 5

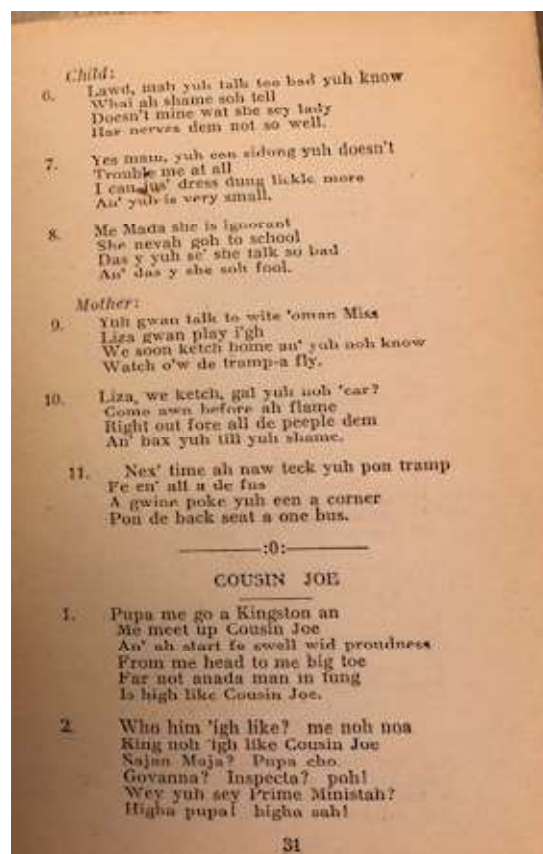


Figure 6

Appendix 2

Illustration from Louise Bennett, *Jamaica Dialect Verses* (1942), 35.

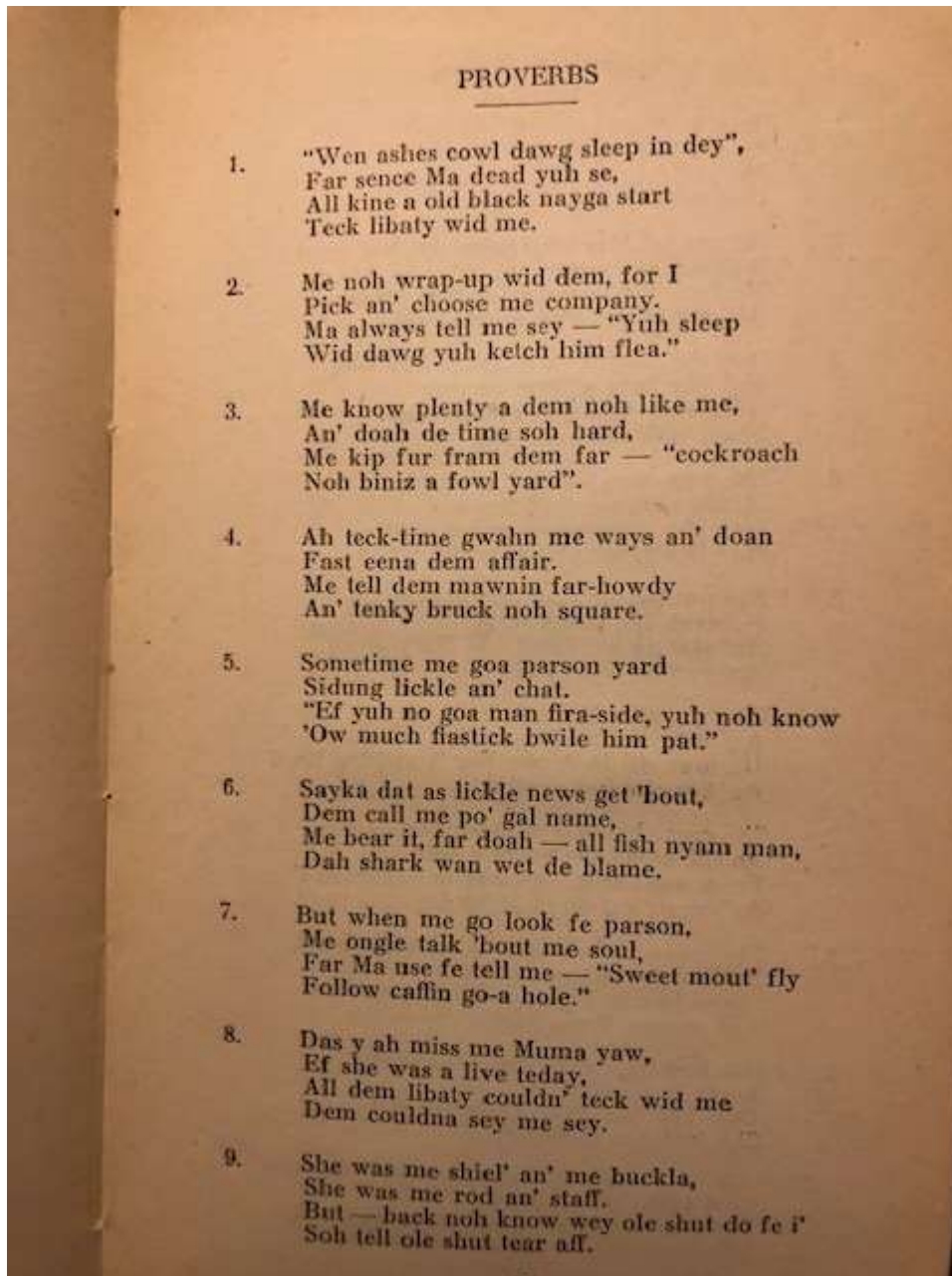


Figure 7

Chapter Three

‘Aunty Roachy Seh’: Proverbial Didacticism in Bennett’s Published and Unpublished Monologues

In this chapter I argue that employing the didactic function of proverbs was a key factor for Bennett in the radio monologues she wrote and delivered between 1966 and 1982. This chapter is concerned in particular with the didactic nature of proverbs in relation to the monologues and begins with Mervyn Morris’s observation that Bennett’s (Aunty Roachy) stories are ‘in tune with the rest of [her] work though obviously more didactic than her poems or Anancy stories’.²⁸³ I argue that we can develop this understanding of Bennett’s didacticism by attending to her *Proverb Manuscript* alongside the published monologues in *Aunty Roachy Seh* and the under-researched unpublished monologues. In this chapter I will consider how Bennett’s didacticism functions creatively and how it is intimately bound up in her performance and her use of proverbs in the monologues.

In his introduction to *Aunty Roachy Seh*, Morris also notes that Bennett ‘has chosen to give [the proverbs] special prominence by listing at the end of each monologue the proverbs used in it’.²⁸⁴ This choice creates a separate textual space for proverbs on the page and supports my view that they should be analysed both within the dynamic performance-texts of her monologues and as self-contained didactic elements of folklore. In emphasising this didactic nature of the proverbs in the monologues I return to Neal R. Norrick’s observation that the Jamaican proverb expounds codes of moral behaviour centred in Jamaican philosophy.²⁸⁵ These are passed down through the generations and have been frequently used to teach the younger members of society. Norrick is emphatic in his insistence on the relationship between the proverb and a broad understanding of teaching or moral education:

²⁸³ Mervyn Morris, quoted in Opal Palmer Adisa, “Culture and Nationalism on the World Stage: Louise Bennett’s *Aunty Roachy Seh Stories*.” *The Global South* Vol. 4. No.2 (Indiana University Press, 2011): 128. “Interview with Morris.” Personal interview with Adisa, no records.

²⁸⁴ Louise Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, ed. by Mervyn Morris (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1993; repr. 2005), Introduction xi.

²⁸⁵ Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean*, 41

Proverbs have *didactic* content. Didactic content in one form or another has consistently been predicated of proverbs by paremiologists of various persuasions – the didactic tendency may be direct in the form of a prescriptive rule or warning.²⁸⁶

He goes on to conclude that:

whether any proverb or any other single utterance is didactic on the basis of its semantic content alone seems to be a moot point; but clearly all proverbs should be usable as directly didactic in some context – even more or less situationally bound proverbs must have an evaluative meaning which enables them to function didactically under certain circumstances. Sayings lacking didactic potential entirely are clichés rather than proverbs.²⁸⁷

Norrick concedes that it is not clear if proverbs have self-contained didactic meanings. However, in stressing the evaluative element which enables the proverbs to function in certain circumstances, Norrick is pointing to the importance of the contextual framing in which the proverbs are placed and how meaning is created through the circumstances of its utterance. Bennett's use of proverbs is contextualised by the timeframe in which she was performing the monologues, between 1966 and 1982, soon after Jamaican independence when the topics relate closely to an early postcolonial nation.

Two other leading paremiologists, Archer Taylor and Wolfgang Mieder, also comment on the didactic nature of the proverb. Taylor recognises that proverbs are seen as didactic, writing that 'didactic writers naturally show a great liking for proverbs'.²⁸⁸ He further notes that they suggest a course of action or contain a statement of fact.²⁸⁹ Mieder claims proverbs are based on experience or observation and thereby stresses the indirect, experiential side of their didactic nature, writing that 'they are true 'monumenta humana' .. and will continue to be part of our communicative strategies'.²⁹⁰ Both of these opinions advocate that the proverbs offer a method of teaching and imply that the proverb takes a didactic approach through the experience and observations of the people themselves over the generations. Meider's argument mirrors Morris's observation that the experience

²⁸⁶ Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean*, 41, Section 314.

²⁸⁷ Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean*, 42-43.

²⁸⁸ Taylor, *The Proverb*, 172. In particular he relates the comment above to legal contexts (this reminds us of the use of proverbs by the Yoruba people in legal battles in the courts).

²⁸⁹ Taylor, *The Proverb*, 93.

²⁹⁰ Wolfgang Mieder and Janet Sobieski ed., "*Gold Nuggets or Fools Gold?*" *Magazine and Newspaper Articles on the (Ir)relevance of Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases*, supplement series of "Proverbium" Vol 22 (Burlington, VT : University of Vermont, 2006).

encapsulated in the proverbs is not new but rather it is part of the flow of communal experience represented by the proverbs themselves. And it is once again this complex and fluid weight within proverbial thinking that Bennett instils into the monologues.

The volume of proverbs that Bennett uses in the monologues also allows me to more fully analyse the didactic quality that she calls upon. As noted above, this will be developed with reference to the *Proverb Manuscript*, which affords a further interpretive approach to the monologues that highlights the multiplicity of meaning associated with each proverb. As we look at the monologues in more detail, we will see how Bennett's interests in proverbs continue to lie in Creole poetics; in the moral and thematic categorisations under which the proverbs are placed in the *Proverb Manuscript*; and in what I call 'translated meanings', that is the shift between Creole proverbs and suggested glosses in standardised English language in either the *Proverb Manuscript* or other dictionaries of Jamaican proverbs. Crucially, with the monologues, Bennett leaves behind a material legacy in the form of her recording scripts, the published collection *Aunty Roachy Seh*, and the unpublished scripts held in the McMaster archives, all of which I explore in this chapter. This is a powerful legacy of everyday Jamaican history and commentary. And it is all the more powerful when we remember that what is preserved in these monologues is only a partial archive. In some cases, we now have only the titles of the monologues to indicate the full range of topical subjects that Bennett addressed.

The monologues are the most nationally focused of Bennett's genres. Broadcast to a Jamaican radio audience, they detail her responses to daily life with a frequency and diversity that is impressive in itself. And within that diversity the dynamic role of proverbs is pronounced. The number of proverbs referred to and their use within the monologues reinforces the importance Bennett places on this way of thinking, speaking and writing in her creative practice. Versions of some of the proverbs, but by no means all, can be found in some of the substantial collections in print, such as the previously discussed Martha Beckwith's *Jamaica Proverbs*, Izett Anderson and Frank Cundall's *Jamaica Proverbs*, and Llewelyn Watson's *Jamaica Sayings*.²⁹¹ Notably, in the introduction to *Aunty Roachy Seh*, Morris records his initial observation that Louise Bennett has an unpublished collection of

²⁹¹ Martha Beckwith *Jamaica Proverbs* (Poughkeepsie, New York: Vassar Cooperative Book Shop, 1925; repr. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970); Izett Anderson and Frank Cundall *Jamaica Proverbs and Sayings* (Irish University Press; Facsimile edition, 1972); Llewelyn Watson, *Jamaica Sayings with Notes on Folklore, Aesthetics and Social Control* (Florida & Tallahassee: A&M University Press, 1991).

more than 700 proverbs.²⁹² That was an underestimation: we now know that the *Proverb Manuscript* contains over 1800 proverbs.

The dynamic didactic force of the proverbs will be explored in three key monologues, which were broadcast between 1967 and 1974.²⁹³ Together they illustrate the range and multiplicity of proverbial usage and emphasise the didactic impact of the proverbs in Bennett's monologues. In the first monologue, 'Telephone', Bennett comments on the efficacy of the radio and the use of the telephone systems to facilitate a better quality of reception for local Jamaican broadcasts. However, when we cross-reference the single proverb used in this monologue with the *Proverb Manuscript*, a multiplicity of meanings for the proverb emerges which gives rise to further interpretations of the monologue. In the two other monologues examined in this chapter, Bennett's commentaries on local issues are discussed in parallel with the didactic complexity of the proverbs revealed within the pieces themselves. The monologue 'Jamaica Philosophy', with its multiple proverbs, exemplifies how proverbs are an essential part of interrogating or seeking to understand the world, our knowledge of it and how humans should act within it. In the last monologue, 'Jumpin prices', Bennett rails against the rise in local prices and here the proverbs link together to build up a commentary of communal frustration and blame. Even though Bennett's commentaries remain localised and she performs the proverbs in an intimate manner, she was also interested in reaching a wider audience for her works. Therefore, this study will be framed by a discussion of how she used emerging forms of communication, moving between radio, recordings of her performance and the textualized monologues in *Aunty Roachy Seh*.

As I illustrated in the previous chapter on poetry, Bennett's creative practice favours embedding her work in the local. The monologues address relevant local issues and, in this chapter, I further unpack and nuance the notion of local. I argue that it is through the didactic nature of the Jamaican proverb form itself that the notion of the local is to be found, where Bennett encourages her audience to identify with the proverbs of their homeland, and in so doing calls her listeners and readers together, whether they are living abroad or locally. The proverbs are rooted in the local: they are articulated in Jamaican Creole and saturated with traditional wisdoms that are tied to local contexts and histories.

²⁹² Morris in Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, xi.

²⁹³ Notably, 'Jumpin Prices' was repeated in 1969, 1973 and 1974.

It is this localised power of the proverbs themselves which I argue contributes to the notion of the local in Bennett's monologues overall.

Recording *Miss Lou's Views*: The LP

Scripted live performances of *Miss Lou's Views* through the 1960s-1980s were intended to inform and frame current issues, offering an insightful picture of current social and political issues in Jamaica. The broadcasts covered a wide range of newsworthy events that were circulating at particular times, such as pieces on school spelling competitions, the state of education in Jamaican schools, social commentaries on class, race, and gender, the population explosion, and the rise of the cost of living. In the monologues, Bennett discusses precise local issues in intimate ways even as she uses a media form that is expansive. In other words, she embraces different media to broaden ways of communicating this localised legacy.

One important recording of ten monologues is still available as a long play record (hereafter LP) titled *Miss Lou's Views*, released by the Jamaican record label Federal in 1966.²⁹⁴ On this record we can hear the following ten monologues: A1 Mini Skirt; A2 Hair Season; A3 Scandal; A4 Local Matches; A5 Water shortage; B1 Street Cry; B2 Bush medicine; B3 Telephone; B4 Water Savings; B5 Head Pickers.²⁹⁵

²⁹⁴ Louise Bennett, *Miss Lou's Views* Federal Records, 1966, vinyl LP.

<https://www.discogs.com/sell/release/5444375?ev=rb>

²⁹⁵ Bennett, *Miss Lou's Views*, track list.



Figure 8

This sample collection of *Miss Lou's Views* is the only means to hear ten of her monologues in one recording — other monologues, as we shall see in Chapter Five, are incorporated individually throughout her various performances. Of the ten monologues, only 'Scandal' is printed in *Aunty Roachy Seh*, and three more can be read in text form in the unpublished monologues in the McMaster archives: 'Hair Season', 'Local Matches' and 'Mini Skirt'.²⁹⁶ This makes the recording a valuable and exciting source in preserving Bennett's monologues and allows the listener to hear Miss Lou's voice as she presents on air. In 1966, when this record was released, Bennett was already understood to be a central figure in Jamaican cultural life. The record consolidates that position, and it is worth devoting some space to describing its contents and performances before turning to a more critical discussion of the different media Bennett uses to reach a wider audience.

The sleeve notes on the record say that the programme was sponsored by Seprod Ltd, a Jamaican food company (a group of companies which has been part of the Jamaican economic landscape since 1940).²⁹⁷ The sleeve cover of the record also includes a now anachronistic summary of Jamaicanness as male and singular, but its emphasis on topicality, humour and philosophy is central to the themes across the monologues:

²⁹⁶ Louise Bennett, "Miss Lou Fonds", Bennett, Louise Coverley. ["Miss Lou's Fonds"] ["Monologues Not Used in Aunty Roachy Seh"] McMaster University Archives, Ontario. Digital archives.

<https://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca/islandora/object/macrepo%3A48700>

²⁹⁷ Seprod Ltd. For the last 80 years Seprod has been the largest manufacturing and distribution company in the Caribbean region. <https://www.seprod.com/about-us/>

In 'Miss Lou's Views', a humorous comment on topical events, Louise Bennett has been able to capture all the spontaneity of the expression of the Jamaican's joys and sorrows, his ready, poignant and even wicked wit, his religion and his philosophy of life.²⁹⁸

The humour and vitality of Jamaican life is easy to hear when listening to the tracks on the LP. For instance, when Miss Lou equates the length of the mini skirt to the high cost of living, she comments:

My Aunty Roachy seh dat it look like de gal dem a tech up dem skirt tail fi match de high cost of living, but some a de mini skirt wearers dem over step dem bouns and dem skirt tail gone up higher den de cost of living for Aunty Roachy seh if living cost was as high as dem mini skirt de worl bank wouldaa affi declare bankrupsey.²⁹⁹

The humorous link observed between the length of this new fashion and the rise in the cost of living is not only clever, but the monologue also goes on to make a veiled comment on how the 'bankrupsey' of the girls challenges society's boundaries. When Minna, the main character in 'Mini Skirt', puts on her new mini skirt it only serves to annoy her husband. As noted in the previous chapter, Bennett uses humour to frame more serious issues, and here we move from Aunty Roachy punning about miniskirts as markers of 'high' costs to addressing the consequences of female fashion choices for the male gaze. Although there are no proverbs in this particular monologue, we can hear in the verbal puns a connection with the contracted language of proverbs and the presence of proverbial thinking. Here we see Bennett's skill in using figurative language: the image of the mini skirt constitutes a metaphor where the shortness, or lack of material, of the skirt relates to the shortage of money when confronted with the rise in living costs. As we have seen, metaphors are a common presence in proverbs, which are themselves versatile and to be interpreted creatively. The commonality that enables the understanding of proverbs links to the commonality of the situation she illustrates in the monologue: 'some a de mini skirt wearers dem over step dem bouns and dem skirt tail gone up higher den de cost of living'. As with proverbial speech, there is a multiplicity of meaning and here a connotation of sexuality hovers within the language Bennett uses.

The sounds of Jamaican life are captured on the first track on side B, 'Street Cry', where Miss Lou replicates the cries of some of the street sellers. It is exciting to hear this recording since the script for this particular monologue appears to have been lost and so

²⁹⁸ Louise Bennett, *Miss Lou's Views* Federal Records, 1966, vinyl LP.

²⁹⁹ Bennett, "Monologues Not Used in Aunty Roachy Seh" ["Miss Lou Fonds"], n.d. McMaster University Archives, transcribed by the author whilst listening to the Archive recording.

this LP is the only place that it has been preserved. In this monologue, Miss Lou first explains how the children no longer know what street criers were and she exclaims ‘for everything changes, first it was horse carts and now it is fast cars’. The street criers seemingly had such strong voices that they would have won singing competitions — and indeed, ‘everything had a cry, chile’ from the sellers of ripe and green bananas, eggs, peanut butter, peaches, coconuts etc. to the cry of the fish man. Miss Lou then sings the fish man’s cry — ‘ooooh’ — which spans the vocal range rising upwards to a high lingering note. She then sings out the street cry for the fruit seller — ‘buy your sweet orange, buy your ripe banana’, repeatedly spanning a major fourth and back again. The melon seller sings a long single hollow note, and the coconut cart man cries out: ‘want a coconut, oi!’ ending on the rising syllable. Miss Lou then exclaims that the sweetest street cry comes from that of the peanut seller who sings and dances round his steaming cart to his own musical notation and entices the buyers by his antics. On this recording, Miss Lou breathes life into these lost cries and allows the listener to imagine what the streets of Jamaica must have sounded like when all the street criers were calling out their wares in a cacophony of different voices. The absence of an explicit proverb in this monologue is perhaps due to the element of persuasion within these vibrant cries being more important than a didactic impulse. This is the closest today’s listener can get to witnessing the live performance of these ten specific monologues and the LP is therefore a valuable source of enjoyment and critical appreciation of the vitality and vocal dexterity that Miss Lou brought to her radio performances. On the LP we can also hear that the pace of the performance is very fast and cohesive, broken up by a short burst of mento music between each monologue. I suggest that Bennett must have been reading from scripts, as the four examples on the LP, for which we have textual references for three of the recordings in the archives and which I compared with the tracks, are repeated word for word. These scripts have been clearly typed out with no alterations which possibly means they were ready to read out for the recordings.³⁰⁰ As an example, below (Figure 9) is the script for ‘Local Matches’, one of the four tracks on the LP.³⁰¹ This is easily read in preparation for recording.

³⁰⁰ Bennett, “Monologues Not Used in Auntie Roachy Seh”, [“Miss Lou Fonds”], n.d. <https://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca/islandora/object/macrepo%3A48700#page/1/mode/2up>

³⁰¹ Bennett, “Monologues Not Used in Auntie Roachy Seh”, 57.

MISS LOU'S VIEW

LOCAL MATCHES
BY

LOUISE BENNETT

Is wah matches mean fe do wid we doo eeh, expecially dem deh matches we meck ina Jamaica, de local meck matches dem,eh,ehhh we nat short of Jamaica made matches yuh know but Jamaica make dem Matches stick too short, eh,ehh every weh we tun macca juke we lawks chile, de finga bunnings my poor Auntie Roachie suffa, she bun-up five finga pan har wedden han aready,yes! wid de Jamaica Matches dem ohh! cakah trying fe light gas stove wid shart stick matches. Auntie Roachie say, "dat she hearsay dat Jamaica de manufacture dem owna Gas stove now a days", but if dat is true den Jamaica shoulda manufacture matches dat can light Gas Stove widout detrement to de lighta,but accorden to dis short stick, frail stem matches if yuh gwan to light Gas Stove wid dem yuh affi meck up yuh mine fe suffa nuff finga bunnings, even doah de matches dem mark safety matches, "Wat a crosses! Safety Matches". My Auntie Roachie halla "Wa kine a Safety, oh! an she run quick and she goah look fe har dictionary fe fine out if safety meen what she did tink it meen an low an behole de Dictionary say Safety meen, free from Danger been Secure, preventing Injury,Preverting Accident, ah-ah Auntie Roachie look pan de Dictionary, den she look pan de matches bax cova mark Sاتفety Matches, den she gi out, "One a onnooAtell lie One a onnoo not talking de truth, an a nebba woulda like fe noh say dat is me Dictionary not talking truth far dis Dictionary me staff an me bucklar wen it come to expounding English Language fe many years Den if is de matches a tell me such a dung-right perfidey, den a dont like it far me an Matches haffi work very close togadda every day I can hardly drink a cup a tea or eat a peice a food widout matches Eh-eh, got someting fe do wid de preceedings an me an Matches should'nt have noh untruthfulness between we atall, expecially me owna Jamaican Matches for me is one oman dat was very glad to see dat Jamaica can meck book Matches fe even up it self wid de American an England Cont-entinal Manufacturer dem, but dis so-so Book Matches Buiness is forc ing Jamaica people fe go back to Cool stove an wood fire cookings for Book Matches only got likings fe tings like those an seen as how we is a progressive Country borrowing money from Worle Bank an manu-facturing good to export to Foreighn lands,and all dem tings de, an donating trips to United Nations to fight for de rights for other Nations, doing we wotliss bess to contribute alittle gansterism an a little gang warfare to we Country development so as to fit we fe take out place monge de odder Developing Countries of de worle an de develop Nations dem already,,well since we is very farward in dem tings dere den it is not right dat we should go backwards wid we cooking implements Noooo! But my Auntie Roachie she have fe discard har gas stove an go digout har Cool stove from unda de house far she say dat wen she ketch-ing up de cool Stove she can stan far from de Stove draw de Matches den teck a aim an fling it ina de stove, but even dat not too safe far de Book Matches stick dem feel so friendly toward one anadder dat wen Auntie Roachie go fe pull off one de ole Book a Matches come off ina har han, so she just meck one strike wid de ole a de Matches dem

Figure 9

We know that Bennett prepared meticulously and, on the preparatory scripts that we are able to access, it is clear that she made many alterations on the typed pages. We can see the careful crafting that went into all the monologue for performances. To illustrate Bennett's conscientious process of editing the sample image below (Figure 10) is from an

unpublished monologue named ‘Wedding Table’.³⁰² As we can see the edits are handwritten with score outs and additions, where we can not only see but also hear Bennett’s intentions if this monologue was to have been included in a printed version. For instance, in the middle of the page, she expands on one of the sentences – ‘the wedding Godmadda remove and her helps dem teck off de top and middle centre cake and put dem sideways’. Here Bennett gives a fuller explanation for where the two tiers of the wedding cake were placed, rather than them just being removed. At the end of the page, she includes a wonderful phrase, ‘such delicious belly-pleasin food’, again expanding the description of the wedding feast. I speculate that, on rereading the script, she realised that she wanted to be more descriptive and conversational and so she added in the extra phrases in her own handwriting. She also consistently changes the spellings to Godmadda and Godfadda, indicating that, if this were to be typed out and used in print, then the Creole spelling would need to be used. This is the kind of forensic editing that can be seen in other scripts in the unpublished monologues and gives us a valuable insight into Bennett’s editing process which shows her desire for accuracy and creativity. It is also noticeable that Bennett altered the typed words from ‘speakers full of humour and good counsel’ to ‘jokes and good counsel’. With the notion of ‘good counsel’ Bennett seems to be entering the territory of proverbs where, even though it is not explicitly proverbial, the monologue is also about preserving cultural practices of ‘de real ole time’ reception.

³⁰² Bennett, “Monologues Not Used in Aunty Roachy Seh”, [“Miss Lou Fonds”], 7.
<https://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca/islandora/object/macrepo%3A48700#page/1/mode/2up>

(6)

Plenty clapping when one wud hollar, "I bid \$1,000" and den put down \$5 into de plate.

De bidding is always very lively an when de wedden godmother an godfather feel dat de money in de plate is sufficient to help the married couple, dey bid together, "Dat dis beautiful cake be unveiled."

All bidding stop same time an de God madda an her helper dem teck off de cake and presents de bidding-plate to de bride an groom, so dat both their hands touch de cake.

The wedden God madda an her helper dem teck off de top an middle centre-cake, an de wedden godfather calls upon two of de wedden procession girls to cut de bottom centre cake. De one who mek de quickest cut is gwine to ketch a husband before de other one. De wedden

godmother an cake bearers cut up de cake and share it around, round, giving de bridal couple de first slice to share between dem. In de real ole-time wedden receptions dem pour de wine out of clay cooling jars an de wedden godfather, call many speakers to speak.

Speakers full of humour and good counsel. De speech dem always start de jokes.

After dis, de wedden godfather shoots "Quadrille!" an de band strikes up, de quadrille tune, De married couple an dem parents an God madda Godfather de couple start de first figure "De buggy bruk, de buggy bruk De buggy bruk an de horse fall down,"

After the first break in de quadrille, food an drink, nuff, nuff an plentiful is served. Dinner of Curry goat, roast breadfruit, an yam, run down, ginger beer an cane-liquor. an nuff such delish belly fuleasin food.

Figure 10

The Trans–Media Context in a Local and Global World: Bennett’s Radio Presence

Within the construction of Jamaican cultural identity in the 1960s there is a complex interlocking of the notions of local and global and of technology and modernity. Before returning to Bennett’s monologues it is important to understand how she operated within a trans-media context that was both local and global, and in doing so her media career raises questions about the meaning and importance of ‘home’ and Jamaican language. Bennett’s particular understanding of the concept of ‘home’ is distinguished by a confidence in its value for explaining the world. It is not inward facing, and the transmediation of her work on a global level means that the ‘local’ in Bennett’s work can hold its own against any forces (global or other) that might undermine or dismiss its value. Leif Shenstead-Harris reflects on Bennett’s skill and stresses how consistently, through the dissemination of her work over multimedia platforms, Bennett was able to remain accessible for wider audiences whether they were abroad or remained at home in Jamaica: ‘Wherever she lived, Bennett’s dexterous migratory perspective sustained a mass audience in Jamaica for mixed media performances consisting of proverbs, discussion, criticism, moralism and poetry’.³⁰³ However, whatever the context of her broadcasts and despite her ability to retain large audiences across a wider geographical area, Bennett consistently focusses on the local more than the global. In short: she was a writer who remained rooted in a distinctive notion of home.

Bennett’s notion of home is one that she held on to throughout her travels. In 1990 at World Theatre Day she declared that ‘any which part mi live – Toronto-o! London-o! Florida-o! – a Jamaica mi deh!’.³⁰⁴ In this context of claiming to be in Jamaica wherever she lives, we can identify Bennett’s understanding of what I term a ‘migratory home’. This home can be considered to be culturally and linguistically bounded in local, short-distance terms where Bennett is transmitting an idea of home contained to Jamaica. To be clear, however, this does not make it a regressive, insular or fixed understanding of home. Nor is it the same as the more problematic notion of ‘local colour’ to which I return below. Rather, this home is migratory because it is on the move with Bennett and also has reach into the diaspora in a way that allows us to see that Bennett also wants her audiences to

³⁰³ Leif Shenstead-Harris, “Between ‘Home’ and Migritude: Louise Bennett, Kamau Brathwaite and the Poet as Migrant.” *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* Vol. 8, No. 2 (2017): 136.

³⁰⁴ Morris, *Miss Lou*, 34.

understand that home can be abroad. The notion of home in her work can be extended to house, family, and to a local community as well as to its language and philosophies. However, Bennett adapts her means of communication to the emergence of a more global culture with an astute understanding of the technological opportunities that were opening out to her. This legacy of adapting the local to global contexts persists today as her work continues to be diffused through forms that did not exist then, such as Instagram, Facebook and YouTube.

In thinking about the movement from audio recordings and radio to text and vice versa, we can see that Bennett rose to the challenge of repurposing words and forms and embraced the relationship between the spoken, written and broadcasting mediums at a time of instability for Jamaica. Alejandra Bronfman offers a broad view of Bennett's use of the burgeoning audio-visual channels and she places Bennett in the wider conversation about the politics of media infrastructure critical to Jamaica in the decolonising moment.³⁰⁵ Bronfman's discussion focuses on the progression of the media forms in Jamaica, specifically the radio and the television, but she observes that, in general, Bennett's life was one of 'remediation, of the moves among media and of the repurposing of words and forms'.³⁰⁶ Bronfman writes:

This collection (Folder 46 in "Miss Lou's Fonds") which includes audio-visual materials as well as many interviews in which she reflects on her career, allows for a consideration of the relationship between the spoken, the written, and the broadcast word. It speaks to a long life of remediation, of the moves among media, and of the repurposing of words and forms.³⁰⁷

If we pause to consider the way Bennett embraces the relationship between the spoken, written and the broadcast word, we can appreciate Bronfman's term 'remediation' more fully. We can see that remediation for Bennett takes on different directions where, when she moves through the media forms, her artistry moves correspondingly. Her words and forms are repurposed so that, as she discusses the same topics, they alter and become more than repetition of the same material. For instance, in the written forms of the unpublished monologues we saw how these are altered from an initial script to one ready for

³⁰⁵ Alejandra Bronfman, "This Thing Is Very Much Alive: Louise Bennett on Audio-Visual Media", *Journal of West Indian Literature* Vol. 25, No. 2 (2017): 63-81.

³⁰⁶ Bronfman, "Very Much Alive", 64.

³⁰⁷ Bronfman, "Very Much Alive", 64. This comment relates specifically to folder 46 of the "Miss Lou Fonds", which is a random collection of papers where pieces of paper are repurposed, 'so the envelope of a letter from a friend becomes a place for a few notes, or a sheet of ruminations becomes crowded with shopping lists squeezed into the margins.'

performance, which itself takes a different form and is transmitted through a different media. The Creole words that Bennett carefully scripted and spelled out (Godmadda, Godfadda) are now heard by an audience rather than read, producing new performative texts rather than being a simple repetition of the same material.

Furthermore, by exploring the notion of repurposing of words and forms this allows us to focus on my interest of the remediation of proverbs and proverbial thinking. The proverbs find their own integral space in the multiple platforms Bennett uses for her works: this is a key focus of my thesis, where the space the proverbs inhabit within each genre allows the proverb to be examined as a separate entity as well as an integrated part of her chosen genre. Norrick places this proverbial ‘space’ within the oral/scribal debate and argues that the proverb can be read as a ‘discrete text rather than as part of a larger text or interaction’.³⁰⁸ However, proverbs operate both as fixed wording (a text) that can be written down in isolation and as spoken words that might be part of a larger interaction or performance. This shows how the proverb, and proverbial thinking, can be used to reanimate the argument that oral and scribal are not mutually exclusive. Proverbs elude an either/or categorisation, much as Bennett herself does as an artist, and the mobility of her words, written or spoken, encouraged Bennett to embrace audio and visual media as both an oral and scribal format.

According to Bronfman, Bennett was integral to the growth of the media in Jamaica, but it is unlikely that supporting the growth of media was a main motivation behind Bennett using the radio for her monologues. Rather, it would make sense to consider that Bennett viewed the radio as a new channel of communication through which she could repurpose her words at the same time as it enabled her to reach a wider audience and reinvigorate traditional folk forms of storytelling and proverbial thinking. These new media developments enabled her to reach as many of her audiences as possible just as new habits of tuning into radio and television were beginning to alter forms of communication in everyday Jamaican lives. It is interesting to note here that Bronfman’s term ‘remediation’ for Bennett is multidirectional: as she moved across media these moves were not necessarily away from textual forms, and often she returns to text.

During the period between 1965 and 1982 when *Miss Lou’s Views* aired, not only did Bennett personally benefit from the increase in radio and TV coverage, but it became clear

³⁰⁸ Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean*, 1.

that she herself was influential in the rise and demand for new and more locally led forms of programming. Crucially, *Miss Lou's Views* also spanned the politically charged period from post-independence through the years of nation building for Jamaica. Indeed, the rise of radio enabled a certain kind of democratic development which Mervin Alleyne observes:

the primary condition for the efficient working of the communication machinery is a language shared by people as a whole; a vehicle which makes the linguistic form of the communication recognizable and the content comprehensible to the whole population.³⁰⁹

Alleyne makes the point that 'the communication machinery' depends on and reinforces 'shared' linguistic forms of communication, thus creating visibility for Jamaican identity across diverse media forms, and which in turn resonates with the political climate surrounding the decolonising moment. Audiences can now hear different types of broadcasts, where there was a constant shift between Standard English and moments of Creole enunciation, and the sound of actual voices speaking in Creole could be heard over the radio. Potentially this mingling of linguistic forms of communication makes it possible to be listening and acknowledging Creole language within a programme being broadcast in Standard English.

Over her career Bennett embraced diverse channels of communication. Her entry into radio dates from 1945 when she moved to London to attend RADA. Three months after her arrival in the metropolitan capital, Bennett landed a contract at the BBC following an invitation to all the overseas students at RADA to send Christmas greetings to their families over the radio. As she herself explains in an interview with Louise Collins, where most of the students said, 'Hello Mama, Hello Papa, Hello Auntie', Bennett stood up and spoke in Creole: 'ma darlin' frien', ma journey end a London ton ya know'. She continues by explaining that this meant 'my darling friend, my journey has ended and I have got here to London'.³¹⁰ The fact that she used Creole in this Christmas message to her homeland signals her prescient understanding of the importance of Jamaican linguistic varieties for articulating cultural identity. There was such a good response to this greeting in what she called 'folk language'³¹¹ that the general overseas manager of the BBC, who had been

³⁰⁹ Mervin Alleyne, "Communication and Politics in Jamaica", *Caribbean Studies* Vol. 3, No. 2 (1963): 22.

³¹⁰ Louise Bennett, "Interview with Miss Lou re: Career and Jamaican Language". McMaster University Archives, Ontario [sound recordings], November 1985: Audio cassette <https://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca/islandora/object/macrepo%3A74310>

³¹¹ Louise Bennett, "Interview with Miss Lou re: Career and Jamaican Language", (11.16)

listening to all the greetings, called her in and offered her a contract to host a programme specifically for the Caribbean. She was asked to name her programme which she duly did, calling it *Caribbean Carnival*. She also states in this recording that she was asked to choose her own signature theme tune to which she replied, ‘I would like for my signature tune to be “Mango walk” — that’s what Jamaicans call it’.³¹² Bennett explains that Albert Benjamin had recorded this as a popular tune, but he called it ‘Jamaican Rumba’.³¹³ At the start of each show, the BBC Variety Orchestra, which accompanied the programme, played this too slowly on the strings, and every week, Bennett would jump into the orchestral version of ‘Jamaican Rumba’ and sing lines from the folksong ‘Mango Walk’ in a quicker mento rhythm as a contrast to the sedate rendition from the orchestra.³¹⁴ This set an upbeat tone for *Caribbean Carnival*, which she broadcast weekly for thirty minutes on Tuesday evenings, from 1945 to 1947, in the Rudolph Steiner Hall, to be transmitted as part of the BBC Empire Service. As Carolyn Cooper says, ‘Louise Bennett colonised the BBC in reverse by using the Jamaican language on her show’.³¹⁵

In 1948 Bennett returned to Jamaica to join the staff at Excelsior as the appointed Island Supervisor for the Women’s Federation, which eventually was unsustainable due to lack of funds. In 1950 she returned briefly to London and reconnected with the BBC where she hosted a radio show, *West Indian Guest Night*.³¹⁶ This was an hour-long weekly radio show (recorded each Tuesday evening for broadcast to the West Indies the following day).³¹⁷ As mentioned in Chapter One, whilst in London, Bennett was also an influential contributor to the BBC programme founded by Una Marson, *Caribbean Voices*, broadcast by the BBC World Service from Bush House in London between 1943 and 1958. The programme sought to represent the Caribbean through literature written by West Indian writers from and about their own nations. This created the notion for West Indian writers both at home and in the UK of ‘cosmopolitanism and rootedness.... where they simultaneously

³¹² Louise Bennett, “Interview with Miss Lou re: Career and Jamaican Language”, Audio cassette. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nykh0ZnvcXg>

³¹³ Albert Benjamin was a composer who created an orchestral version of ‘Mango Walk’: see https://www.boosey.com/cr/sample_detail/Jamaican-Rumba-1946/40; <https://www.boosey.com/composer/Arthur+Benjamin>

³¹⁴ Louise Bennett, ‘Listen to Louise’, 37a. Interview, 30 Sept 1981. Jamaica National radio script, 11 June 1996 (see ‘Listen to Louise’ in McMaster University Archives: <https://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca/islandora/object/macrepo%3A74310>)

³¹⁵ Carolyn Cooper, “Paying Lip Service to Louise Bennett-Coverley”, *Jamaica Gleaner*, 9 October 2022, <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/commentary/20221009/carolyn-cooper-paying-lip-service-louise-bennett-coverley>

³¹⁶ Schenstead-Harris, “Between ‘Home’ and Migritude”, 131-149.

³¹⁷ Morris, *Miss Lou*, 17.

identified with empire and island'.³¹⁸ To this end, the editor Henry Swanzy called for submissions that represented 'local colour' in order to propagate a literary focus on Caribbean localities and lived experience.³¹⁹

The term 'local colour' is problematic in this context as many of the Caribbean writers were already living in the diaspora and were in effect, writing back in their national consciousness rather than from their local contexts. In this way, *Caribbean Voices* 'embodied many contentions, if not contradictory forces, associated with colonialism and empire'.³²⁰ The term 'local colour' could be seen as radical or restrictive of certain freedoms in writing, but the focus was on creating a culturally postcolonial identity through Caribbean literary language. Louise Bennett epitomised this in her vernacular poem 'Bans O' Killing' which was aired during a broadcast on 11th June in 1948. On the face of it, this poem answers Swanzy's call. She illustrates the irony of speakers of Standard English who imply that 'dialec' is a subordinate form of language. She asks:

Yuh gwine kill all English dialec
Or just Jamaican one!
Dat dem start fi try tun language
From de fourteen century –
Five hundred years gawn an dem got
More dialect dan we!
Yuh wi haffi kill de Lancashire
De Yorkshire de Cockney
De broad Scotch and de Irish brogue
Before yuh start kill me!³²¹

³¹⁸ Bronfman, "Very Much Alive", 65.

³¹⁹ Swanzy was the producer of the BBC General Overseas Service who consistently promoted West Indian literature, particularly through *Caribbean Voices* which he took over from Una Marson in 1946. His promotion of unpublished writers was an important influence on the development of Caribbean literature.

³²⁰ Glyne A. Griffith, "Chapter Three: Caribbean Voices and Competing Visions of Post-Colonial Community" in *The BBC and the Development of Anglophone Caribbean Literature, 1943 – 1958*, 71-109.

³²¹ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 4; *Jamaica Labrish*, 218.

Bennett does respond to Swanzy's call for local colour, which, as noted, could have been perceived in a British context as a limited notion of 'local' where one might expect to hear about seemingly exotic topics from an island nation. This tension is noted by Glyne Griffith:

The story of Caribbean Voices demonstrates that conservative colonial attitudes could be as prevalent at the periphery as at the imperial centre and conversely, that hostility toward the myopic authority of colonial culture could be active among those of privilege and influence within the imperial centre.³²²

However, what Swanzy received from Bennett with this poem, 'Bans O' Killing', is a linguistic debate with an imagined linguist narrator reaching out to a global audience on matters that are insistently local to Jamaica and have a wide-reaching resonance. Bennett enters into the contemporaneous debate concerning the colonial delegitimization of Jamaican language. The postcolonial critic, Belinda Edmondson, comments, 'with their radical message of language equality, Miss Lou's poems like 'Bans o' Killing' are tailor made for the postcolonial era and its concomitant emphasis on cultural parity with metropolitan centres of the West'.³²³ In terms of the spoken voice, Griffiths further notes that scholars such as Laurence Breiner believe that the privileging of the spoken voice, which radio demanded, was vital.³²⁴ It was vital because, through the impact of a short-wave radio program rather than a textual form, writers would be made aware of how their work would sound to a diverse West Indian audience listening at home. So, at this moment in the process of decolonisation, the critical perspective of scholars, editors and programme directors such as Swanzy found echoes in Bennett as a writer, performer, folklorist who championed a locally rooted aesthetic, written in Creole. She was writing for a wider audience and yet the poem she submitted demands a recognition that it has its roots in a particular time and place. Therefore, in the years before Jamaican independence, Bennett's contribution to *Caribbean Voices* ratified the use of Creole as a, or even *the* Jamaican language and asserted its respectability on the airwaves. At that time, she herself was still not acknowledged as a serious poet, so the editorial decision by Swanzy to include her reading of the poem on the radio was prescient in recognising her creative practice. Bennett's work was broadcast five times between 1948 and 1952. Strangely, however, it

³²² Glyne A. Griffith, "'This is London Calling the West Indies': The BBC Caribbean Voices" in Bill Schwarz (ed.), *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004): 197.

³²³ Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow*, 103.

³²⁴ Griffith, "This is London Calling", 206.

seems that Swanzy struggled to procure contributions from Bennett, soliciting her for submissions in 1947 which she did not respond to at the time. She sent poems to the programme three years later in 1950 with the accompanying note: ‘Dear Mr Swansea [note the misspelling] here are the story and verses about Christmas. If you need an explanation of John Canoo “Anancy” etc let me know. Thanking you’.³²⁵ Bronfman suggests that this note shows that Bennett was distracted or unimpressed by the programme or the approach towards her as someone who suited the vision for the programme concerning its politics and aesthetics. The tone of the note does seem to imply this without, however, being necessarily dismissive of Swanzy or his aims. It may be more illustrative of the view that Bennett was not interested in the specifics of the media per se. It could equally be argued that Bennett felt that the need to be personally present to perform and communicate her own art — and by that time she was back in Jamaica.³²⁶

As her career progressed, Bennett moved from Jamaica to New York from 1950-1955 where she took multiple jobs, broadcasting at WWRL and singing folksongs and recording records with the Smithsonian Folkways label.³²⁷ It was here that she met Eric Coverley, whom she married in 1954. They both returned to Jamaica in 1955. Bennett broadcast *Laugh with Louise* at Radio Jamaica, but also worked for the Jamaica Social Commission as a drama officer between 1955-1959, which required her to travel all over Jamaica. She joined the staff of the Jamaica Broadcasting Company when it was launched in 1959 where she and Ranny Williams performed *The Lou and Ranny Show* to a live audience on Sunday evenings which was then broadcast every Tuesday evening from 1959 to 1964. The Jamaican Broadcasting Company was a private company that was granted a licence in 1950 to operate regular broadcasts covering the whole island.³²⁸ One aspect of the licence

³²⁵ Bronfman, “Very Much Alive”, 65, footnote 16 – referencing Louise Bennett, “Letter to Henry Swanzy” December 4, 1950, University of Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library, Special Collections, Papers of Henry Swanzy, MS 42/1/6/97.

³²⁶ This suggestion that she needs to be present to perform will be explored further in Chapter Five when I consider her live performances.

³²⁷ WWRL was founded in 1926 and is a commercial radio station licensed to New York City. It airs as an affiliate of the Black Information Network (BIN). Originally it had a multi-lingual format serving the various ethnic communities of New York City. Later, it became primarily oriented towards African Americans living in New York City in the mid-1960s.

³²⁸ That same year the company had taken over the station known since 1940 as ZQI, the new name for the first national radio station in Jamaica, VP5PZ, that had begun broadcasting one year earlier thanks to a local operator named John Grinan. Wartime regulations meant Grinan had to hand over his equipment to the government. Initially VP5PZ broadcast once per week but under ZQI this increased to daily broadcasts with content that reached beyond news and wartime information by including live performances of local artists. The details of this broadcasting history is drawn from the link: <https://old.jamaica-gleaner.com/pages/history/story005.html>

granted to Radio Jamaica in 1950 was that it was to be a commercial radio station supported by advertisers and sponsors. It offered complete coverage of national events where Bennett was to find a sympathetic forum to reach wider audiences. The government decision to issue a licence for commercial broadcasting marked a significant moment in the history of Jamaican radio and it is no coincidence that Bennett established her influential place in this medium later in the decade that followed. During the late 1950s her radio career is characterised by her efforts to validate Jamaican identity by broadcasting in Creole, and in so doing she bridged prevailing social and class divisions. Reporting and voicing the fictional figure of Aunty Roachy, Bennett became an ever-present sound in household radios across the nation, reaching a larger audience than she might have expected before the change in broadcasting in 1950.

Miss Lou's Views: Who is Aunty Roachy?

The voice that most audiences associate with the monologues on the radio is that of the fictional character Aunty Roachy, who was created by Louise Bennett as an alternative persona. As Miss Lou, Bennett spoke every week about a wide variety of topics, listed in the sections below, where the intention of the monologues was to build an identity and 'foster pride in the average person by offering a new paradigm based on the assertion that Jamaican had a culture worth preserving and sharing'.³²⁹ Aunty Roachy finds relevance in the critical moment of cultural identity that *Miss Lou's Views* embodies through three areas: through the legacy of 'dialect'; through the preservation of the many important cultural moments in Jamaica; and through consistent use of proverbs as didactic tools. Moreover, the figure of Aunty Roachy is complicated, as she is voiced through Bennett via the persona commonly and affectionately identified as Miss Lou. Aunty Roachy is viewed by some as an alter ego for Bennett herself. So, who does the audience identify as the narrator of the monologues? As seen above, in many of the monologues the speaker is not Aunty Roachy herself but an anonymous speaker (perhaps Miss Lou) who claims that 'my Aunty Roachy Seh'. In this way, Bennett becomes further distanced from the authorial 'I' where she can advocate her own opinions through the secondary figure of Aunty Roachy

³²⁹ Opal Palmer Adisa, "Culture and Nationalism on the World Stage: Louise Bennett's Aunty Roachy Seh Stories", *The Global South* Vol. 4. No.2 (Indiana University Press, 2011): 125.

who is omnipresent, so much so that Morris, who edited *Aunty Roachy Seh*, likens the character of Aunty Roachy to the insect roaches, where, in a parallel to the trickster figure of Anancy, she is everywhere and indestructible.³³⁰ Aunty Roachy constitutes a composite figure, representing all Jamaican women, closest possibly to the market women represented in the poem 'On A Tramcar', with their chatter and gossip. Bennett created Aunty Roachy to become the voice for the everyday Jamaican woman and the specificity of the prefix 'my' allows every person to claim her as their own proxy family.

Aunty Roachy is most probably framed as middle aged or as an elder as her opinions are imbued with a wisdom derived from life experience. This supposition is furthered by Opal Adisa who claims that the determination of Aunty Roachy's age is strengthened using the various proverbs she cites as examples to corroborate her opinion — the proverbs constitute an integral part of the Aunty Roachy broadcasts and help to hypostatise the points she makes which reinforce the role and importance of the Jamaican idioms.³³¹ This amplifies the mutability of the proverbs where the proverbs are activated as a gauge for a person's age since it is more often the elders in the community who use proverbs as didactic tools. Bennett inhabited a world of proverbs, and proverbial thinking, which in this context, demonstrates a form of politics. The proverbs offer a touchstone for ideas of political understanding concerning how people decide to live, social values, and perhaps suggesting that people should live how they used to live. The act of listening to elders who pass wisdom on through proverbial teachings creates a pathway for cultural knowledge. The fact that the title of the edited version reflects the phraseology used in the monologues themselves, 'Aunty Roachy Seh', focuses attention on the vocalisation of the commentaries, which are concerned first with listening and then teaching within a linguistic community. Louise Bennett wanted to extend this proverbial community through the teachings of the proverbs. Adisa points out that in the monologues Aunty Roachy makes the proverbs 'real' which, in turn, reinforces their importance. We see the open and mobile sense of didacticism where her audiences learn to listen and share a sense of the same moral territory that Aunty Roachy draws upon. For instance, in the monologue 'Bad Minded' Aunty Roachy decides 'fi learn Modder Wallop a lesson bout bad-mindedness'.³³²

³³⁰ Mervyn Morris, "Interview with Mervyn Morris", 2009 (Personal interview with Adisa, mentioned in "Culture and Nationalism, 127) No records.

³³¹ Adisa, "Culture and Nationalism", 125-135.

³³² Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*; 61.

In this monologue three proverbs are quoted on the consequences of one's actions/ words; two are integrated into the text, and the last one is framed with:

Aunty Roachy seh, 'Yuh did tink me was gwine encourage yuh eena yuh bad-mindedness, no? But me was only a try fi show yuh dat 'when ratta like romp round puss jaw, one day him gwine en up een puss craw'!³³³

Here we see the narrator quoting Aunty Roachy who teaches the audience about the consequences of talking ill of someone. She reinforces the important role that proverbs play in a communal and known cultural environment, where the audience can learn varied lessons from the inclusion of the proverbs. Through the monologues, Aunty Roachy called for people to 're-examine and evaluate their life choices, cultural practices and attitudes post-independence'.³³⁴ This was an unstable time with Jamaica emerging from a colonial legacy that had attempted to discredit their heritage. Over her corpus of work, Bennett was instrumental in voicing the desire to nation build and Morris writes:

Her whole career was part of nation building and the nationalistic project. But because she is so often defending moderation and common sense her work also identifies with what are sometimes claimed as classical values.³³⁵

When we look at Bennett's work from a contemporary perspective, these 'classical values' ensure a certain relevance for her work, but they do not relate so obviously to debates on Jamaica's political future as requiring radically new forms of representation or expression. None of this means her work is not political in its own way. Indeed, my reading of the Aunty Roachy persona sees her as a complicatedly political act, not least in relation to questions of gender. This question of gender is echoed by Aisha Spencer, who forwards the view that 'Aunty Roachy disrupts the masculine political discourses that sought to construct an image of what the Jamaican nation ought to be'.³³⁶ For Spencer, the use of the female voice of Aunty Roachy as the privileged voice in the monologues challenges and disrupts the hegemony of the historically male voice of folklore and storytellers. Notably, there are few interruptions from male personae in the monologues, which feeds into this activist point of view. The gendered voice of Aunty Roachy is clear but the performance of

³³³ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*; 62. 'When ratta like romp round puss jaw, one day him gwine en up een puss craw': When one courts trouble, he must expect punishment (*Retribution*, 18).

³³⁴ Adisa, "Culture and Nationalism", 125-135.

³³⁵ Mervyn Morris, "Interview with Mervyn Morris", 2009 (Personal interview with Adisa, mentioned in "Culture and Nationalism", 127) No records.

³³⁶ Aisha T. Spencer, "Interrogating Conceptualizations of Gender in the Shaping of a Nation, as Presented in Miss Lou's Monologues", *Journal of West Indian Literature* Vol. 18, No. 1 (2009): 83.

Aunty Roachy is creatively complex as it mobilises generational differences and addresses sensitive matters through a multi-layered form of authorial distance. Aunty Roachy is centred in the monologues, and she disrupts notions of what the nation ‘ought to be’, but this does not mean that Bennett’s female voice is univocal or politicised in a singular way.

Nonetheless, there is an important way in which Louise Bennett embraces the idea of singularity. When she adopts the persona of Miss Lou (and calls upon the fictional persona of Aunty Roachy) she dons the national costume with which we identify her. Many of the iconic photos of Louise Bennett capture her in this costume. It is, for Bennett, an extension of Miss Lou as she takes on this persona of Aunty Roachy, and in wearing the costume she takes on a particular role. Interestingly, even when she was not visible in the studio recording *Miss Lou’s Views*, she wore a version of the national dresswear.³³⁷ The costume she usually wore was designed with the help of her mother in 1942, initially for her appearance in ‘Hot Chocolate’, a variety show.³³⁸ According to Mary Jane Hewitt, it resembles the dresses of market women in St Mary’s who hitched up their skirts when they had to cross a stream.³³⁹ Bennett’s dress adapts this style to uncover the petticoat layer and to represent the over layer being lifted up to allow the women to cross. Significantly, the costume attracted criticism, none more publicly than the now infamous (and now deleted) 2017 Instagram post from DJ Ishawna who compared the legendary Jamaican folklorist’s bandana attire to a tablecloth.; ‘Min uh dress inna tablecloth like Miss Lou’.³⁴⁰

Ishawna’s comment caused considerable backlash. It is worth focusing on the debate briefly to understand the enduring legacy, and complexity of what Miss Lou/Aunty Roachy represents. Carolyn Cooper, for example, writes ‘Ishawna was reprimanded for her statement but refused to apologise. To be fair to the DJ, her post was much more about her own fashionable modernity than Miss Lou’s old-fashioned costume’.³⁴¹ Cooper continues by noting the generational shift in attitude, albeit not directly related to the dresswear but to the fundamental issue of keeping icons alive:

³³⁷ National Library of Jamaica. “Miss Lou and the Early Jamaican Theatre.” YouTube Video, 1:05:06. Posted by “National Library of Jamaica” September 7, 2017, accessed June 20, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6mZUxGP8XA>

³³⁸ Morris, *Miss Lou*, 93.

³³⁹ Hewitt, “Comparative Study”, 75. This is cited by Morris, *Miss Lou*, 93, footnote 5. The original PhD thesis could not be consulted as it is not digitised.

³⁴⁰ DJ Ishawna (@ishawnaa) “Min uh dress inna tablecloth like Miss Lou” Instagram, July 8, 2017. <https://www.caribbeannationalweekly.com/entertainment/ishawna-fire-dissing-miss-lou/>

³⁴¹ Carolyn Cooper, “I Have a Tablecloth Dress” *The Gleaner*, July 21, 2017 <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/commentary/20170723/carolyn-cooper-i-have-tablecloth-dress>

It is a shame that Miss Lou was dragged into this. The bandana is one thing. But Miss Lou is a sacred figure for old people in Jamaica and the diaspora. Not quite so for young people. Old people forget that each generation creates its own icons, and the only way that icons of the past are going to mean anything to young people is if old people make an effort to keep them alive. ...the lasting insult to Miss Lou is not the tablecloth dress. It's our refusal to acknowledge the power of our Jamaican language. At home and in school!³⁴²

Cooper's response underlines the fact that Bennett's status as a national hero relates not only to her acknowledgment of costume heritage, but more importantly to her vindication of 'our Jamaican language' which is embodied in the persona of Auntie Roachy. The tablecloth is significant as it is a visual reminder of the continuous impact that Bennett had in a postcolonial country preserving its heritable identity. Kei Miller's response to the post, which was published in the *Jamaican Observer* at the time of this controversy, comes in the form of a witty and satirical poem:

What a ting Miss Matty,
It really bun me hawt,
Look how dis gyal goh style mi frock
as so-so table clawt!

But me prefer wear mi table cloth,
wid hat and glove and boot
dan put mi self pan Instagram
in a buttu birthday suit!

But mi naah get inna temper
Mi ah guh hole mi tung
For she nuh got nuh dress at all
For mi guh dress her dung!³⁴³

In mirroring the form of Louise Bennett's own poetic voice, this poem catches and consummately dismisses the argument, ending with an amusing pun. Miller echoes

³⁴² Cooper, "I Have a Tablecloth Dress", *The Gleaner*, July 21 2017, <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/commentary/20170723/carolyn-cooper-i-have-tablecloth-dress>

³⁴³ Kei Miller, poem (unnamed) *Jamaican Observer* July 17, 2017. <https://www.jamaicaobserver.com/latest-news/online-readers-comment-ishawna-and-miss-lous-tablecloth-frock/>

Bennett's ethos of addressing issues with humour, whilst still making a strong comment. In his response, Miller harnesses the powers of Aunty Roachy, Miss Lou in astutely replicating Bennett's poetic artistry. At the start of his response, he refers to the character of Miss Matty who is a persona that Bennett uses in her poems, most notably in 'Colonization in Reverse' to reveal the 'joyful news' of Jamaica's inventive colonizing of England. This immediately puts the reader in touch with Bennett's poetry which Miller is parodying and celebrating. With his use of puns 'For she nuh got nuh dress at all/ For mi guh dress her dung!' he echoes Bennett with the clever wordplay around giving Ishawna a 'dressing down'. Moreover Miller also reminds us of the moral didacticism present in Bennett's poetry which we have seen embodied in the proverbs. The poet's mention of Instagram in his lines 'dan put mi self pan Instagram/ in a buttu birthday suit!' not only replies to Ishawna's post, but it also brings attention to the different mediums of communication that I outlined above. The Instagram incident is proof of a social media afterlife for Bennett and a fascinating reminder of how her work, and her understanding of the local and the global, continues to be shaped by and adapt to new media.

'Telephone' — The Multiplicity of Proverbial Interpretation

We have seen that diverse channels of communication became useful to Bennett, and she began to rely on the radio to reach out to her local audiences. The following example of the monologue 'Telephone' was presented in *Miss Lou's Views* on July 21st, 1967.³⁴⁴ It highlights the irony of using the telephone to better connect the local radio. Telephone and broadcasting services were linked in 1950 with the creation of Radio Jamaica Rediffusion in an attempt to use telephone technology to secure better reception for radio programmes. In 'Telephone', and through the mediated voice of Aunty Roachy, Bennett presents a pointed commentary on the instability of the service. Notably, when we attend to her creative use of proverbs we see a singular proverb being used as an integral didactic element in the monologue. Cross reading with the *Proverb Manuscript* and its particular

³⁴⁴ This date is according to Mary Jane Hewitt's records, a sample of which are appended below. Her research ends in 1974, and as noted above, some monologues were repeated, I would suggest that 'Telephone' was only broadcast once. It is textually represented in Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 112.

moral and thematic headings elucidates a reading of the monologue that is a commentary on the inefficacy of the telephone service as a means of communication, but can also open out to become a moral lesson on an even broader issue of friendship.

My analysis of this monologue draws attention to some of the techniques used by Bennett, not least the way she activates one proverb, ‘han go packy come’ (if you help others, you will get help), to highlight its multiple and didactic meanings. In the first instance, Bennett personifies the telephone and by doing so creates a humorous relationship between the user and the telephone system itself. The telephone itself acquires a voice and a persona within the relationship and counsels the people themselves to demand recompense. The humour is obvious alongside the frustration that Aunty Roachy feels at the inadequate service:

we grunt and beat it an we keep awn a trus telephone, but telephone never trus
Jamaica people one day!

During the commentary, she also gives an example of the inadequate service of the telephone system: she refers to instances when Jamaican emigrants phone home from abroad and get no reply, even though everyone is at home:

Jamaica telephone gone pon dial toneless spree again widout a beg yuh pardon!

And as she continues with her frustrated critique, she introduces a proverb which is then listed at the end of the monologue:

Aunty Roachy seh is time telephone start fi trus Jamaica people. After all ‘han go
Packy come’. Mmmm. Is time fi telephone seh to Jamaica people ‘doan pay no
more bill so till yuh get good service’.

In this example, we see how Bennett fashions the central message of the monologue around this single proverb that is also placed at the end of the monologue:

‘Han go, packy come’; if you help others; you will get help (*friendship, generosity, gratitude, conscience, helplessness, recompense*).³⁴⁵

The *Proverb Manuscript* now affords a unique reading of the monologue through the multiplicity of interpretations attaching to the singular proverb identified in the various

³⁴⁵ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 112. Packy is a gourd that is used for utilitarian purposes, and not just for food. The skin or shell of the large green fruit hardens to become wood-like when dry. The shell can then be carved and is used to make a variety of items including cups, and bowls and decorative pieces. The gourd symbolizes the giving and sharing where what you give with one hand you receive back with the other.

moral and thematic headings under which this short proverb is placed. Each of these headings conveys a nuanced difference concerning relationships and illustrates the didactic impact of Bennett's various placements of a given proverb. In the case of the proverb used in 'Telephone', the relationship between the caller and the telephone is interpreted as a friendship and is assumed to be two-way. However, the various headings in the *Proverb Manuscript* allow for different readings: generosity suggests one person is perhaps more happy to give than the other; gratitude portrays a feeling of indebtedness; conscience suggests a deeper spiritual element; helplessness shows a neediness in the relationship and recompense assumes a reward situation. In recognising these wider interpretations, we can see that Bennett is subtly drawing out the complexity of a relationship with the telephone — both as a physical object and a symbol of human relationships — by using the various interpretations of the proverb. These feelings of gratitude, of helplessness, of reward, are all feelings which are involved in any relationship with a friend.

This proverb, as a discrete element in the monologue text, therefore, carries a seemingly disproportionate weight in instructing a deeper reading which underpins the monologue. The proverb appears towards the end of the prose section of this monologue which in itself places the proverb in a summary position for impact. It contains many moral teachings for the audience when understood through the symbolic metaphor of the telephone. Through the personification of the telephone Bennett creates the emotional responses, similar to that between two people. Therefore, the inclusion of these teachings of the proverb, understood through the moral and thematic headings in the manuscript, expands Bennett's critique to apply not just to the inefficiency of the telephone system for communicatory purposes, but to a consideration of the behaviours within friendships. When we consider the ambiguity of the expressive 'mmmmm' in the context of 'Yes, massa! We is all telephone victim! Mmmmmm', it is hard to determine in text how that really sounds.³⁴⁶ It could be a ponderous expression, inviting us to think about what the telephone is doing. And yet, if we think about the connotations of the proverb, with the visual image of the hand going out to help and receiving something in return, we question who is doing the giving and receiving. It should be the telephone, so then the 'mmm' becomes a criticism for not offering this helping hand. Where is the trust that if it helps the Jamaican people, the people will help it too? The headings that this proverb is placed under in the *Proverb Manuscript* include *Generosity* and *Conscience*, which feeds into the expectations of

³⁴⁶ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 112.

certain codes of behaviour between friends and here, it reflects on the idea of the telephone as a friend.

Interestingly, to complete the monologue, Miss Lou recites a poem by Bennett herself called “de Public and de Phone” which appeared in a national paper in 1947 and then appears in the 1966 edited collection by Nettleford.³⁴⁷ It does not appear in Morris’s collection, indicating that Morris may not have considered this to be one of her stronger poems. It was not uncommon for Bennett to insert her own poems into the monologues, mixing her creative art forms to expand her commentaries. Whilst Bronfman frames her scholarly argument around the same poem with a focus on the audio-visual media in which Bennett worked, it is notable that she does not link this poem analytically to the monologue ‘Telephone’ even though it is presented as part of the piece. For this study, I argue that the poem amplifies the irony in the monologue. The irate tone of the poem is explained in Nettleford’s paratext which precedes and introduces the poem called ‘de Public an de Phone’ in *Jamaica Labrish*: ‘The public complained in 1948 (and they still do) about the shortcomings of the telephone service. The Telephone company categorically denied (and it still does) the charges’.³⁴⁸

The telephone is also personified in the poem.

Non connection an confusion!

De public no satisfy.

Dem fo meek company bout phone

Telephone tell dem seh dem lie!

The poem continues to ascertain who is lying and whether the truth lies with the public or with technology:

.... Me haffi try

Fi fine out if a public or

A phone a tell de lie.

³⁴⁷ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 71.

³⁴⁸ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 71.

But me cyaan split de difference now

An me cyaan crack de bone,

Me cyaan gi de public right or wrong

For me no got no phone!³⁴⁹

Bennett extends the joke of trying to find out who is to blame, who is or is not offering a helping hand. The punchline and final irony comes in the final line: the poet does not have a phone to find out if it is the public or the phone that is lying. The interweaving of the genres of prose and poetry, and the insertion of the proverb in this monologue creates differing ways for the reader/ listener to engage in a debate about unstable modern forms of technology and communication. The monologue is expressed with humour and irony, a trademark of Bennett; she can humorously challenge the authorities through both her alternative persona Aunty Roachy, and the poetic speaker. As Morris notes, Louise Bennett is a committed moral teacher, determined to instruct us through delight, but we might add that what we learn is not fixed or singular.³⁵⁰ The personification of the telephone in both the prose and the poem adds a further layer of authorial distance, where the phone itself becomes a character with an opinion of its own. The proverb, ‘han go packy come’, gives guidance on the wider spectrum of relationships, but exactly how it should be interpreted and put to use in this context is open to debate. Effectively, in this monologue Bennett is playing with the core notion of communication itself, where the means to relay the voices and stories, facilitated by technology, becomes a story line of its own. It is interesting to note that the monologue ‘Telephone’ on the LP of *Miss Lou’s Views* has a completely different narrative, although she does use the same scenario of a strike by the telephone company but takes a different direction in this critique of the telephone, which is also personified: ‘telephone had a bad day’.³⁵¹ The ‘mmm’ in the recording is not weighted with meaning; rather it sounds like an habitual interjection, almost whilst she finishes one sentence and continues to the next. There are no proverbs in the recorded version. The variation of narrative reinforces the way that Bennett regards the written text and recorded performances as different forms, where she can adapt and reinvent scenarios around the same topics.

³⁴⁹ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, 72.

³⁵⁰ Morris in Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, xi.

³⁵¹ Bennett, Louise. *Miss Lou’s Views*, Federal Label, 1967, LP. Side 2, Track 3

Publishing *Aunty Roachy Seh*: Remediation from Recording to Text

Returning to consider the publication history of Bennett's monologues, it is important to restate there are no recordings of the radio shows that are easily accessed today. Therefore, this study necessarily relies upon the textual representation of the recorded radio show in *Aunty Roachy Seh*. In *Aunty Roachy Seh*, Morris published a collection of 50 monologues where he chose these particular 50 monologues as 'a fair indication of the range'.³⁵² Within these 50 monologues, Bennett uses 121 proverbs, and it is important to re-iterate here that Bennett herself requested that the proverbs used in each monologue in *Aunty Roachy Seh* should be listed clearly at the end of each piece to afford them special prominence.³⁵³ By requesting that the proverbs are listed separately after each monologue I propose that Bennett not only shows us the importance she places on proverbs but suggests that they are to be read not just within the text of the monologue but as independent texts that shed new light on the monologues' content. It is interesting to observe that in the archival records of the scripts used in *Aunty Roachy Seh*, the proverbs are not always listed in the way they ultimately appear in the published edition of *Aunty Roachy Seh*, which suggests that there was a revisioning of their role in relation to the monologues.

We have seen that the monologues are complex texts of instruction and information, and the inclusion of numerous proverbs acts to instruct and promote moral values. Proverbs work by asserting a communally understood didacticism and, for Bennett, this enables a critique of experiences and practices within Jamaican cultural heritage. Anand Prahlad's holistic understanding is of the proverb as 'a lived part of the culture'.³⁵⁴ The notion that proverbs are alive is embedded in the oral transference of knowledge that is passed daily through conversations and interactions. In her interview with Mary Jane Hewitt, Bennett was asked about the dominant use of proverbs in her work as a form to express values of morality, justice, fair play. Bennett's response illustrates how she does not differentiate her use of proverbs from the environment that she is in.

³⁵² One might question why the unpublished monologues that Morris did not choose have not yet been examined or indeed published as a further edition to *Aunty Roachy Seh*. This would warrant more time and research as a valuable addition to studies on the works of Louise Bennett.

³⁵³ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, intro xi.

³⁵⁴ Keulker, "A Life in Proverbs", 657.

It's a fundamental thing in that this is the sort of thing that was happening around me when I was a child, the sort of people I knew, that I loved so much [...]. I find them always quoting proverbs, too, these people...working hard for their living and they don't take liberty and no body take liberty with them. And so this thing was deeply embedded in me.³⁵⁵

This response prioritises the use of proverbs to maintain and argue for cultural respect and fairness. Her work shows that Bennett herself embodies Prahlad's statement that proverbs are part of the lived culture and for her, they were a part of her upbringing and own moral teaching. Bennett chronicled the everyday, topical issues of Jamaican life, leaving a wealth of information and understanding of local life for the generations to come. The topics in the monologues were references to or prompted by the news or events in the neighbourhood generally and all of them can be framed within a moral code about communal living ('they don't take liberty and no body take liberty with them'). These specific commentaries may not be relevant to today but, as Morris notes, our interest is sustained by other elements: 'we are drawn to the work by its intimate Jamaican authority, the vitality of its language, and the particular values it promotes'.³⁵⁶ The descriptions of the context in which the monologues were broadcast help us to understand the mood of the times, when Jamaicans were facing a rapidly changing postcolonial society. When we realise this, the monologues take on even more importance as a voice for the community at that time, and as a record of the times for future audiences.

Morris captures part of the legacy of these manuscripts in print. *Aunty Roachy Seh* was first published in 1993 by Sangster's bookstores, Kingston, and reprinted in 2003 and 2005. In looking at Morris' paratextual interventions, such as his introduction, the audience can learn how to approach this edition of the text and better understand the nuances of various editorial choices, including decisions on design and content. Morris told me that:

The first editions of *Selected Poems* and *Aunty Roachy Seh* did not have similar covers. The *Selected Poems* (1982) had a plain bright blue cover with no image of Miss Lou; the *Aunty Roachy Seh* cover (1993) had a pale yellow background and an attractive colour photo of Miss Lou. The 2005 covers are visual reminders of the original cover of *Jamaica Labrish* (1966). Each of the 2005 covers – including *Jamaica Labrish* and *Anancy and Miss Lou* – presents an image of Miss Lou on a background of bandana cloth (as in her performance costume). The designer and the publisher made these decisions.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ Bennett, interview by Hewitt, 37.

³⁵⁶ Morris in Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, xi.

³⁵⁷ Morris, interview by Lobban, in emailed responses to the author, February 9, 2017.

For the content of the text, the publishing house gave Morris freedom to decide how the volumes were presented to the public, in cooperation with Louise Bennett herself: ‘Sangster’s gave me freedom to do what I was doing. If Miss Lou was happy, Sangster’s was happy’.³⁵⁸

In the introduction to *Aunty Roachy Seh*, Morris writes a brief explanation of the history behind the monologues published in this edition and highlights illustrations of the local and familiar issues that the reader will find promoted by Miss Lou in the monologues themselves. However, the main thrust of the introduction is to explain his approach to the representation of Creole in print. He notes that:

The spelling assumes that anyone familiar with Jamaican Creole will hear the sound of Creole even when the spelling looks like Standard English. Our main concern has been to present the pieces in a form which makes them (the monologues) easy to sight read.³⁵⁹

Morris treads the line between presenting not only a live performance, but one that is consistently vocalised in the dialect. I have already noted this issue of representing the sound of the Creole orthographically in a way which allows the reader to ‘hear’ the text. Morris’ approach is to make the text audible to the silent reader through sight-reading.

Other paratextual elements are the headings provided in italics at the top of each monologue where Morris explains in Standard English what topic will be dealt with.³⁶⁰ For example, monologue twelve is entitled ‘Myrtle Bank’, and before the reader is exhorted by Bennett to ‘Listen no!’, Morris gives a short explanation about the content: ‘*The end of the once famous “high an mighty” hotel in downtown Kingston*’.³⁶¹ This allows a non-Creole reader/speaker to understand the location of the hotel and the fact that it was once a renowned destination.

The fact that these explanations are written in Standard English might suggest an unexpected form of intervention by Morris which may be questioned. Beth McCoy interrogates such editorial practices when theorising the contentions around the intersection of race and paratextuality in terms of identity, space, power and authorship confronting all peoples in the 21st century.³⁶² She writes that ‘marginal spaces and places have functioned

³⁵⁸ Morris, interview by Lobban, in emailed responses to the author, February 9, 2017.

³⁵⁹ Morris in Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, viii/ix.

³⁶⁰ Morris confirmed that he wrote these short explanations and often included a quotation from the piece he was describing.

³⁶¹ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 35.

³⁶² Beth McCoy, “Race and the (Para)Textual Condition.” *PMLA* Vol. 121, No. 1 (2006).

centrally as a zone transacting ever-changing modes of white domination and of resistance to the domination'.³⁶³ In this case, the intervention of a Jamaican editor using Standard English to explain the context of each monologue before the reader has read it must be seen as an editorial choice aimed at gaining a wider audience for the monologues. Moreover, the first publication of 1993 would have been under Bennett's supervision, which assumes her permission for the explanations to be written in this notational form. However, the use of Creole in the main text of each monologue inherently localises the monologues and distances a non-dialectal audience, despite the inclusion of a glossary.

Aunty Roachy Seh: Multiple Approaches to Proverbial Didacticism

In the monologue 'Jamaican Proverbs' Bennett explains that the didactic nature of proverbs is activated to emphasize a point, to inform and to instruct her audiences:

Proverbs are used to emphasize a point... but mostly as warning or advice. They draw vivid pictures, provoke thought and are mostly short, to the point, neat and memorable in form. One is able to see and feel the truth of the expression readily and that is why the proverbs are such a strong and vital force in the spoken Jamaican language. The Jamaican proverbs are rooted in the consciousness of our people and spring readily to the tongue.³⁶⁴

Bennett relates how proverbs are 'rooted in the consciousness of our people' and, in framing proverbs within the monologues, she combines her own instructive commentary with culturally embedded proverbial wisdoms. In *Aunty Roachy Seh*, Bennett comments on issues that are current and topical, which may seem dated and irrelevant now, but which in themselves offer the opportunity to examine the wider social and moral implications of her commentary. Therefore, these monologues reveal much about contemporary political and cultural contexts but also about the authorship and shaping of the monologues themselves to reflect these issues. This, in turn, demands an examination of the art form of the crafted pieces themselves. The inclusion of the proverbs is part of that art form, where the proverbs are a rich creation which reveal much about cultural values. Thus, proverbs are

³⁶³ McCoy, "Race and the (Para)Textual Condition", 156.

³⁶⁴ Louise Bennett, "Jamaican Proverbs". Typescript, N.D. McMaster University Archives, quoted in Morris, *Miss Lou*, 83.

themselves shaped and influenced by culture and the combined art form itself becomes a vital political and cultural artefact.

This section analyses examples where proverbs challenge from within the monologues and point to truths that, as we have already noted, can often be masked or downplayed by Bennett through humour. In many of the monologues, Bennett uses multiple proverbs to emphasise points she wishes to make. Once again, I will demonstrate how cross-referencing with the classificatory system of the *Proverb Manuscript* affords a more expansive interpretation of the monologues and allows for an exploration of the various methods Bennett employs for activating proverbial didacticism.

The monologue that contains the most proverbs in *Aunty Roachy Seh* is ‘Jamaica Philosophy’. It contains thirteen proverbs which are listed at the end of the monologue as Bennett requested. The use of multiple proverbs in this monologue highlights the importance placed by Bennett on the philosophies held within proverbs. The script begins with the explanation that the Jamaican people pass down their culture and traditions and birth right to the following generations, a culture which includes proverbs:

my Aunty Roachy seh dat Jamaica people have a whole heap a culture and tradition and birthright dat han dung to dem from generation to generation,

All like de great philosophy of we Jamaican proverbs – dem. Mmm.³⁶⁵

At the beginning, the sceptical character Muches accuses Aunty Roachy of being a fool in equating the old word ‘philosophy’ with proverbs:

One facety gal dem call Muches gi out she, “A so-so foolinish Miss Roachy she dah chat. How yuh coulda put a deestant wud like ‘philosophy’ wid de ol jamma bad talkin proberbs-dem?”

See yah! Aunty Roachy never mack fun fi leggo tong upon Muches!

She seh, ‘When goat laugh, everybody fine out seh him got no teet!’ Dat mean, some people should keep silent to hide dem ignorance.³⁶⁶

Aunty Roachy continues to make her point in claiming Jamaican proverbs as their own philosophy:

³⁶⁵ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 7.

³⁶⁶ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 7. The explanation of what the proverb means is given in the text.

An if yuh follow de philosophy a we Jamaica proverbs, yuh woulda know seh dat ‘When yuh go a jackass yard, yuh naffi chat bout big aise’ (don’t offend people when you are in their domain).³⁶⁷ Mmm. So yuh shouldn come a me yard come call me foo fool.

Well sah, Muches shut up her mout, pam.³⁶⁸

To continue the didactic impulse, Auntie Roachy overwhelms Muches with pertinent proverbs as an illustration they are still used to teach and inform. The monologue lists eleven more proverbs, one after the other — this use of listing not only emphasises what a powerful tool the proverbs can be when used in context, it shows the varied knowledge of proverbs that Bennett had at her disposal, and also allows the proverbs to assert their independent status from these particular contexts. She offers in text translations for five more proverbs, in Creole, including the last one in the list: ‘before me tumbla dung, me hole macca’ — dat mean, choose the lesser of two evils’.³⁶⁹ This proverb is categorised in the *Proverb Manuscript* under *Caution*. The other proverbs in the list are placed under the moral and thematic headings of *Pretence*, *Humility*, *Character*, *Faithfulness*. The hope is that the messages are clear to Muches — each proverb contains a warning for her and are framed in proverbs which are her cultural inheritance. As the proverb says they are ‘fi-yuh’. However, in the monologue this is not conclusive as we also read, ‘Well sah, Muches shet up her mout, pam’. Silence here might mean consent but it could also mean unspoken dissent or refusal. For the other proverbs used in this monologue, there is a subtle difference in the interpretations of warning, for instance, ‘weh yuh no know bout, no chat bout’. In the *Proverb Manuscript* this is translated as ‘don’t pretend to know more than you do’ and placed under the heading of *Pretence*, warning the individual against pretending to be something they are not. The proverb ‘faihtful dog laugh after bad name’; one who knows his worth, is placed under *Character* but also under *Confidence*, *Faith* and *Faithfulness* and draws attention to the strengths and weaknesses embodied in oneself. A further example of the warning that is given to Muches is in the next proverb where the moral and thematic headings lead to a more nuanced interpretation of the remonstrance: ‘yuh nuffi

³⁶⁷ The explanation of what this proverb means is given in the text. Notably she alternates between using Creole to explain the proverbs and Standard English as here.

Furthermore, the proverb is catalogued by Louise Bennett under the heading *Discretion and Prudence*, which gives more substance to the understanding of not giving offence.

³⁶⁸ Bennett, *Auntie Roachy Seh*, 8.

³⁶⁹ Bennett, *Auntie Roachy Seh*, 8.

put yuhself eena barrel when match box can hole yuh'; don't pretend to be more important than you are. This is again placed under *Caution*, but it is also placed under *Humility*, where a nuanced interpretation ties the attribute to the individual's nature as well as the warning. In these examples we see once again how classification under different headings expands the interpretation of the proverbs and illustrates the richness of proverbial complexity and meaning, which underscores the central place that proverbial thinking occupies in all of Bennett's works.

Bennett finishes 'Jamaica Philosophy' by applying the dictionary definition she had started with to that of the 'ole time' Jamaican proverbs:

an dem got principles governin thoughts and conducts, and morals an character, like what the dictionary seh. So doan cry dem dung for "What is fi-yuh cyan be un-fi-yuh".³⁷⁰

In returning to this definition, 'Jamaica Philosophy' creates a circular, self-referential infrastructure whereby the dense use of proverbs becomes an illustration of Bennett's central argument that an entire Jamaican philosophy is held within the proverbs. In other words, Bennett uses multiple proverbs to build up the point of her argument from within the monologue. The wider interpretation offered by cross-reference with the *Proverb Manuscript* sustains the point that proverbs should be recognised as integral to Jamaican philosophy.

The usefulness of the moral and thematic headings in the *Proverb Manuscript* for widening interpretations of the monologues is also relevant to 'Jumpin Prices'. In this monologue, three proverbs link together to underpin a message of caution.³⁷¹ In this commentary, Bennett takes a humorous poke at authorities and traders concerning inflation:

For we cos a livin a run-jostle gains we development, an de high cos a livin a develop faster dan we development can develop! An Authority dah authorize development, but Authority cyaan authorize cos a livin, so cos a livin deh pon a cos we so much dat ew fine it hard fi live!³⁷²

³⁷⁰ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 8.

³⁷¹ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 93. The paratext for this monologue reads *Prices go up and up, and "de consumers-dem a suffer from pain a pocket."*

³⁷² Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 93.

Bennett proceeds to target the traders who are complaining that they are suffering headaches due to the rising costs. Notably, the speaker is once again detached through calling on ‘my Aunty Roachy’ to verbalise certain ideas in the monologue:

My Aunty Roachy seh dat if de trader-dem a got headache, what dem tink de consumers-dem a got?

The monologue finishes with the observation that the authorities should ‘leggo dem authority pon cos a livin jumpin process-dem’.

Humour is key to this monologue but, as has previously been observed, humour for Bennett was a form of defence against hardship. The costs are rising so quickly that the people cannot afford to live. The people do not know what is going to rise and what is not, and here Bennett introduces the first proverb: ‘when fire set a monkey tail, him seh a cool breeze’; trouble is often disguised as something good.³⁷³

The local consumers are unsure which prices will rise, creating an unstable and unsustainable environment. The rise in the cost of living is being manipulated and camouflaged by the authorities and, to an extent, the traders.

The remaining two proverbs appear together at the end of the monologue. This conforms to a pattern which has formed throughout the collection of Bennett ending her monologues with one, if not several, proverbs so that the collective voice of proverbial wisdom is the last thing we hear. In ‘Jumpin Prices’, the closing proverbs are linked by the figure of the crow but have different meanings. The first of the proverbial couplet is:

‘when john crow fly too high, him feader dem drop’; refers to a pompous person who is in danger of losing his position (*Class*).³⁷⁴

In placing this under the heading of *Class*, Bennett is commenting on the class division between those in authority and those who are impacted by their power and influence. This links to the third proverb:

³⁷³ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 93. This proverb does not appear in the *Proverb Manuscript*.

³⁷⁴ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 94. This proverb could be reminiscent of Icarus and the notion of hubris.

‘Doah yuh cyaan stop flyin crow feader from drop, yuh can hinder crow from meck nes pon yuh head top’; one cannot prevent evil, but he can prevent himself taking part in it (*Caution & Precaution*, 161; *Evil*, 12; *Imprudence*; *Warning*).³⁷⁵

In this example, the different headings under which Bennett places the final proverb suggests an escalation of blame on the authorities and traders. First it suggests the authorities and traders should be cautious and disassociate themselves from the rising prices; furthermore, the placement under the heading of ‘evil’ implies the authorities may be instigators of this hardship and exhorts them to prevent themselves from taking further part in it. The proverb itself carries this message of disassociation; however, the headings of *Caution*, *Evil*, *Imprudence*, *Warning* under which Bennett places the proverb, raise questions of blame, challenge the individuals for not standing up to the authorities, and highlight the morality of the price jumps when the local people cannot afford to live. The triad of proverbs operates under the surface of the monologue to build up a picture of frustration at the pain caused by the rise in costs, and subversively comments on the issues of social stratification. Humour camouflages the message of hardship, and yet the proverbs raise questions and create a parallel commentary within the script. Bennett is a master at this dual crafting, utilising the proverbs and helping readers and listeners ‘to see and feel the truth of the expression’.

Proverbial Impact in the Unpublished Manuscripts

In a further examination of Bennett’s consistent and impactful use of proverbs within the monologues, I turn now to the unpublished material that includes scripts for 34 monologues that were not used in *Aunty Roachy Seh*.³⁷⁶ Many of the unpublished monologues have proverbs listed at the end as Bennett requested; 54 proverbs were used across the 34 monologues in this archival source. There are also ten Christmas-themed monologues, none of which include a proverb. This omission is noted as an interesting

³⁷⁵ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 94.

³⁷⁶ Louise Bennett Coverley [“Miss Lou’s Fonds”] [“Monologues Not Used in Aunty Roachy Seh”] McMaster University Archives, Ontario. 1-108. Digital archives: <https://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca/islandora/object/macrepo%3A48700>. It has to be noted that there are one or two instances where monologues have been categorised under ‘unpublished monologues’ but do in fact appear in *Aunty Roachy Seh* – for instance ‘Proverbs (School Challenge) October 1976 on page 70 of the unpublished monologues page appears under School Challenge in *Aunty Roachy Seh* on page 10. This is likely to be an error in recording the scripts.

anomaly. The unpublished monologues offer a rich source of material and the archival scripts also offer an insight into Bennett's preparations with her handwritten alterations and notes.³⁷⁷ These handwritten notes and alterations are more frequent than in the archival scripts of the monologues that were used in *Aunty Roachy Seh* as the scripts ultimately used for publication are more regularly typed out for ease of reading. Several of the archival scripts of the monologues used in *Aunty Roachy Seh* have discernible dates written at the top of the page; others have numbers which may mean the year in which the monologue was delivered, but this is supposition. More of the unpublished monologues are dated so it is possible to get a sense of what was topical at the time as well as the subject matter. There are several concerning election times; voting lists; Labour Day; and International Women's Day — all of these would have been broadcast to align with the specific dates of these events. For instance, the script for International Women's Day is dated March 7th, 1980, and this was repeated on Monday March 9th, 1981, under the title 'Oman day oman'. Labour Day is dated May 22nd, 1972. Clearly, some of the monologues were repeated, although not many, which is evidence that a great many scripts have been lost.

The following archival images from Mary Jane Hewitt's research notes show the textual scripts chosen for publication for *Aunty Roachy Seh* (53 are given here although 50 were ultimately chosen and placed in a different order), with a fuller list of 88 supplied by Louise Bennett for Morris to choose from.³⁷⁸ These sources add valuable information about the range of topics covered in the monologues. The lists exemplify Bennett's vast commentary on contemporary issues in Jamaica, allowing us to witness the daily issues that she critiqued and providing us with a unique picture of what was concerning people at certain times. Mary Jane Hewitt's involvement is crucial; she completed her comparative PhD on Louise Bennett and Zora Neale Hurston in 1976, and part of her research is recorded in the McMaster archives which I draw on for this section's analysis of monologue topics and proposed categorisations. I also analyse one of the unpublished monologues from the archives entitled 'Cos A Livin' in terms of the use of twelve proverbs which Bennett lists at the end of the text. This monologue was selected as part of the 53 monologues to be published but was cut from the final selection. In analysing a

³⁷⁷ Bennett, "Monologues Not Used in Aunty Roachy Seh", 1-108.

³⁷⁸ Louise Bennett Coverley ["Miss Lou Fonds"] [Aunty Roachy Seh], McMaster University Archives, Ontario: other contents, notebooks: 9-11; digital archives: <https://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca/islandora/object/macrepo%3A33172>

monologue that was not published and therefore rarely seen, I can re-emphasise the proverbial thinking that underpinned all of Bennett's work.

Hewitt clearly worked closely with Morris as we see from her notes to him on the scripts below. She appears to have diverted her attention to concentrate on her thesis (hence the archival records of the monologues end in 1974) and it was Morris alone that made the final editorial choices for *Aunty Roachy Seh*.

Bennett clearly directed the choice of monologues she wished to appear in *Aunty Roachy Seh*, but this leaves questions open as to the rationale behind the limited list she gave to Morris.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁹ Possibly the range was too varied and too long — in which case perhaps a second volume of *Miss Lou's Views* could be suggested for publication.

Miss Lou's Views (for publication)

1. Jamaican Language
2. Show Off Speech
3. Jamaica Philosophy
4. Proverbs
5. Universal Children's Day
6. World Health
7. Tom Cringle's ~~My~~ Cotton Tree
8. Myrtle Bank
9. ~~Manny~~ Hero Nanny
10. Dear Princess
11. Independence Day
12. Prize Giving
13. Jamaica Hazards
14. Lewd Songs
15. Social Climbing
16. Rude Man
17. Y Lunch
18. Bad Mannas
19. Class and Colour ~~Prejudice~~ Debate
20. Good News ~~Headline~~ Headline
21. Shady Tree
22. Bad Minded
23. Spelling Bee
24. Woman Equality
25. Oman Driver Priases
26. Demonstration
27. Breast Feeding
28. Pork Parts Deport
29. Roots Food
30. Cos of Livin
31. Rent Control
32. Jumpin Prices
33. Uncontrollable Beef Price
34. Bogus Shortages
35. Sow an Reap
36. Telephone
37. Labour Day Work
38. Work Time
39. Farm Allergy
40. Everybody Business
41. Farden Bump
42. Police
43. Tief
44. Water Tief
45. Authority an Gun Court
46. Wife Beating Bill
47. Paraplegic
48. West Indies an Jamaica
49. Iron Smith Again
50. Free Schoolin
51. Cuban School
52. Voluntary & Compulsory
53. Cross Roads Traffie

Miss Lou to supply

Fraidness

Runway Smaddy

Human Rights

Praises

Drudging Food

25/1/84
Report to T. Thompson (1/6/78).

Figure 11

Miss Lou's Views (to choose from for publication)

1. Pork Parts Deport
- ~~2. Games Maltreatment~~
3. Class and Colour Debate
4. Social Climbing
5. Jamaica Philosophy
6. Tom Cringle's Cotton Tree
- ~~7. Columbus Day~~
8. Hero Nanny
- ~~9. Seven Meet Seven~~
- ~~10. National Hero~~
11. Myrtle Bank
12. Jamaica Language
13. Independence Day
14. Farm Allergy
15. Work Time
- ~~16. Lazy People~~
17. Roots Food
18. Sow an Reap
- ~~19. Banana Crisis Again~~
20. Uncontrollable Beef Price
- ~~21. Mawger Saltfish Competition~~
- ~~22. Yap Promotion~~
23. Labour Day Work
24. Spelling Bee
25. Free Schooling
26. Proverbs (Schools Challenge)
27. Cuban School
28. Voluntary & Compulsory
29. Universal Children's Day
- ~~30. O Day~~
- ~~31. Dunnins Time~~
32. Cos' of Livin'
- ~~33. Jamaica Dollar Devaluation~~
34. Jumpin Prices
- ~~35. Inflation~~
- ~~36. Good-bye Poun Note~~
37. Rent ~~Control~~ Control
- ~~38. Auction Sale~~
- ~~39. Uncharitable New Money~~
- ~~40. Austerity Prosperity~~
41. Telephone (New)
- ~~42. Tom Feel Telephone~~
43. Jamaica Hazards
44. Cross Roads Traffic

Figure 12

Miss Lou's Views (to choose from for publication) continued

- ~~45.~~ Go-Slow Fire Brigade
- 46. Oman Driver Praises
- ~~47.~~ Pickney Dental Health
- ~~48.~~ Family Planning
- 49. World Health
- ~~50.~~ K.P.H. Bicentennial
- 51. Breast Feeding
- ~~52.~~ Shortages
- 53. Demonstration
- ~~54.~~ Action Committee
- ~~55.~~ Boy Scout
- 56. Y Lunch
- 57. Water Thief
- 58. Rude Man
- ~~59.~~ Unemployment Violence Again
- ~~60.~~ Thief
- 61. Bad Mannas
- 62. Wife ~~Man~~ Beating Bill
- 63. Shady Tree
- 64. Everybody Business
- 65. Bad Minded
- 66. Good News Headline
- 67. Authority an Gun Court
- 68. Prize Giving
- ~~69.~~ Black Is Beautiful
- 70. Lewd Songs
- ~~71.~~ P.M. Broadcasting
- ~~72.~~ Unisex Clothes
- 73. Show Off Speech
- ~~74.~~ Two Voice Lucy
- ~~75.~~ Bogus Oman
- ~~76.~~ Bogus Police
- ~~77.~~ Cow-Police
- 78. Farden Bump
- 79. Dear Princess
- 80. Woman Equality
- ~~81.~~ Immigration Bill
- ~~82.~~ Summit Conference
- ~~83.~~ Foreign Worries
- 84. Iron Smith Again
- 85. West Indies an Jamaica
- 86. ~~Paraplegic~~ Paraplegic
- ~~87.~~ Cassius Ali
- 88. *Police*

Figure 13

Below is the first page from the five-page list that Mary Jane Hewitt compiled with her suggestions of what to include in the book of *Miss Lou's Views*.³⁸⁰ Crucially, the fuller list (not included here) shows all the dates that the monologues were broadcast from 1966 to 1974.

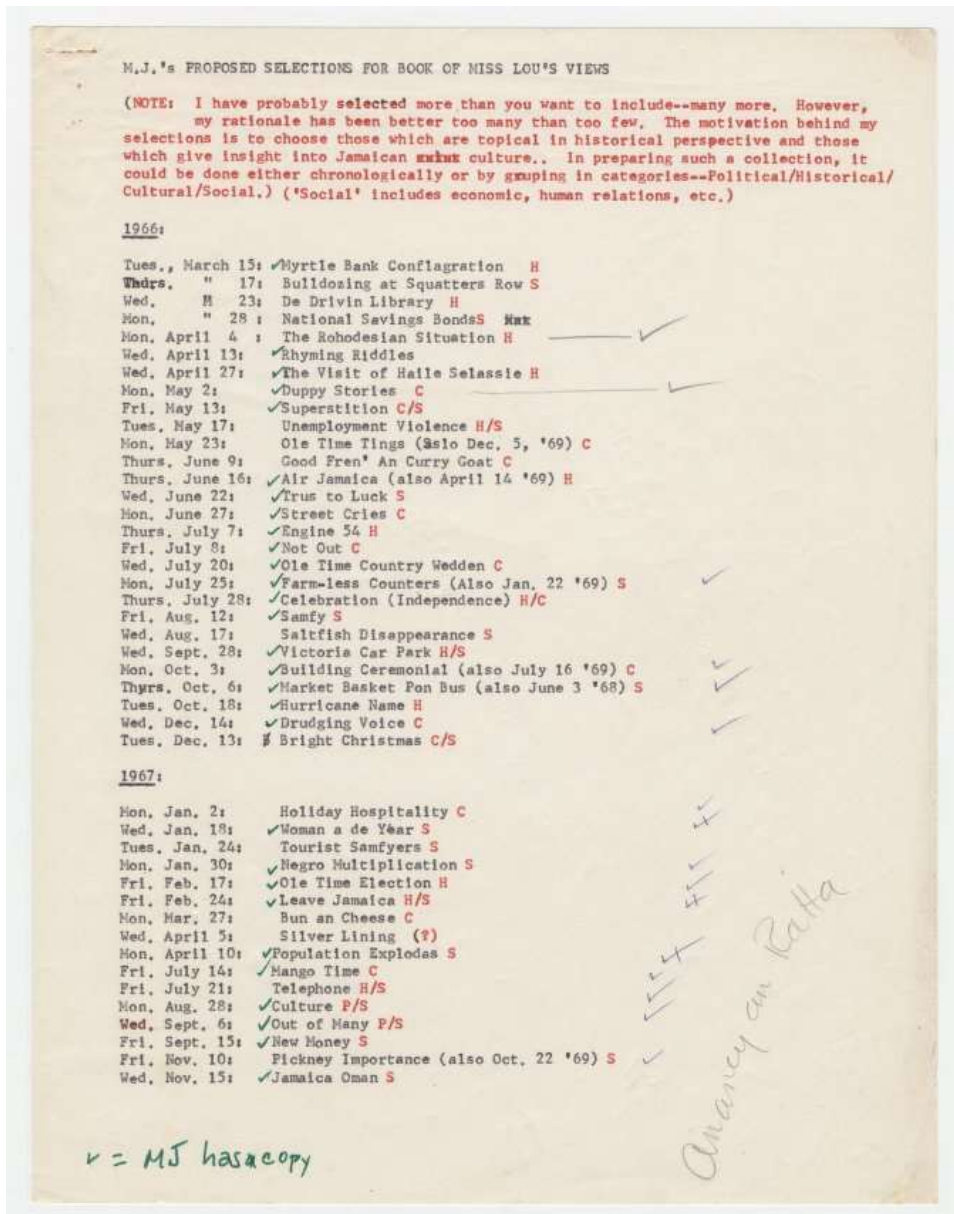


Figure 14

³⁸⁰ Louise Bennett Coverley ["Miss Lou Fonds"] McMaster University Archives, Ontario: Various lists of contents, 1978, n.d.; typed lists of contents of LB's notebooks, 1966-1974, n.d.; other contents, notebooks, 27. Digital archives: <https://digitalarchive.mcmaster.ca/islandora/object/macrepo%3A33172>

It is interesting that in her note at the top of the page Hewitt suggests the monologues could be grouped into four themed categories: political, historical, cultural and social (with ‘social’ being defined by her as including ‘economic, ‘human relations, etc’). However, an obvious obstacle to Hewitt’s categories is that many of the monologues would not in fact fit neatly under one heading, but rather would spill over into several categories. Looking closely at Hewitt’s note and her lists, we can see that she herself was aware of potential problems. She places some of the monologues under two categories, such as the ‘Celebration (independence)’ broadcast on July 28, 1966, which she annotates with H/C (historical and cultural). Another example of the difficulty of her themed categorisation is seen in ‘Leave Jamaica’ broadcast on 24th Feb 1967, where again Hewitt places the monologue in two categories H/S (historical and social). Both the headings are relevant to the monologues and it would clearly pose an editorial challenge to differentiate between them. Hewitt also attempted to place some monologues under the more specific headings of traffic, holiday, public service and foreign. However, this presents an overly complicated categorisation of the monologues. Conceivably, it may also have been interesting to follow Hewitt’s alternative suggestion, mentioned in the note, which was to publish the monologues in the chronological order in which they were broadcast. This would have added another layer to the understanding of the timeline of events and issues that Bennett was commenting on in *Miss Lou’s Views*. However, because of the loss of many of the scripts and the lack of recordings, this would not have been sustainable. In *Aunty Roachy Seh*, Morris does not seem to prioritize the monologues by subject specific themes or chronology. Interestingly, he centres each monologue within the initial vocalised exhortation to ‘listen no!’ and the finale of ‘ay ya yie!’ These are presented in a handwritten style of printed font and here, even though the monologue is in printed text form, the choice of font draws attention to voice — it is the voice of the multifaceted didactic figures of Miss Lou and Aunty Roachy that is represented in his editorial approach.

Below I reproduce images of ‘Cos A livin’ with its twelve listed proverbs.³⁸¹ The set of four images below shows the neatly typed out four-page version of ‘Cos A Livin’’. This includes Bennett’s handwritten annotations: an additional proverb and corrections to the

³⁸¹ Bennett, “Monologues Not Used in Aunty Roachy Seh”, [N.D.], 22-25.

typed-out proverbs. The second set of two images shows an earlier version of the script, dated 28 November 1966 and titled 'Cos' of Livin''.³⁸²

³⁸² Bennett, "Monologues Not Used in Aunty Roachy Seh", [Nov. 28, 1966], 21.

COS A LIVIN

Listen, no!

What we gwine do bout de high cos a livin, eh sah?

Lawks, missis!

Aunty Roachy seh dat everyting human bein need fi exis pon gawn up an keep awn goin up, so dat existence a tun one a de bigges problem pon we.

Ah mean to seh, me know dat is a good ting fi hab ambition an fi waan raise up weself eena de worl as de big lickle independent country dat we is in now. But lawks! So we a try fi raise up weself, de cos a livin a raise up higher an faster dan we can able fi raise up fi-we lickle livin, an cos a livin deh pon a win de raisin race! An when it come to keep up wid it, ha massi!

It hard pon we, but wha fi do?

Meck Jamaica people tan deh ask wha fi do, till "wha fi do" tumble dung pon dem!

We haffi "teck time knock sofly". We haffi "creep before we walk", an "learn fi walk before we start run race" gains de big time well set up experience nations of de worl. We haffi curb some a we highfalutin plans an high chested run-jostlins, an member seh a "High seat kill Miss Thomas puss", an realize seh "Quattie bread-get can full monkey belly", but "Follow fashin meck monkey lose him tail", an "So monkey a try fi climb up a house top, a so him tail a

Figure 15

heng dung eena door mout", a oh! So we better watch out!
For "What fit elephant cyaan fit mosquito", a oh!

Doah sun shine sometimes, tings no bright,
Doah pot a bwile, bickle no nuff.
River flood but water scarce, an
Rain a fall but dutty tough!

Tings so bad dat nowadays when
Yuh ask smaddy how dem do
Dem fraid yuh teck i tell dem back
So dem no answer yuh!

No care omuch we dah work fa
Hard time still eena we shut!
We dah fight, hard time dah beat we.
Dem might raise we wages but

Poun gawn awn pon we pay, an
We feel no merriment;
For ten poun gawn on pon we food
An ten poun pon we rent!

Figure 16

Salfish gawn up! Mackerel gawn up!
Pork an beef gawn up same way.
An when peas an matches ready,
Dem jus go pon holiday!

Whai oh! De cos a livin eena
Everybody shut!
An all de sinting-dem dah sell
Fi ten time wha dem wut!

No bodder call fi steak or stew
Eena no butcher shop.
Ef yuh no know de butcher well
Yuh raise so-so scrap-scrap!

Cloth, boot, pin an needle gawn up!
Ice, bread, taxes, water rate!
Kerosene oil, gasolene gawn up!
An de poun devaluate!

De price a bread gawn up so high
Dat we haffi gree
Fi cut we eye pon bread an tun
A dumplin refugee!

Figure 17

An all dem marga smaddy weh
 Dah gwaan like fat is sin?
 All dem-deh weh dah fas wid fat?
 Me lef dem to dumplin!

Sun a shine an pot a bwile, but
 Tings no bright, bickle no nuff!
 Rain a fall, river dah flood, but
 Water scarce an dutty tough!

PROVERBS

1. Teck time knock softly.
2. Creep before yuh walk.
3. Learn fi walk before yuh start run race.
4. High seat kill Miss Thomas puss.
5. Quattie bread-^{gut} can full monkey belly.
6. Follow fashin meck monkey lose him tail.
7. So monkey a try fi climb up a house top, a so him tail
 a heng dung eena door mout.
8. What fit elephant cyaan fit mosquito.
9. Pot a bwile but bickle no nuff.
10. River flood but water scarce.
11. Rain a fall but dutty tough.

12. *noh put yuhself eena barrel wen matches - bok
 sam hol yuh*

Figure 18

Listen noh- Wat we gwine do bout dis high cos'-a-livin' eeh sah. lawks missis, Aunty Rocky sey dat everyting human been need fe exist pon gwain up an keep awn going up so dat existance a tun one a de bigges' problem pon we. Ah mean to sey we know dat is a good ting fe hab ambition an fe want fe raise up wesself ina de worl' as de big lickle Independent country dat we is in now, but lawks, so we a try fe raise up wesself, de cos'-a-livin' a raise up higher an faster dan we can able fe raise up fe we lickle livin', an cos'-a-livin' deh pon a win de raising race! An wen it come to keep up wid it, hamassi! It hard pon we, but wah fe do. Meck Jamaica people tan deh ask wah fe do, till "wah fe do tumble dung pon dem." We haffe teck time knock softly, we haffe creep before we walk, an learn fe walk before de start run race gains' big time well set up experience nations of de worl, wi haffe curb some a we highfaluting plane an high chested run joslins a member sey a high seat kill miss thomas puss, an realize sey "quattie bread- get can full monkey belly, but falla fashin meck monkey loose him tail, an so a monkey a try fe climb up a house top, a so him tail a heng dung ina door mout a oh, so we better watch out, for wat fit elephant kyan fit mosquito a oht:-

Doah sun shine sometimes, but tings no bright

Doah pot a bwile, bickle no nuff "

"River flood but water scroce an

"Rain a fall but dutty tough!"

Tings so bad dat nowadays wen

Yuh ask steady how dem do,

Dem fraid yuh teck i' tell dem back

So dem no answer yuh!

No care omuch we dah work fa

Hard time still eena we shut (shirt)

We dah fight, hard time dah beat we,

Dem might raise we wages but-

Poun' gawn awn pon we pay, an

We feel no merriment,

For ten poun' gawn on pon we food

An ten poun' pon we rent!

Figure 19

Saltfish gawn up! Mackerel gawn up!
 Pork an beef gawn up ~~an~~ same way,
 An wen peas an matches ready
 Dem jus' go pon holiday!

What! oh! De cos'-a-livin',
 Everybody shut (shirt)
 An all dem sinting dem dah sellin'-
 Fe-ten-tite-wah dem wat!

No badda call fe steak or stew
 Eena no butcher shop,
 Ef yuh no know de butcher well,
 Yuh raise so-so scrap-scrap!

Cloth, boot, pin an needle gawn up,
 Ice, bread, staxes, (water-rate) in a six,
 Kerosine oil, gasolene gawn up,
 An poun! note soon disappear.
 De price a bread gawn up so high,
 Dat we haffe gree
 Fe cut we eye pon bread an tun
 A dumplin refugee!

An all dem mawger smady wey
 Dah gwan like fat is sin,
 All dem deh wey dah fas' wid fat
 Me lef dem to dumplin!

* Sun a shine an pot a while, but
 Tings no bright, bickle no nuff!
 Rain a fall, river dah flood, but
 Water scarce an dutty tough!

Figure 20

In this unpublished monologue there are several clues as to the postcolonial contradictions of living in a ‘big likkle independent country’. Bennett comments on the rise in prices and on the costs of ‘raising up weself’. This complex interest in how Jamaicans can respond to independence is reflected elsewhere in Bennett’s work. In the poem ‘Independance’ Bennett draws our attention to celebration, and yet concern about the new status: ‘Independance wid a vengeance! ah hope/ we chin can stan de strain!’.³⁸³ We know that *Miss Lou’s Views* was broadcast from March 1966, and the date at the top of this script is November 28th, 1966; hence the monologue was broadcast four years after independence in 1962, showing Bennett’s continuing interest in the possibilities for postcolonial Jamaica.

Belinda Edmondson notes the effect that this surging nationalism had on local, popular middle-class artists who were writing for predominantly middle-class audiences. She writes:

Naipaul’s observation – that it is the people (specifically, the middle class) who police their own literature as much as any literary critic – is a challenge to the view that it is postcolonial critics who are responsible for the two tiered system of literature that prevails.³⁸⁴

Edmondson explains that:

critics of Caribbean literature tend to see value in literature associated with international “placelessness”...or an avant garde literary experimentation that is associated with the elite international marketplace; by contrast, literature that is locally or regionally popular tends not to have these qualities.³⁸⁵

I focus on the points that Edmondson makes about middle classness and being local; Bennett herself was middle class, not one of the market women and yet, with her performative voices she becomes creatively part of all of Jamaican society. This brings to the fore the complexity of her position, commenting on the challenges facing a newly independent nation, and writing and performing in Creole as an ‘authentic’ voice of the people. She herself is a mediated figure, crossing classes much as the proverbs are communally used and understood by all. Edmondson further notes that ‘the renditions of Creole speech and the visions of Caribbean life [by Bennett and others such as Claude McKay] have been seamlessly integrated with state interests in the postcolonial

³⁸³ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 129.

³⁸⁴ Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow*, 87.

³⁸⁵ Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow*, 185, footnote 5. There is a wider argument that it is the critics alone who shape this distinction, but this is too wide a discussion for the parameters of this thesis.

Caribbean'.³⁸⁶ Indeed, with her emphasis on the local, Bennett 'reveals the politics of the evolving middle class as [...] perhaps no other writer'.³⁸⁷ The emphasis on the 'local' that I have noted throughout this thesis gains momentum when considering the reaction by Bennett to the hardships seen in 'Cos a Livin', written and performed four years after Jamaica gained independence. These are local issues facing local people, critiqued by locally born Miss Lou.

However, the figure of Aunty Roachy, as a central character and voice, remains problematic because Bennett as we know came from a rural background but was not from the marketplace, and therefore is classed as being separate from the market women that Aunty Roachy embodies. This complicates the narrative of class but we should remember that the voice in the monologues is not just Aunty Roachy, but that she herself is mediated and understood through the prism of Miss Lou's narrative, Bennett's language choices, and other voices claiming the figure as 'my' Aunty Roachy. Furthermore, the proverbs that are voiced within the monologue also act to connect Bennett's personae to those unknown people who have voiced these proverbs in the past, as part of the shared language of Jamaica that reaches across class to invoke a communal morality for living. Therefore, we must keep in mind, as we read the monologues, Bennett's complex shifting between multifaceted personae, where she can be seen as a local writer of local issues, a creative communicator of didactic proverbial thinking, as a middle class, maternal national icon, or as an ancestor for future poetic voices across the globe.

Couched as it is in humour, Miss Lou's frustration and anxiety in 'Cos a Livin' is captured in her words:

But lawks! So we a try fi raise up weself, de cos a livin raise up higher an faster dan we can able fi rais up fi-we lickle living, and cos a livin deh pon a win de raisin race! An when it come to keep up wid it, ha massi!³⁸⁸

The personification of the 'cos a livin', who wins the race to rise up, is imaginative and effective. The Jamaican people keep asking what they can do, until the actual words "'wha fi do" tumble dung pon dem!' This phrase mirrors the one in another published monologue, 'Jumpin Prices', where Aunty Roachy says 'An jumpin sinting got a way fi

³⁸⁶ Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow*, 88.

³⁸⁷ Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow*, 87.

³⁸⁸ See Figure 15, 156.

kin puppa-lick (somersault) an tumble dung. An woe be unto whosever it tumble dung pon, a oh!’³⁸⁹ With the notion that the question itself and the jumpin prices will physically fall down on top of them, Bennett is playing with the idea of rising and falling, actions and consequences. This enables the issue to be imagined and visualised, thereby giving it more potency. In addition, she uses twelve relevant proverbs which frame this analysis. Once again, the power of the proverbs and the multiple possibilities for interpretation is enriched by Bennett’s organisation of them in the *Proverb Manuscript*. We also notice that, in the earlier draft, the proverbs are interwoven with the text without being distinguished as separate utterances, as if to suggest the seamless way that Bennett incorporates them into her texts. This is significant but placing these utterances into quotations also suggests their important status for Bennett. In the later version they are visually stressed speech acts, affording them an external authoritative status in the text.

Bennett problematises the idea of Jamaicans themselves having ambition ‘as big Lickle independence country dat we is in now’, setting the aspirations of the individual within the context of Jamaica’s independence and the economic possibilities for a small nation-state. The narrator addresses this question of ‘What fi do’ through proverbs which are cautionary and advisory. The placement of the proverbs under the moral and thematic headings of the *Proverb Manuscript* offers an aide to a more nuanced understanding of Bennett’s warnings in this monologue and presupposes a reaction to the proverbs through the connotations behind the headings.

‘Noh put yuhself eena barrel wen matches box can hold you’; don’t pretend to be more important than you are (*Humility 1, Caution and Precaution, 38*)

‘Creep before yuh walk’: don’t be in too much of a hurry to achieve your goal (*Patience and Time 3*)

Underlying this dual proverbial message is a subtle criticism of the character of the individual (or nation) who wants to rise up without the resources to do so. There may be a conservative anxiety here about Jamaica’s postcolonial future, but there is also a nonetheless radical wish for Jamaica to find a way to move beyond a life where ‘dutty tough’, to quote the poem that ends the monologue.

³⁸⁹ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 93.

The volume of proverbs used in the monologue and the ‘translations’ of each proverb under the particular moral and thematic headings combine to reconfigure a separate narrative that can be critically examined separately from the prose of the monologue. Consider the following two:

‘Follow fashion meck monkey lose tail’/ ‘falla fashi’ bruk monkey neck’; those who ape their betters often hurt themselves/ we can hurt ourselves by imitating others (*Imitation 1. Character, 99*)

‘So monkey a try fi climb up a house top as so him a heng dung eena door mouth’; ‘monkey dah hide, but him tail fall dung a door’; it is difficult to hide our faults (*Character 112, see Weakness*).

Bennett stresses the didactic power of the proverbs through the volume of proverbs she uses in this monologue to create a narrative of warning. In the above proverbs, Monkey better watch out or he might get hurt, lose out, become exposed or find himself in danger. The proverbs also carry a warning not to copy colonial examples as Jamaica begins to learn how to handle independence – in which case this becomes a subtle ‘poke’ at the governance of the colonisers. In presenting the proverbs in a dense section of text in the middle of the monologue, she highlights the proverbs as carriers of received wisdom where, in this case, not only the individual learns a moral lesson, but Bennett also cautions the nation in its response to independence. If we could hear this monologue as it was broadcast, no doubt the dominance of the proverbs, the liveliness and the complex shared language of the proverbs would reverberate at the heart of it.

It is significant that Bennett includes one of her most well-known poems in this monologue. We have seen that she did often include her poems in her monologues and by including ‘Dutty Tough’ she draws upon a recognised poem to re-emphasise the hardship that the people are facing, where the ground is always hard. What is most significant here is the inclusion of two more verses that are neither in *Selected Poems* nor *Jamaica Labrish*. The two extra verses in the unpublished monologue include the title of the monologue, ‘Cos a Livin’:

Whai oh! De cos a livin’ eena

Everybody shut!

An all de stining den dah sell

Fi ten time una dem wut!
No bodder call fi steak or stew
Eena no butcher shop
Ef yuh know de butcher well
Yuh raise so-so scrap-scrap!³⁹⁰

Bennett includes the extra verses in the archival draft dated 1966, and in the cleaner copy ready for recording. The question arises as to why Nettleford did not include these verses in his poetry collection of 1966. It might suggest that Bennett wrote the verses to respond to the title of the monologue, and then excluded them when giving over the poems to be published; or more likely, that Nettleford's publication was already in progress and that, in discussion with Bennett, this was already an authorial sanctioned text with 'final intentions' agreed. This would mean that she wrote the two extra verses after the poem was 'finished' in order to include the verse with the title in the unseen monologue. The addition of these verses in the poem reinforces the theme of the poem and the monologue by adding even more detail about life during hard times. We can speculate that perhaps Bennett thought of this version as a different poem from the recognised 'Dutty Tough', as one entitled 'Cos o' Livin' within the framework of the monologue. What we can see, however, is that she perceived the written text and performance text as two different forms; the printed text is fixed, whereas there are many instances where Bennett modifies her poems while performing.³⁹¹ Working on the draft monologue gives rise to the kind of cross fertilisation which is key to proverbial thinking. In paying attention to proverbial thinking we can see connections in Bennett's work as well as highlighting her constant creativity and experimentation across the different forms she uses.

In the monologues, both published and unpublished, we recognise the consistency of Bennett's proverbial thinking: its formal adaptability, its role as a repository of folk wisdom and Jamaican philosophy and its ability to open out multiple interpretations. I show that proverbial didacticism is deployed within the monologues in a way that highlights Bennett's distinct sense of the powers of the local and of Jamaican language. The proverbs, and their encouragement of moral codes of behaviours and understanding,

³⁹⁰ See Figure 17,158.

³⁹¹ For instance, in *Miss Lou Yes M' Dear* she cuts verses from her well known poem 'Colonisation in Reverse' presumably for timing reasons in the flow of the performance.

are also shown to be flexible, working provocatively within the context of storytelling while also retaining an independent status in Bennett's texts. It is in tune with Bennett's sense of their importance and contemporary relevance that she would incorporate proverbs into the new technologies of radio operating in postcolonial Jamaica, and into the vibrant speech of the narrative and poetic voices she created. In an unpublished 1985 interview on her career and Jamaican language, Bennett herself evokes her dressmaker mother's sewing room as a rich metaphorical space that crystallizes the significance of proverbs in an 'ordinary', everyday milieu. In her memory, the sewing room, this communal, accessible space of repair and creativity (predominantly female in Bennett's description) through which diverse people pass is a microcosm of Jamaican society, brought together by the proverbs: 'The one thing that all the ladies could understand was the proverb. It is universal – something we all share – that's the clue'.³⁹²

In the following chapter, I explore the challenges of contemporary and relevant understandings of the local and Jamaican language by contexts of migration and the creative reworking of Anancy stories. The final chapter discusses how the face-to-face nature of performance draws upon the locality of the audiences and the possibilities of hearing and seeing proverbial thinking and speaking in action.

³⁹² Louise Bennett, "Interview with Miss Lou re: Career and Jamaican Language", audio cassette.

Chapter Four

Anancy Poetics: Proverbial Reclaiming and Recreation in Bennett's Anancy Stories

*'Everything that has happened in the world was started by Anancy'.*³⁹³

With its focus on the Anancy stories, this chapter continues the exploration of genre in Bennett's works through a proverbial lens. In the preceding chapters, proverbs were found to be integral to the structure and wider understanding of her poetry and the monologues. In this chapter, the focus shifts onto the trickster figure of Anancy, what he represents in Caribbean heritage and his metaphorical status within the stories.³⁹⁴ It leads us to think about the relationship between Bennett and the trickster and to appraise Jahan Ramazani's concept of 'mythical avatar' as well as the idea of the 'spinner of stories'. I also demonstrate how, in Bennett's versions of the stories, the proverbs occupy a more liminal space — even to the extent that they are sometimes no longer explicitly written into the texts — and yet proverbial thinking in the short stories continues to be present. In short, I discuss how the proverbs act as a transformational element for Bennett as she reclaims the stories for Jamaican folklore.

This connection between the Anancy stories and proverbs has been noted by Hugh Hodges, who makes the general link between characteristics of proverbs and the Anancy stories:

If half of what proverbs do is authorise by appealing to familiar and collective wisdom, the other half of what they do is introduce something new and surprising, a turn. In this respect they share something important with Anancy stories.³⁹⁵

Hodges observes the parallel between proverbs and the stories in terms of the 'familiar and collective wisdom' encapsulated in both genres. The proverb's familiarity no doubt hinges on its repetition in all kinds of contexts and also ensures the survival of a collective value system to which Bennett is highly attuned. Hodges continues by arguing that the proverbs

³⁹³ Bennett, "Me and Anancy", in Walter Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Story*, Intro, ix.

³⁹⁴ I will be referring to the Anancy spelling throughout but I will be faithful to other authors' spelling when referring to their works, including Bennett's spellings which occasionally vary.

³⁹⁵ Hugh Hodges, *Soon Come: Jamaican Spirituality, Jamaican Poetics* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 65.

introduce something ‘new and surprising’, terms which I link to the specific expansion of interpretation found in Bennett’s Anancy stories when we read them through the lens of proverbial thinking. Indeed, this chapter’s focus on the Anancy stories seems particularly apt for exploring the inherent value of the ‘new and surprising’ in proverbial thinking. Where Hodges focuses on structural similarities between proverbs and Anancy stories, I will progress his theory by exploring how Louise Bennett takes this further and embeds the proverbs into her stories. In setting up the relationship between proverbs and the Anancy stories, we can see the similarity between Hodges and Bennett’s observations about the uses of proverbs. However, my analysis of Bennett in this chapter also illustrates that she considers that the implicit, and at times explicit, use of proverbs *should be* part of the narrative practice. The notions of the familiar and collective wisdom which Hughes appraises, combined with the ‘new and surprising’ element to proverbs, once again underscore the malleable nature of proverbs, and in her versions of the Anancy stories Bennett uses a form of recreative power to activate a way of adapting proverbial usage which authorises her to unpick the stories and reclaim them through proverbial thinking. As we shall see, Bennett’s persistent use of Creole in her retelling of the Anancy stories also contributes to a feeling of propriety and ‘authenticity’ for a Jamaican audience and, in this way, Bennett creates her unique storytelling voice. Her use of Creole as a fundamental part of the oral tradition evokes the transatlantic journey of the spider figure from Africa and the survival of enslaved peoples. The prejudice and bias against oral culture and Creole that I examine in Chapter One’s discussion of collecting practices meant that the importance of Anancy was slow to be fully captured in print by collectors and recorders. The performance of oral narratives in Jamaica was a form of both entertainment, and education, as listeners learned from elders transmitting knowledge and values as they ‘recount [ed] the old-time days of childhood and the part Anansi stories played in them’.³⁹⁶ In reactivating the stories in Creole, Bennett reproduces them in a form that those who grew up in the same culture would remember. In doing so she validates the importance of an active oral narrative tradition.

There was an explosion of critical writing about Louise Bennett in the 1980s and 1990s but to date there is not a substantial body of work on the analysis of her specific versions of Anancy stories and the contribution she makes to the scholarly efforts of others who have

³⁹⁶ Laura Tanna, *Jamaican Folk Stories and Oral Histories* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica Publications, 1988; repr. 2000), 29.

collected, collated and discussed the stories. In addition to looking at the importance that Bennett herself places on the Anancy figure — which is evident in the positive ways that she recentres him in her versions of the stories — and the way she reclaims the Anancy stories that inhabited her own past, in this chapter I also compare her versions of the Anancy stories with other collectors such as Walter Jekyll, Philip Sherlock and Martha Beckwith. In exploring Bennett’s versions, I illustrate where the proverbs can be read into her Anancy stories and, by referring to the *Proverb Manuscript*, I expand interpretations of the stories via proverbial evidence and implication. As part of a proverbial approach to the Anancy stories, and echoing the notion of proverbial malleability, I offer a reading where the stories themselves could be perceived as a form of proverb, or what I term an ‘elongated proverb’.

In Emily Zobel Marshall’s seminal book *Anansi’s Journey*, she reminds us of the ‘vibrant tradition of telling Anansi stories that dates back to the beginnings of the slave trade’.³⁹⁷ The Anancy figure is understood to be symbolic of survival and resistance, through the crossing of the Middle Passage to his often ambiguous place in the Caribbean and the wider African diaspora. I fully acknowledge that the origins of the trickster figure are woven into African history and rooted among the Asante of Ghana. Nonetheless, my focus in this chapter is on post-1900 textualizations of Anancy specifically, even as I retain an emphasis on the inherently slippery traits associated with this figure historically. At the very least, it can be argued that the different spellings of Anancy signify an enduring malleability and multiplicity of the trickster which accords with the different transatlantic dimensions of the figure and are replicated in the malleability of the short story genre that Bennett exploits.

Anancy in Print: Twentieth-Century Publishing Histories of Anancy Stories

Before exploring the relationship between Bennett and Anancy we can look at other earlier collections of the stories as comparative versions against which to understand the unique nature of her versions. Anancy’s printed history begins early in the 20th century when several Jamaican women of European ancestry compiled collections of the Anancy Stories.

³⁹⁷ Emily Zobel Marshall, *Anansi’s Journey: A Story of Jamaican Cultural Resistance* (Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 2012), 5.

Laura Tanna is to be acknowledged for her tracking skills in the publishing history of the oral genre of storytelling and she notes that by 1900, ‘one could count less than forty different Jamaican Anansi stories published in journals, pamphlets and books’.³⁹⁸ This low number could be the result of the kind of disparaging attitude to native oral culture mentioned earlier and which we can identify in a short 1896 article by Ada Trowbridge, who writes that: ‘the stories with the natives are rambling and without point and rest in repetition and a sort of metrical jingle’.³⁹⁹ For Tanna, Trowbridge’s assessment illustrates ‘the kind of bias which held that the art of the majority of Jamaicans was inferior to that derived from England or Europe’.⁴⁰⁰

Notably, in 1907 it was the Englishman, Walter Jekyll, who provided the first substantial printed collection of Jamaican folklore.⁴⁰¹ His *Jamaican Song and Story* not only includes Anancy stories but also digging songs, ring tunes, dancing tunes and is a collection which Nettleford acknowledges remains ‘a rich and valuable source book for Jamaican creative artists’.⁴⁰² In compiling her own versions of the stories, Bennett herself acknowledges a debt to Jekyll’s collection. She credits his book as:

An important source of research in the development of our folk art. The present generation of Jamaicans and especially we in the theatre are deeply indebted to Walter Jekyll for so faithfully and painstakingly recording the Jamaican folk stories and songs.⁴⁰³

Jekyll was a clergyman who moved to Jamaica as a planter where he collected and published songs and stories from the local African Caribbean community. These were the songs and stories which Phillip M. Sherlock describes as the ‘living roots of the future’ and Jekyll also recognised the significance of these stories and songs for the identity of a future Jamaica.⁴⁰⁴ When she was collecting Jamaican folklore for personal and professional

³⁹⁸ Laura Tanna, *Jamaican Folk Stories and Oral Histories* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica Publications, 1988; repr. 2000), 22. In her book, Tanna explains her own full exploration of the oral narratives through groundwork and the collecting of ninety-two stories. Her manner of writing in this particular volume brings the subject alive and makes it relevant as she explores the history, the art and the various strands of orality. She is to be acknowledged not only for her collection but for her analytical skills regarding the oral genre of storytelling.

³⁹⁹ Ada Wilson Trowbridge, “Negro Customs and Folk Stories of Jamaica,” *Journal of American Folklore IX*, No. XXXV (1896): 282-83; quoted in Laura Tanna, *Jamaican Folk Stories*, 22. Trowbridge’s bias is equally noted when she compares the beautiful Greek story of Arachne with the ‘inferior perceptions of the Africans.’

⁴⁰⁰ Tanna, *Jamaican Folk Stories*, 22.

⁴⁰¹ Walter Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Story, Anancy Stories, Digging Sings, Ring Tunes and Dancing Tunes* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966).

⁴⁰² Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Story*, Intro xiii.

⁴⁰³ Louise Bennett, “Me and Anancy”, in Walter Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Story*, Intro xi.

⁴⁰⁴ Philip M. Sherlock, “The Living Roots”, in Walter Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Dance*, Intro viii.

purposes and trying to remember some of the stories, Bennett was ‘overjoyed to find accurate retellings of many of the stories that I had forgotten’.⁴⁰⁵ Her short foreword to Jekyll’s collection allows us to begin to appreciate how Bennett’s approach to writing Anancy stories differs from collectors such as Jekyll. Bennett revisits stories from this collection, re-voicing those stories which were integral to her own childhood. As she notes, ‘my Grandmother used to tell me Annancy stories every nightThese were my favourite lullabies’.⁴⁰⁶ This ‘process’ involves remembering the stories that Jekyll had recorded, then revoicing and recommunicating the stories in her own style; Bennett found it ‘interesting and amusing to note that Annancy had somehow found his way into my versions of several of the stories Mr. Jekyll recorded without mention of him’.⁴⁰⁷ We will see this in the later comparative reading of ‘Toad and Donkey’, where Bennett takes over the story and moulds it into her own distinctive version.

Even though Jekyll had recorded the stories, Bennett appears to have believed that there was a gap or blind spot of some sort in his approach. This view is indicated in a personal interview with Mary Jane Hewitt where Bennett was asked if she was collecting folklore because it had meaning and what was her purpose other than to entertain:

Hewitt: Was it only to entertain? Do you feel you were conserving something for posterity for future generations?

Bennett’s answer to this adds to our understanding of her motivation – she replies that,

Bennett: I felt it was a necessity to put them down because they were ours and had been neglected for so long.

Hewitt: They hadn’t been recorded by someone?

Bennett: You know, up to when I started I didn’t even know about Walter Jekyll’s collection of folk things. That spurred me on. Because he did a great job but so little understanding of the thing and I was getting the real meaning of the things.

Hewitt: He was not Jamaican? You are Jamaican and you can bring to it a greater understanding, a deeper understanding – was that what you felt?

⁴⁰⁵ Bennett, “Me and Anancy”, Intro x.

⁴⁰⁶ Bennett, “Me and Anancy”, Intro ix.

⁴⁰⁷ Bennett, “Me and Anancy”, Intro x.

Bennett: Yes that's what I felt.⁴⁰⁸

With the phrase 'I was getting the real meaning of the things' we see Bennett's deep-rooted sense of local Jamaicanness and her suggestion that only a Jamaican, who might be described as having an 'insider' perspective, can get the true meaning behind the folklore and the heritage of the songs and stories in Jekyll's collection. Jekyll recorded them and, although Bennett credits his collection in Hewitt's interview, there is a sense that she feels that to truly understand and translate local folklore one must belong to the culture.⁴⁰⁹ As a Jamaican, Bennett's deep understanding of the importance of the Anancy stories within folklore lays the ground for her distinctively expansive approach to folklore and the way in which proverbs become integral elements in her Anancy storytelling practice. Bennett stresses the difference between recording and embedding meaning in the stories so that she can reclaim the status the folklore stories should have had. It comes across in the interview with Hewitt that she was trying to understand the history of the folklore herself and by encapsulating it in her creative practice she was not only preserving the heritage of the folklore for Jamaica but also elevating it to its rightful place. As we shall see in this chapter, this is key to her versions of the Anancy stories where she places the trickster at the centre of the stories. In different versions from Jekyll, but also Beckwith and Sherlock, the trickster figure is not always dominant. As already noted in Chapter One, Bennett, as opposed to Beckwith, explained that she 'had never been scientific' and did not approach her collecting of Anancy stories as a scientific project.⁴¹⁰ From this, we can suggest that her main purpose was to recreate and reclaim Anancy at the centre of her creative story making. Bennett's consistency in using Creole in her textual representations of Anancy also needs to be recognised. Her use of Creole is a recurring topic of discussion throughout this thesis, centred as it is around the influence of oral culture and challenges of representation in text and questions it raises about reclaiming a linguistic culture for the Jamaican people within the hegemony of the coloniser. In placing Anancy within her own overarching social commentary of Jamaica at the time, and in using Creole to do so in her versions of the Anancy stories, she reclaims the trickster and his stories for the Creole-speaking people of Jamaica within their everyday lives.

⁴⁰⁸ Bennett, interview by Hewitt, 42.

⁴⁰⁹ Bennett, interview by Hewitt, 42.

⁴¹⁰ Bennett, interview by Hewitt, 42.

Beyond the linguistic significance of Bennett's choice of Creole for her (re)telling of the Anancy stories, it is also worthwhile thinking about how Bennett uses Anancy's widely acknowledged 'cunning' to explore other qualities of Jamaican cultural and identity. For example, Carolyn Cooper observes that:

Indirection is the quintessential attribute and all dubious distinction of the crafty Jamaican woman of whom Bennett herself is a prime example for she creates with cunning irony out of the raw materials of Jamaican life a dramatized world of paradoxical characters who simultaneously mask and disclose the ambiguously shifting Bennett point of view.⁴¹¹

The notions of indirection, irony, ambiguity and dramatisation that Cooper raises lead us to think about what we might call Bennett's 'cunning' use of proverbs in her work, where the proverbs introduce a different form of dramatisation with proverbial images, masked meanings, and the moral messages found within this pithy form. In the following explorations of the proverbial impact on the Anancy stories, we see how Bennett uses the proverbs to comment on the dubious morality or slippery moral message within the stories. In the 1950 edition of *Anancy stories and Dialect verse*, the proverbs are either written into her texts, or implied and then printed out in full on the page at the end of the story.⁴¹² She uses the proverbs to evaluate human weaknesses which Anancy exploits and here Cooper's observation moves towards the perception of Anancy that Barrett has also argued for, namely that Anancy can be seen as epitomising a 'Jamaican personality': 'so intricately woven is Anansi in Jamaican life that his cunning has become part of the Jamaican personality stereotype'.⁴¹³ My argument is that Bennett is reclaiming a broader, creative significance for Anancy's 'cunning'. As I show in my later discussion on the spider figure, he acts as a symbol of survival who 'cunningly' spins stories in the face of dismissive and troubling stereotypical readings of traditional oral cultures that postcolonial scholars have

⁴¹¹ Carolyn Cooper, "'Disguise Up De English Language': Louise Bennett's Anansi Poetics" (lecture, The 2016-2017 Michael Baptista Lecture, Founders College, York University, Toronto, Nov. 3, 2016). Dr Carolyn Cooper, recently retired Professor of Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of the West Indies, delivered the 2016 Michael Baptista Lecture in commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the passing of "Miss Lou" (1919-2006), Jamaica's iconic and beloved poet and folklorist. The lecture was presented by CERLAC and co-sponsored by the Department of Humanities, the Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on Africa and its Diasporas, and the Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community and Diaspora.

⁴¹² Bennett et al, *Anancy stories and Dialect Verse* (Kingston: Pioneer Press, printed for the Pioneer Press by the Gleaner Company Ltd., 1950). As I will explain later in the chapter, this is the volume that I will be using to analyse the impact of proverbs in Bennett's stories as this is the only edition that includes proverbs in the publication.

⁴¹³ Leonard Barrett, *The Sun and the Drum: African Roots in Jamaican Tradition* (Jamaica: Sangsters Book Stores in association with Heinemann, 1979), 32.

long alerted us to. This is where Bennett and other collectors and writers are reclaiming the Anancy character's traits in a more positive framework.

In what follows, I suggest that Bennett's use of proverbs in her versions of the Anancy stories is highly distinctive. She differs from the other collectors that I am exploring not only in her creative approach to the stories but in her application of the proverbs which expand meaning and add a nuanced interpretation to the stories. This is further enhanced through reference to the *Proverb Manuscript*. As I will advocate later, elements of the short story can also mirror qualities of the proverb. As we saw in the first chapter of this thesis, the proverb is not easy to define — nor is the short story. I will explore this further when considering the short story as a form of fable, which in itself relates to the folklore element of the proverb and where I suggest that some of the elements of Norrick's proverb definition can be attributed to the Anancy short stories.

As well as Jekyll, another collector of Anancy stories and precursor to Bennett that I wish to look at is the white American Martha Beckwith, whom I discussed in Chapter One. Beckwith's *Jamaica Anansi Stories* was published in 1924 and contained material that was gathered over two visits to Jamaica in 1919 and 1921. Like Jekyll, she claimed to have recorded these verbatim, 'without polish or adornment' and portrayed the tradition of the stories as 'true folk art'.⁴¹⁴ The volume includes stories, songs, witticisms, riddles (but not proverbs), notes and an index to the sixty informants. She widely cross referenced the contents of her collection with folklore studies from other cultures. As an anthropologist and ethnographer, Beckwith's focus was to transcribe the texts from the oral into written form for preservation purposes, despite the challenges, and even if 'the lively and dramatic action, the change in voice, even the rapid and elliptical vernacular, cannot appear on the printed page'.⁴¹⁵ Notably, she also stressed the tradition of the stories as 'authentic performance art'.⁴¹⁶ Beckwith's descriptions of the modes of transmission of the stories as requiring dramatic action, the vocal element and the vernacular leads to the perceived need for the stories to be performed. This immediately makes us think of what Bennett achieves in her creative interpretations of the stories in performance, and highlights the difference between the two: Beckwith, as we saw in the first chapter, was a recorder and collector; Bennett, a collector and at the same time a creator and performer. After Beckwith, it was

⁴¹⁴ Beckwith, *Jamaica Anansi Stories*, published as 'Memoirs of the American Folk-lore Society' by G. E. Stechert & Co., Vol. XVII (1924). [Republished by Forgotten Books, 2007], 1.

⁴¹⁵ Beckwith, *Jamaica Anansi Stories*, 1.

⁴¹⁶ Beckwith, *Jamaica Anansi Stories*, 1.

only from the 1940s onwards that Jamaicans moved to publish their own folklore, for preservation as well as education. Tanna observes that it was Philip Sherlock who was particularly influential in bringing Anancy into the educational forum, with, for example, a narrative from *Anansi and the Spider Man*.⁴¹⁷ Sherlock is credited with creating an awareness of the cultural value of folk narratives for West Indians, but he presents the narratives in literary form, not as oral performances in Creole.⁴¹⁸

Consideration of the educational value of folk narratives draws our attention to some of the language and terminology used in discussions of the stories themselves and their content. For Zobel Marshall, a leading scholar in Anancy studies, there is a hierarchical prejudice in the definitions given to the folktale:

Folklore is often seen as a precursor to the fairy tale and the power dynamics of colonialism are at the very heart of the definition of the fairy tale. The fairy tale genre is of North American and European origin and in Eurocentric thinking fairy stories have been viewed as superior to the indigenous folk tale which was often interpreted as outmoded and simple.⁴¹⁹

This prejudice continues in that white and non-indigenous collectors have been concerned about the negative effects on children since the Jamaican Anancy stories appear to condone the characteristics of cunning, greed, slothfulness and deceit. Zobel Marshall notes that white collectors searched for the moral of the story and, finding none, concluded that the stories lacked morals as they were rooted in a more “primitive” non-Christian culture — or that they reflected the moral deficiencies of the “black race”.⁴²⁰ The link made to proverbs in the following sections opens out this question of morality in the stories and leads to an exploration of the multiplicity of proverbial thinking and morality.

Nettleford also writes that:

In Jamaica this descendant of the West African semi deity seems to take on special significance in a society which has its roots in a system of slavery — a system which pitted the weak against the

⁴¹⁷ Philip M. Sherlock, *Anansi and the Spider Man: Jamaican Folk Stories* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1956). This was reprinted in 1975 as a children’s bilingual story book in Spanish and English.

⁴¹⁸ Tanna, *Jamaican Folk Stories*, 24.

⁴¹⁹ Emily Zobel Marshall, “This is Not a Fairy Tale: Anansi and the Web of Narrative Power” in *The Fairy Tale World*, ed. by Andrew Teverson (London: Routledge, 2019), 4.

⁴²⁰ Marshall, “Not a Fairy Tale”, 6.

strong. It is as though every slave strove to be Anancy and he who achieved the spider form became a kind of hero.⁴²¹

The terminology surrounding the meanings and symbolic uses of the stories further adds to their complex status in that the Anancy stories can represent both fabled mythology and resistance strategies for enslaved people. In the 1975 interview with Mary Jane Hewitt, Bennett was asked when she first heard the word ‘folktale’ attached to an Anancy story. Her reply was:

Bennett: When I started to write for the newspapers and they asked if I knew folk stories and I replied yes, I know a lot of Anancy stories.

Hewitt: So you knew they were folk stories. That was in the early 40s?

Bennett: Yes because by then I had started to collect what I call ‘folklore’ in a conscious way.⁴²²

For Bennett, the Anancy stories represent a reclamation of what belonged to the Jamaican people.

Bennett and Anancy: Her Own Style

It is here that Louise Bennett fully enters the discussion as one of Jamaica’s foremost story tellers and folklorists. Her most comprehensive collection of Anancy stories is her 1979 publication *Anancy and Miss Lou* which brings together thirty-one Anancy stories, recorded in her own personal style.⁴²³ This constitutes five new stories and contains repeats of the Anancy stories she published in *Dialect Verses* (1942) and *Anancy Stories and Poems in Dialect* (1944).⁴²⁴ There are also several stories from the 1957 collection *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse* which itself includes fourteen different Anancy narratives and five stories in Standard English. The 1950 volume of *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*,

⁴²¹ Rex Nettleford, “Jamaican Song and Story and the Theatre” in Walter Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Story*, xiii.

⁴²² Bennett, interview by Hewitt, McMaster University Archives, Ontario [Louise Bennett fonds] ‘Various lists of contents, 1978, n.d.; typed lists of contents of LB’s notebooks, 1966-1974 (1975):39.

⁴²³ Louise Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, foreword by Mervyn Morris (Kingston: Sangster’s Book Stores, 1979).

⁴²⁴ These two volumes are out of print and unattainable – unknown publisher and binding.

compiled by Bennett and several other authors, includes twelve Anancy stories by Louise Bennett in dialect, most of them taken from *The Gleaner* newspaper Sunday columns which she wrote earlier in her career.⁴²⁵ Bennett felt particularly driven to preserve the nation's folklore not only by recording the stories but most importantly performing them and teaching them or transferring them orally to children. She told them in dramatic form to an entire generation of children who were raised watching *Ring Ding*, where she taught them to sing, recite and to listen to her perform Anansy stories (twelve of these programmes have been recorded).⁴²⁶

The Anancy stories have survived in Jamaican folklore and, since Bennett's efforts, have been adopted into textual form by other authors, such as Andrew Salkey, who have used Anancy in fictional and non-fictional accounts. It is valuable to consider Salkey's radical versions as well as Bennett's when recognising that it was not really until the work of Louise Bennett and Andrew Salkey ... 'that the [Anancy] tradition was fully recuperated as an adult one'.⁴²⁷ Salkey's two collections of stories, *Anancy's Score* (1973) and *Anancy, Traveller* (1992) are aimed at adults rather than at children and were written to outline his vision of a better, more ethical world.⁴²⁸ Salkey was born in Panama and moved to Jamaica in 1930 but left to live in England in 1952. In comparing Salkey's radical versions with Bennett's we can observe material differences between the latter's creative art forms and Salkey's use of the short story genre for his own politics and creative experiments. In Bennett's stories, although she re-voiced the figure of Anancy, a key focus was to point out general human traits in order to teach the consequences of moral choices in a non-activist manner.

Firstly, and contrary to Bennett, in both his collections Salkey creates a hybrid prose form sliding on the continuum between Creole and Standard English. This reflects the first generation of Caribbean writers mentioned in the introductory chapter who experimented with fusing Creole and Standard English. Bennett, however, continues to remind us of a

⁴²⁵ Bennett et al, *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*, 1950.

⁴²⁶ Morris, *Miss Lou*, 96. Ring Ding will be explored more fully in the final chapter.

⁴²⁷ Ramazani, *Hybrid Muse*, 205. In footnote 20 Ramazani refers to a quote from Jeremy Poynting "From Ancestral to Creole: Humans and Animals in a West Indian Scale of Values" in *Monsters, Tricksters and Sacred Cows: Animal Stories and American Identities*, ed. by A. James Arnold (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1960): 208.

⁴²⁸ Emily Zobel Marshall, "'And Always, Anancy Changes': An Exploration of Andrew Salkey's Anancy Stories" in *The Caribbean Short Story: Critical Perspectives Part 4: Folkstories and Oral Traditions*, ed. by Lucy Evans, Mark A. McWatt and Emma Smith (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2010): 219.

Creole articulation that is not the same as Standard English and where the verbal playfulness of Anancy in her versions creates an ever-present ambiguity.

In his Anancy stories, Salkey implements Anancy as a medium through which to reflect on the limitations of language, the writing process and his chosen narrative structure, in which he combines prose and poetry.⁴²⁹ To do this, Salkey and Anancy become synonymous in one story, where Anancy shuts himself in the titular spider hell hole to write in both prose and poetry.⁴³⁰

Two special ways to put down things and such like Anancy: one way got to call itself prose business, like direct word using; the other way got to do with poem. Mis up the two ways and you getting something nearish a prose poem linking.⁴³¹

Salkey's diversion from the traditional style of Anancy narratives challenges the boundaries of the short story form by disrespecting the rules.⁴³² (Later in the chapter, I discuss a similar transformative influence of Bennett's particular proverbial thinking in the short story genre). Although Bennett draws attention to her creative personae by titling her collection *Anansy and Miss Lou*, Salkey goes further in his experiments, building into his texts self-reflexive considerations of the act of writing itself.

Additionally, a further difference between the two writers is that traditionally Anancy is depicted as a morally ambiguous figure operating outwith the contemporary moment. Salkey, in his versions, is more explicitly subversive in a formal and political way. For him, Anancy is depicted as a contemporary political figure, a freedom fighter engaged in current political struggles. His radical political development in the 1960 and 1970s was 'strongly influenced by the political awakening gripping the Caribbean inspired, in part, by Caribbean intellectuals, Rastafarian thought and the Black Power Movement in the USA'.⁴³³ Where Bennett does not create contemporary issues, Salkey addresses political issues of war and nuclear power, for example, through the shape-shifting Anancy figure in *Anancy, the Atomic Horse* where we see Anancy, 'in the shape of a massive mushroom head Atomic Horse, flying down and inspecting the Man and Woman family compound.

⁴²⁹ Zobel Marshall, "And Always Anancy Changes", 217.

⁴³⁰ Andrew Salkey, *Anancy's Score*, illustrated by Errol Lloyd (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1973), 129.

⁴³¹ Salkey, *Anancy's Score*, 129.

⁴³² Zobel Marshall, "And Always Anancy Changes", 213.

⁴³³ Zobel Marshall, "And Always Anancy Changes", 216.

The Atomic Horse having hungry eye f' the seven pickney'.⁴³⁴ He eats the children one day after another until they are all gone. The Man and Woman rip open the belly of the Horse and bring the children back to life, but the twist in the story comes when the children, who were happy to be dead, challenge their parents that 'you can't see we did give way everyt'in name Hope', and killed their saviours.⁴³⁵ In this story, Salkey warns of the dangers of nuclear weapons, the temptation to be lured into a false sense of security and ultimately the ability of nuclear weapons to destroy. Anancy becomes 'a lens through which [Salkey] can examine the fragile and endangered relationships we have with one another and the planet on which we live'.⁴³⁶ Salkey's contemporary political interests encourage him to activate the figure of Anancy as an ambiguous but urgently needed political agent. However, this is not to say that Bennett is not subversive and transformative in her textualizations and performances of Anancy. There is an ambiguity in her work where, even though she is grounded in the traditional, she still presents the Anancy figure as ambiguous in his morals and behaviour, and the inclusion of the proverbs by implication raises even more questions.

In continuing to explore Bennett's particular style I look now at the formulaic ending she employs in her versions of the *Anancy* stories, and her persistent practice to finish with the disclaimer, 'is Anancy meck it. Jack Mandora, me noh choose none' (Jack Mandora being the keeper of heaven's gate). The formulaic ending distinguishes between Anancy's world and that of the reality of the ordinary world by affirming at the beginning and at the end that what happened in the story was made by Anancy and that it is not the storyteller's responsibility.⁴³⁷ By using this ending, Bennett disinvests the authorial presence from the presentation of the stories. This echoes the deflection of the authorial 'I' in Bennett's poetry where she uses different characters to construct poetic voices and also the obvious deflection in the monologues when she uses the voice of the Aunty Roachy persona. Anancy's actions are often subject to moral disapprobation but Bennett's use of the disclaimer after every story allows the reader to step away from rebuke in the same way.

⁴³⁴ Salkey, *Anancy's Score*, 89.

⁴³⁵ Salkey, *Anancy Score*, 92.

⁴³⁶ Zobel Marshall, "And Always Anancy Changes", 220.

⁴³⁷ Ivy Baxter, *The Arts of an Island* (Metuchen, H.J: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1970), 163; quoted in Laura Tanna, *Jamaican Folk Stories*, 31.

Tanna acknowledges the confusion that arises from this one concluding phrase, and this confusion perhaps reflects, in microcosm, the various interpretations of the trickster figure himself. Another interpretation of the phrase is given by Jekyll:

All Anancy stories end with these or similar words. The Jack is a member of the company to whom the story is told, perhaps its principal member; and the narrator addresses him and says; "I did not pick you out, Jack, or any of your companions to be flogged as Tiger and Annancy were by the monkeys." So when the stories were merely told for diversion, it may have been thought good manners to say: "this story of mine is not aimed at any one."⁴³⁸

This comment shows the direct ways that stories could be linked to their listeners, and perhaps as the stories became less focused on satirising a particular individual so the need for this formulaic ending became less pressing. Ranny Williams's explanation is that the phrase means, 'I have performed like Jack Mandora, I have done a good job and I have nothing more to say,'⁴³⁹ which reflects the interpretations represented by the simpler endings taught to children today: 'Dat is de h'end of de story,' or 'De story end, 'or simply 'Story finish'. Frederic Cassidy, as quoted by Velma Pollard, relates it to a representation of an English nursery rhyme 'Jackanory, I'll tell you a story...I'll tell you another of Jack and his brother, and now my story's done'.⁴⁴⁰ Clearly, there is no consensus regarding how best to interpret the phrase. Nonetheless, it is possible to read it as an illustration of the spirit of proverbial thinking we consider central to Bennett's work: a way to keep stories contemporary by continuously infusing old customs with new meanings.

Morris, in his introduction to *Anancy and Miss Lou*, writes briefly yet insightfully that 'admirers of Louise will relish the ironic subtlety of tone... and characteristic instances of verbal wit'.⁴⁴¹ It is this verbal wit that Bennett expresses in her own performances through embracing the wit of Anancy poetics and communicating the twists and turns verbally to her audiences. Bennett and Ranny Williams were the only professionals who performed Anancy stories on the stage in Jamaican Creole until Williams died in 1980: 'They were both instrumental in legitimising the use of patois and popularising Anansi narratives as an

⁴³⁸ Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Story*, 10.

⁴³⁹ Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Story*, 31.

⁴⁴⁰ Velma Pollard, "Frederic Cassidy: Dictionary Maker", *Jamaica Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2. (1983): 16; quoted in Laura Tanna, *Jamaican Folk Stories*, 31.

⁴⁴¹ Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, Intro x-xii.

authentic art form in contemporary Jamaica'.⁴⁴² Referring to this 'authentic art form', Bennett makes an interesting point about oral performance:

When people grow up in a culture which has an active oral narrative tradition, they become familiar with the material which forms that tradition. The imaginary characters which inhabit the trickster and non-trickster narratives are well known to the audience. Anansi's lisp and personality traits are established in the tradition. The performer can assume that the audience shares a certain amount of background information accumulated by participating in previous narratives.⁴⁴³

Just as Bennett herself grew up familiar with the material that formed Jamaican oral narrative tradition, her imaginary figure of Anancy, with his lisp and personality traits, encourages us to start to think about who Anancy can be and how Bennett claims a place for him in Jamaican life. We know the transatlantic history of the figure and we have seen, as in the comparison with Salkey, how the figure of Anancy can be manipulated and reactivated for different purposes. For Bennett, her Anancy figure, with his lisp and apparent charm presents in such a way that children can engage with and visualise the spider like figure of the stories. Anancy is central to her stories, and her audiences can recognise his actions and behaviour patterns especially when Bennett points out the frailty of human characteristics which Anancy often exploits. In the following sections we will see that there are many lessons to be learned from the multi-faced trickster.

Who is Anancy? The Many Faces of the Trickster

Before exploring how Bennett represents the Anancy figure in her own versions of the stories, it is necessary first to understand who the Anancy figure is since creators and critics alike have found the multifaced trickster figure of Anancy hard to identify. First and foremost, Anancy is a divisive, ambiguous figure, a trickster who is either seen as inspirational or manipulative, a figure of admiration, or a troublesome and seductive creature. On his journey across the Middle Passage Anancy metaphorically takes many different forms: originally he was represented as the liminal, almost deified, figure for the Asante. Thereafter, he embodied a link with a pre-slavery past, symbolising survival and rebellion in Jamaican history. Then he became an earthly figure with heuristic value. He

⁴⁴² Tanna, *Jamaican Folk Stories*, 25.

⁴⁴³ Tanna, *Jamaican Folk Stories*, 31.

exists metaphorically, then, as a symbol; and he exists literally as the hero of the Anancy stories. The various perspectives of the stories chime with the dualities Anancy often embodies, that is to say hero or villain, breaker or supporter of social equilibrium. Tanna summarises the issues surrounding the interpretation of Anancy's status: 'it is this ambiguity that is at once intriguing and confusing; for all that he embodies either a fallen god or a culture hero, he does express something basic to mankind'.⁴⁴⁴ The trickster narratives for some critics, such as Tanna, represents human existence in this natural state between the two extremes of life and death. He was associated with the Sky god in his African ancestry. At other times, it can be an amoral world that he represents — audiences will react according to their own view of the world and their position in society. For a Jamaican:

the trickster is deeply embedded in an unconscious part of their psyche; he is seen as representing survival from and rebellion against slavery and domination; and yet, his own character is suspect.⁴⁴⁵

As noted above, Marshall tracks Anansi's role through history, first as an ambiguous intermediary to the Asante gods (he was known as the soul washer to the sky gods), a liminal character between light and dark, claiming the status as the mediator between Nyame the Sky God and humankind. Then, with the transposition of the stories from West Africa to Jamaica, Anancy becomes a symbol of metamorphosis and cross-cultural fertilisation and an emblem of opposition against the oppressive power structures of the colonial system.⁴⁴⁶ Therefore, the figure of Anancy, as well as being used as a vehicle for political discourse, was intertwined with the Asante religious beliefs and was seen as a semi-godlike figure.

However, from the 16th century onwards, when the Anancy stories were brought over by enslaved Asante people, the trickster changed into a more anthropomorphic figure: 'in Jamaica, Anansi came to earth...and pitted his wits against the Tiger rather than the Asante God Nyame'.⁴⁴⁷ 'The Tiger and Anancy', which Philip Sherlock records, describes how the stories were repossessed and returned by Anancy to the people of Jamaica.⁴⁴⁸ This story

⁴⁴⁴ Tanna, *Jamaican Folk Stories*, 78.

⁴⁴⁵ Zobel Marshall, "'The Anansi Syndrome': A Debate Concerning Anansi's Influence on Jamaican Culture." *World Literatures Written in English* Vol. 39, No. 1 (2001): 2.

⁴⁴⁶ For more on this, see Zobel Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*.

⁴⁴⁷ Emily Zobel Marshall, "From Messenger of the Gods to Muse of the People: The Shifting Contexts of Anansi's Metamorphosis" in *The Society for Caribbean Studies Annual Conference Papers* ed. by Sandra Courtman, Vol.7 (London: Society for Caribbean Studies, 2006): 2.

⁴⁴⁸ Sherlock, *Anansi and the Spider Man*, 3-10.

describes how, in the beginning, the history of Jamaica and the animals (humans) were told as Tiger stories. Nothing bore the name of Anancy. My interpretation of the following story promotes a reading of the tiger as symbolising the white man and the effects of colonialism, where the story illustrates a shift in the perception of power. It is self-evident that the story, which represents the history of Jamaica before Anancy fulfilled the task, was a ‘white man’s history’ and the stories were white men’s stories before Anancy repossessed them.

In Sherlock’s reproduction of the story, Anancy approaches the tiger and challenges Tiger in order to have the stories changed to Anancy stories.⁴⁴⁹ The tiger, thinking that the spider would fail and that the other animals would then ridicule the spider, accepted and challenged Anancy to a task. The task set here on the weakest of animals by the strongest, represents the challenges that Jamaicans faced throughout their history. The task was to bring Mr Snake to him alive and Anancy could have the stories. If he succeeded, the stories could be renamed. Anancy tried three times to trick the snake into a trap but was unsuccessful in the first two attempts. On the third attempt, Anancy finally succeeded by playing to the snake’s pride, suggesting that he could not prove he was the longest animal in the world. To prove he must be longer than a bamboo tree, the spider made the snake stretch himself out along the tree while he tied him to it in the pretence of measuring him. In this way, the snake was bound and carried to the Tiger. And so Anancy won the rights to the stories by manipulating the weakness of the snake: his pride.

The duality and complexity of what Anancy represents is captured by Helen Tiffin’s consideration of Kamau Brathwaite’s creative use of the trickster. She observes that, for him, Anancy points backwards into his heritable past as a means of transitioning to the present day: ‘Brathwaite, through Anancy is both analysing the nature of the Caribbean dilemma and suggesting, through the ancestral African past, a way forward’.⁴⁵⁰ This movement between past and present, and the nature of the Caribbean dilemma is creatively showcased in Brathwaite’s poem, ‘Ananse’.⁴⁵¹ The poem takes the form of two ‘halves’ as the narrative moves through different perspectives and interestingly, in every stanza,

⁴⁴⁹ Sherlock, *Anansi and the Spider Man*, 3-10.

⁴⁵⁰ Tiffin, “The Metaphor of Anancy”, 36.

⁴⁵¹ Brathwaite, “Ananse”, *Islands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). For this discussion I adopt Brathwaite’s own titular spelling – a rebellion in itself? I listened to it and read the text given on the following link: <https://genius.com/Kamau-brathwaite-jah-ananse-annotated> or written in full in Tiffin, “The Metaphor of Anancy”, 32-34.

Ananse changes his form and presents as something different. In the first part of the poem, Ananse is portrayed as sitting in the liminal space, the metaphorical borderland, remembering a past culture, perceived as if ‘through glass/through quartz/quarries of stony water’.⁴⁵² From the poet’s viewpoint, through Ananse, these traditions are in hibernation, to be preserved and resurrected in the present, as a means of healing. Ananse memorises forgotten stories, myths inherent to the Caribbean identity, forgotten songs and carnivals, the sounds of which can be heard in the rhythm and onomatopoeic writing of these lines:

spins drum-/
beats, silver skin/
webs of sound/
through the villages:

threading/
threading/
the moon/
moonlight stories.⁴⁵³

In the second half of the poem, Ananse moves to the ceiling, out of reach of a broom. After remembering the past, the trickster figure, for Brathwaite, now turns to recreating this own destructive past (‘dust, desert’s rainfall of soot’), and re-centres it in the present, where colonialism cannot influence his thinking. Here he alludes to the idea of fallen gods to imagine a new era for ‘Ananse’:

Now the poor hang him on the ceiling
Their brooms cannot reach his hushed corner
And he sits with the dust, desert’s rainfall of soot

⁴⁵² Here Tiffin asks, as Brathwaite echoes ‘as if through a glass darkly’ – 1 Corinthians 13:12 – whether we are to allude to the naivety of mortals on earth?

⁴⁵³ Brathwaite, “Ananse”, see Tiffin, “The Metaphor of Anancy”, 33.

Plotting a new fall from heaven.

Black iron eye'd eater, the many eye'd maker

Creator.⁴⁵⁴

His desire is to create a new reality from the shadows of the past, the histories that had been captured in Ananse's mind, and bring that culture to life again. Arguably, Ananse becomes a god-like figure called 'Creator', recentring African identity but also implying a new Caribbean setting, and the powers of creation:

Revealing their shadows of meaning

As the god stares down,

Black beating heart of him breathing

Breathing.⁴⁵⁵

The Trickster is later quoted in the poem as a 'word breaker', 'consuming our wood/And the words of our houses', challenging colonial supremacy through language. The use of Ananse as a narrator/ creator /breaker of rules signifies a reversal of power, rejecting the domination of the colonial past and taking back control through language and heritage. As captured in the words of the poem, for Brathwaite, the past heals the present and the future.

Tiffin also considers the importance of Wilson Harris in understanding Anancy. She observes that Harris 'recreates Anancy as an archetype of New World experience — he believes in the regenerative powers of language and in the "arts of the imagination" in reversing historical losses'.⁴⁵⁶ Validating Tiffin's observation, Harris writes 'I believe a philosophy of history may well lie buried in the arts of the imagination'.⁴⁵⁷ Harris differentiates between two kinds of myths: one that is direct; and one that has undergone a metamorphosis and is reflective of the native West Indian imagination. One of the myths

⁴⁵⁴ Brathwaite, "Ananse", see Tiffin, "The Metaphor of Anancy", 34.

⁴⁵⁵ Brathwaite, "Ananse",

⁴⁵⁶ Tiffin, "The Metaphor of Anancy", 36.

⁴⁵⁷ Wilson Harris, "History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas" *Caribbean Quarterly* Vol. 54, No. 1/2 (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 2008): 10.

that he discusses is the limbo dance, which was born on the ships of the Middle Passage and where there was so little space that enslaved people contorted themselves into human spiders. He links this back to the notion of the limbo imagination of the folk which for him ‘involved a crucial inner re-creative response to the violations of slavery and indenture and conquest’ and the suspicion around folk obscurity as well as originality.⁴⁵⁸ Harris’s interpretation of limbo clearly relates to the Anancy or spider fables and can be read as another borderline that the spider sits on, that of the threshold of a new world. He argues that the limbo dislocates from the ‘chain of miles across the Atlantic’.⁴⁵⁹ I suggest that, in terms of a temporal understanding, it also serves a dislocating purpose, whereby the past is dislocated from the present and Anancy’s face necessarily changes through time. In discussing myths such as the limbo, Harris also encounters the earlier noted issues of describing the Anancy stories as myths, fables or stories and perhaps the idea of liminality here suggests that the Anancy stories sit across the thresholds between all of these descriptions, a position that makes them particularly suitable for responding to the malleability of Bennett’s proverbial thinking.

For Harris, the power of the artist’s imagination transcends historical realism and, through creativity, provides a way forward for which Anancy becomes a symbolic embodiment. The two approaches taken by Brathwaite and Harris illustrate how Anancy symbolises either: for Brathwaite, a return to the historic psyche of the Caribbean which could heal the past from the fragmented present; or Harris’ position that the fragmented present is now a liberation from that past and one that the artist can mould through the trickster figure.

He stands therefore at the heart of the lie of community and the truth of community, and it is here, I believe, in this trickster gateway, this gamble of the soul, that there emerges the hope for a profoundly compassionate society committed to freedom within a creative scale.⁴⁶⁰

In the poem, Brathwaite focuses on the past, the present, injustice, memory, liminality and darkness. For him, Anancy points backwards into his heritable past as a means of transitioning to the present day — for him, it is the past which heals the present and the future. Anancy is seen to embody the possibility of liberation from the past of which he was a product.

⁴⁵⁸ Harris, “History, Fable and Myth”, 15.

⁴⁵⁹ Harris, “History Fable and Myth”, 13.

⁴⁶⁰ Tiffin, “The Metaphor of Anancy”, 47.

As we have seen, Brathwaite centres Anancy at the heart of the poem above and by taking forward Brathwaite's poem as a framework to discuss Bennett's relationship with the trickster in her stories, there are important poetic comparisons to be made. Although Salkey, Brathwaite, Harris and Bennett have produced a stylistically diverse set of Anancy texts, what unites them is the idea of Anancy as an important creator.

Bennett recentres Anancy in specific ways — through using the figure as a conduit to comment on human characteristics, as a link to the past and her own childhood, and arguably, as an avatar — but his powers to make or create (mischief as much as new ways of living) are always integral to her stories. On the idea of avatar, Jahan Ramazani argues that Anancy is so central to Bennett's creative identity we could view the trickster god as her 'mythical avatar'.⁴⁶¹ I find this concept of Anancy as Bennett's avatar compelling as I take the meaning of 'avatar' not specifically to mean that Bennett is the personification of Anancy per se, but rather that Bennett, as the author/ creator of the stories, takes on what Anancy represents, metaphorically, creatively and linguistically. And to take the image of the avatar further, an author then becomes, like the spider, a 'spinner of stories'. Pascale De Souza argues that it is:

in the language itself, as it is practiced by the African diaspora, that one must look for the origins of signifying; slaves used their deftness at signifying to 'spin' a new language out of systematic division, by decomposing and deporting the language of the other through double entendre, puns, verbal tricks and plurality of meaning.⁴⁶²

This is how Anancy, the trickster, uses language: language becomes the signifying tool by which Anancy dominates weaker creatures. Being a liminal creature who lives in the margins, he works the ambiguities of language to his advantage. The metaphor of the spider's web of trickery and 'the manifestation of creolisation in the new world', as De Souza writes, links the language that Bennett uses for her versions of the stories with the same questions of subversion. The metaphor also points to the desire for survival not only of the language but, over and above this, the survival of the tale itself. The folktale becomes an artistic symbol for Bennett of the need for the history of the Jamaican people to survive, and the spider becomes the metaphorical symbol as the spinner of the tale as

⁴⁶¹ Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse*, 107.

⁴⁶² Pascale De Souza, "Creolising Anancy: Signifyin(g) Processes in New World Spider Stories" in *A Pepper Pot of Cultures: Aspects of Creolization in the Caribbean*, ed. by Gordon Collier and Ulrich Fleishmann. *Matatu* Nos. 27 / 28 (2003): 343.

well as the inhabitant and director of the tale. In this way the stories assume as much importance as the titular figure. So, the ‘deshaping’ and ‘reshaping’ is crucial to the progressive interpretation(s) of the stories in the retelling of each version.

Within this idea of reshaping, if we regard Bennett’s position as half way between the two halves of the Brathwaite poem cited above, we continue to see how she challenges and prompts a reversal of power by taking back control through Creole. In her hands, the language that Anancy uses is seen as symbolic for this element of disruption and survival. She may indeed be called an Anancy-like figure and by recentering the trickster in her stories she is essentially re-centring herself as the artist.

Reclaiming and Centring Anancy: The Examples of ‘Toad and Donkey’, ‘Anancy and the Plantains’, and ‘Anancy and Tigar’

The distinctive relationship between Bennett and Anancy is seen when she recentres Anancy as the director of the action within the stories where the trickster equally is open to critical comment in terms of his moral compass and the manipulation of the other characters.

To explore this notion of recentering Anancy, a footnote in Morris’s introduction to Bennett’s edition of Anancy stories suggests that ‘it might be of interest to compare the following stories with Louise Bennett’s versions: ‘Toad and Donkey’ *Jamaican song and Story* (Jekyll), pp 39 – 42; ‘Tiger as riding horse,’ *Jamaica Anansi Stories*, (Beckwith), pp. 5-6; ‘Anansi and the Plantains’, *Anansi the Spider Man* by Philip Sherlock (Macmillan, London, 1959), pp.48-52 (citations as seen).⁴⁶³ I take Morris’s suggestion as a framework with which to compare the versions of ‘Toad and Donkey’ from Jekyll and Bennett, and it is clear that Bennett recentres Anancy in the story whereas Jekyll omits him completely from his version. In Jekyll’s version it is the toad who manipulates the donkey with his own cunning in order to win the race, with the result that ‘through toad’s smartness donkey can never be racer again’.⁴⁶⁴ Both versions describe a race between a toad and the donkey

⁴⁶³ Mervyn Morris in Louise Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, Intro, viii, footnote 6.

⁴⁶⁴ Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Story*, 42.

where the donkey is duped by the toad's trickery — the toad places his children at various points along the race to suggest that he is racing faster than the donkey.

However, the most obvious difference between the Jekyll version of this story of toad and donkey and the Bennett version is Bennett's replacement of the King figure for that of Anancy.⁴⁶⁵ Bennett places Anancy at the centre of her version — as we already know, she found it amusing that Anancy had somehow found his way into her versions of several of the stories where Jekyll had recorded his stories without mention of him.⁴⁶⁶ In Bennett's version, it is Anancy who thinks up the plan for the toad to place a child at each milestone to trick the donkey into thinking that he is being outrun. Bennett re-appropriates the story and includes Anancy as the trickster and director; or one can argue, reflecting my previous discussion, that she herself, as an artist, becomes Anancy and retells the story in her own style. For her, it is Anancy who manipulates the action: 'Cho, Bredda Toad, man - me no want yuh fi run fass, me only want fi prove dat Donkey is not no race horse, him is a jackass'.⁴⁶⁷ The word 'prove' is instructive as it highlights Anancy's intention to show up Donkey's pretensions to the wider public. Bennett's conclusion turns the focus onto the donkey who has been tricked but is himself ignorant of the trickery involved: 'Donkey was so shame dat him heng him head an lap him aise dem an meck up him mine beber fi tun racehorse again.'⁴⁶⁸

In the discussion above we have seen one difference in placing Anancy as the central figure in the stories. Another question that Morris's footnote raises concerns the differences that arise due to Louise Bennett's language choice in presenting her Anancy stories. Crucially, Bennett, as ever, exclusively uses Creole in her versions. On the other hand, Jekyll varies on the continuum, and Sherlock writes in Standard English. Morris's opinion is that 'for Jamaicans, Anancy stories feel most authentic in our dialect. Some of the Standard English re-tellings, clearly aimed at a non-Jamaican audience, do work in their own terms, but the flavour is very different.'⁴⁶⁹ A comparison between Sherlock's and Bennett's versions of 'Anancy and the Plantains', illustrates the difference that Morris talks about. A sample from Sherlock's version is written as follows:

⁴⁶⁵ Jekyll, "Toad and Donkey" in *Jamaican Song and Story*, 39-42. Compared with Louise Bennett, "Anancy an Toad an Donkey" in *Anancy and Miss Lou*, 78-80.

⁴⁶⁶ Louise Bennett, "Me and Anancy", Intro x.

⁴⁶⁷ Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, 78.

⁴⁶⁸ Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, 80.

⁴⁶⁹ Morris in Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, Intro ix.

His wife said to him, ‘don’t you want some of the plantains?’

‘No,’ said Anancy with a deep sigh. ‘There are only enough for four of us, I’m hungry too, because I haven’t had anything to eat; but there are just enough for you.’

The little child asked, ‘Aren’t you hungry, Papa?’

‘Yes, my child, I am hungry, but you are too little, you cannot find food for yourselves. It’s better for me to remain hungry as long as your stomachs are filled.’⁴⁷⁰

Bennett’s version of the same part of the story is as follows:

‘So him wife seh to him, ‘Wat wrong wid yuh, Bredda Nancy?’

Hear Anancy, ‘Whai, hungry belly dah kill me, me wife, Whai!’

So de wife seh, ‘Den yuh no want none a de plantain?’

Anancy groan and she, ‘Mmmm. No me wife – yuh an de pickney dem eat. Me a big man, me haffi bear de hungry belly, Whai!’

Same time one a de pickney start bawl and seh, ‘No, Papa, tek piece a fi-me plantain. Me can’t bear fi see yuh a suffer hungry belly.’

Anancy meck a loud groan and seh, ‘Awright den, since oonoo force me fi eat, me wi haffi eat’.⁴⁷¹

The outcome was that the family broke each of their plantains in half and gave them to Anancy so ‘Anancy get de mose dan everybody, as usual’.

The oral nature of Creole in Bennett’s representations enlivens this passage and brings an element of immediacy to the story as the reader is drawn into the conversation between Anancy, the wife and children. The use of Creole means Bennett’s version of the story is dramatically expressed and an element of ambiguity is realized though the nuanced meanings and sounds she employs. Bennett marks the propensity of Anancy to be manipulative and to use emotive speech to seduce others for his own benefit. The wailing of Whai! (translatable in Standard English as ‘What!’) is a marker of orality and draws the

⁴⁷⁰ Sherlock, *Anansi and the Spider Man*, 51.

⁴⁷¹ Louise Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, 77.

reader into Anancy's web of subtle verbal manipulation. The reader can hear and evaluate the whining or groaning or outraged tone of the 'Whai!' for themselves. Of course, Bennett was an expert performer of the Anancy stories, and she apologises in print for what is lacking in this form, 'Wat a pity me cyan sing de son fi oonoo'.⁴⁷² The difference between the creative choices of Bennett and the reporting voice of Sherlock highlights the artistry with which Bennett crafts her storytelling. She puts her own interpretation of Anancy's character into the narrative.

A comparison between Beckwith's 'Tiger as Riding-Horse' and Bennett's 'Anancy an' Tigar' allows us to see how Beckwith also reports a story without embellishment or creative input.⁴⁷³ Her version is much shorter than Bennett's, although one reason for this is given in the footnote to the text where she explains that this 'record was poor and could only be taken in part'.⁴⁷⁴ As noted previously, Beckwith approached the act of collecting in a scientific manner and here we see her recording only what was available from informants. What we do see in her version is a minimalist narrative. To introduce the action, she writes:

Tiger was walking to a yard an' see two young misses, an' he was courting one of de young misses. An' as Anansi hear, Anansi go up to yard where de young misses is: and dey ax him said, "Mr. Anansi, you see Mr Tiger?" An' said, "O yes! I see Mr Tiger, but I tell you. missus, Tiger is me fader ol' ridin' horse."⁴⁷⁵

Bennett's introduction is more embellished. She writes:

Once upon a time, Bredda Anancy an Bredda Tigar was acourtin de same gal. Anancy couldn sure if she love him more dan Tigar or if she love Tigar more dan him, an as him did want her fi himself him tudy a way fi mash up Tigar life. Soh one night wen Anancy goh look fi de gal him she to her, "Mish Quashiba," – him tongue tie – "ah hear dat yuh is keepin company with a fella of a very low

⁴⁷² Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, x.

⁴⁷³ Beckwith, *Jamaica Anansi Stories*, 11; Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, 23.

⁴⁷⁴ Beckwith, *Jamaica Anansi Stories*, 529.

⁴⁷⁵ Beckwith, *Jamaica Anansi Stories*, 11.

category. A fella dat was me fada ole ridin horsh, an not fit fi company for a lady like yuh”.⁴⁷⁶

In these introductions from both versions, we see how Bennett, like Beckwith, gives a voice to Anancy at the start, and yet she allows us to see the intent behind his plans more fully. The phrase, ‘tudy a way fi mash up Tigar life’ (work out a way to mess up/destroy Tigar’s life) shows his intentions towards Tigar, and it comes to life in the Creole where we are also reminded of the oral origins of the stories. We see how he starts to manipulate the girl’s emotions for his own end as he plants doubt in her mind with the suggestion that Tigar is ‘not fit fi company for a lady like yuh’. The fact that Anancy’s morals are questionable is set out at the beginning of Bennett’s colourful text, whereas Beckwith’s version is narrated from the report of an informant or informants, with little explanation of his cunning and manipulative intent. This excerpt illustrates that Beckwith, like Jekyll, did not add to the creativity of the narrative. The following proverb is placed at the end of Bennett’s text: ‘too much cousin bruk shop’; too many relatives impoverish a man.⁴⁷⁷ In the *Proverb Manuscript* this is translated as ‘two people cannot control one job’ (*Confusion*, 5). The proverb can be read into the story by implication and carries a critical comment on how someone can take advantage of another in a weaker, or more easily manipulated position; here Anancy takes advantage of Tigar’s need to see the girl to allay the lie Anancy told about him. Tigar had a blind spot which Anancy manipulated for his own gain. The translation given in the *Proverb Manuscript* under the heading of *Confusion* allows us to understand why Bennett placed that particular proverb under this story. The confusion is intimated at the start where both Anancy and Tigar are courting the same girl — both going for the same prize.⁴⁷⁸ Anancy wins by questionable actions and morals, and we see that in effect, the proverb offers no resolution but adds to the complexity of the moral layers in the story.

The various versions of stories above, therefore, provide a comparative platform from which to discuss Bennett’s language choice and semantic differences. They also, crucially, form the basis for a discussion as to whether the elements of morality and didacticism we

⁴⁷⁶ Louise Bennett, Dorothy Clark, Una Wilson and Others. *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*, introduction by P.M. Sherlock (Kingston: Pioneer Press., 1950), 29; Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, 23.

⁴⁷⁷ Bennett et al, *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*, 30.

⁴⁷⁸ Simply put the proverb can be read, in this situation, as meaning that two men cannot court the same woman.

can identify are prescriptive, or if, by being indirect, they emphasise a social function where the stories contextualise a particular social situation. Bennett herself adds a note of caution where she observes that ‘we must try not literally to be Anansi, but do what Anansi did, that is use our knowledge to solve problems, to restore the spirituality that we have lost’.⁴⁷⁹ It is not clear what spirituality means in this quotation, but I suggest that it could be connected to the idea of foundational stories and figures within Jamaican culture and the power of Anancy-style thinking to help people make sense of life. In this way the spirituality that is meant here is about the necessity for belief systems that are connected to Jamaican cultural expression. I recall here the notion written in Brathwaite’s poem of ‘threading, threading’ where we see Bennett’s creativity in continuing to weave the generational inheritance of folklore through her own craft and using knowledge via stories to solve problems.

Proverbial Thinking in Bennett’s Anancy Stories

With a broader understanding of the complexity of the trickster figure discussed above and Bennett’s fluid relationship with Anancy, I now shift the focus to explore more fully the impact of the proverbs on the stories. As outlined at the start of the chapter, the proverbs take a less obvious place in the structure of Bennett’s versions of the Anancy stories. And yet, I argue that proverbial thinking constantly underpins Bennett’s works and here, once again, she uses proverbs as transitional and complementary elements in reclaiming the linguistic and folk heritage of Jamaica.

As I have already indicated, the 1950 edition of *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse* is a key text to consider in relation to Bennett’s proverbial thinking.⁴⁸⁰ It is only in this 1950 edition that proverbs are written at the bottom of certain of Bennett’s Anancy stories; this attracts a reading of the preceding story by presuming the use of the proverb by implication.

Twenty-six proverbs are printed below twelve selected stories by Bennett in this edition. At the end of all but two of Bennett’s Anancy stories, a line is printed to mark the end of

⁴⁷⁹ Bennett quoted in Zobel Marshall, ‘From Messenger of the Gods to Muse of the People: The Shifting Contexts of Anansi’s Metamorphosis’ *Jamaica Journal*, Vol. 29 (2008): 63.

⁴⁸⁰ Louise Bennett, Dorothy Clark, Una Wilson and Others. *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*, introduction by P.M. Sherlock (Kingston: Pioneer Press, 1950).

the story and, below this, proverbs are printed as stand-alone sentences. The number of proverbs listed under each story varies from five under ‘Jackass an’ poun’ to a single proverb listed under three of the stories, including the proverb discussed under ‘Anancy an’ Tigar’. It is assumed that space on the page was at a premium in 1950, and we see how Bennett wanted to maximise the space after each story with related proverbs. Taking this into consideration we see that proverbial thinking was always present, and her need to find space to record the proverbs was important to her in her own section of this collection. Bearing in mind that Bennett was a contributor to this collection, it is worth pausing over these textual interventions to consider the place the proverbs occupy and the powers they have to shift our readings of the Anancy stories.

Sherlock points out that:

the proverbs, like the story, reflect social attitudes and satirise social failings. [...] the abstract gives way to the concrete and one vivid picture conveys the moral or teaches the lesson. The vivid dramatic quality of the proverb, its colour and sparkle make it memorable.⁴⁸¹

The sense here is that the proverb provides a specific snapshot (‘one vivid picture’) to complement the story’s more open reflections of ‘social attitudes and ... failings’. Abstract in this case might relate to conceptual ideas, such as goodness and friendship, which Bennett cares about and depicts in her moral and thematic headings in the *Proverb Manuscript*. However, the notion of abstract and concrete is not clear in this quotation — we need to question if what is meant is that the proverb is concrete, in that it gives that one vivid picture. If this is so, the story could become the abstract, referring to the fluid and often precariously unreliable nature of storytelling; and in that case, the proverbs would provide memorability and stability from within the narrative. So, the ambiguity of this relationship between abstract and concrete reminds us that proverbs operate in different directions, and for Bennett, often challenge more linear readings of the stories.

There are no specific proverbs listed or included in the 1960 edition of *Laugh with Louise* or in the 1979 edition of *Anancy and Miss Lou*. This omission could suggest that Bennett is acknowledging the changing emphasis of proverbial usage (from everyday usage to collector status) or that she is allowing the reader more autonomy to approach the stories,

⁴⁸¹ Sherlock in Bennett, *Jamaica Dialect Verses*, 13.

perhaps drawing on their own knowledge of proverbs. This latter point links to my wider argument that proverbs remain important to Bennett's work even when not explicitly present in the text. The inclusion of proverbs in *Anancy Tales and Dialect Verse* is evidence that proverbial thought can be read as underpinning her versions of the Anancy stories even when proverbs have no explicit textual presence. But even without that evidence, Bennett's writing is so expressive of folk culture that, when there is no explicit use of proverbs, we can still read traces of the philosophical power of 'we Jamaican proverbs dem'.⁴⁸²

Part of that philosophical power in Anancy stories and proverbs lies in their status as didactic forms with definite lessons to teach us. However, in approaching Bennett's work through a proverbial lens I argue that what we can learn, believe, or know should also be understood as related to multiple readings and the interpretative work that listeners and readers must do to make meaning for themselves. Bennett's regeneration of traditional proverbs and stories involves us understanding them as repositories of Jamaican philosophy, and as part of a folk culture that has had, itself, to accommodate change.

⁴⁸² Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 7.

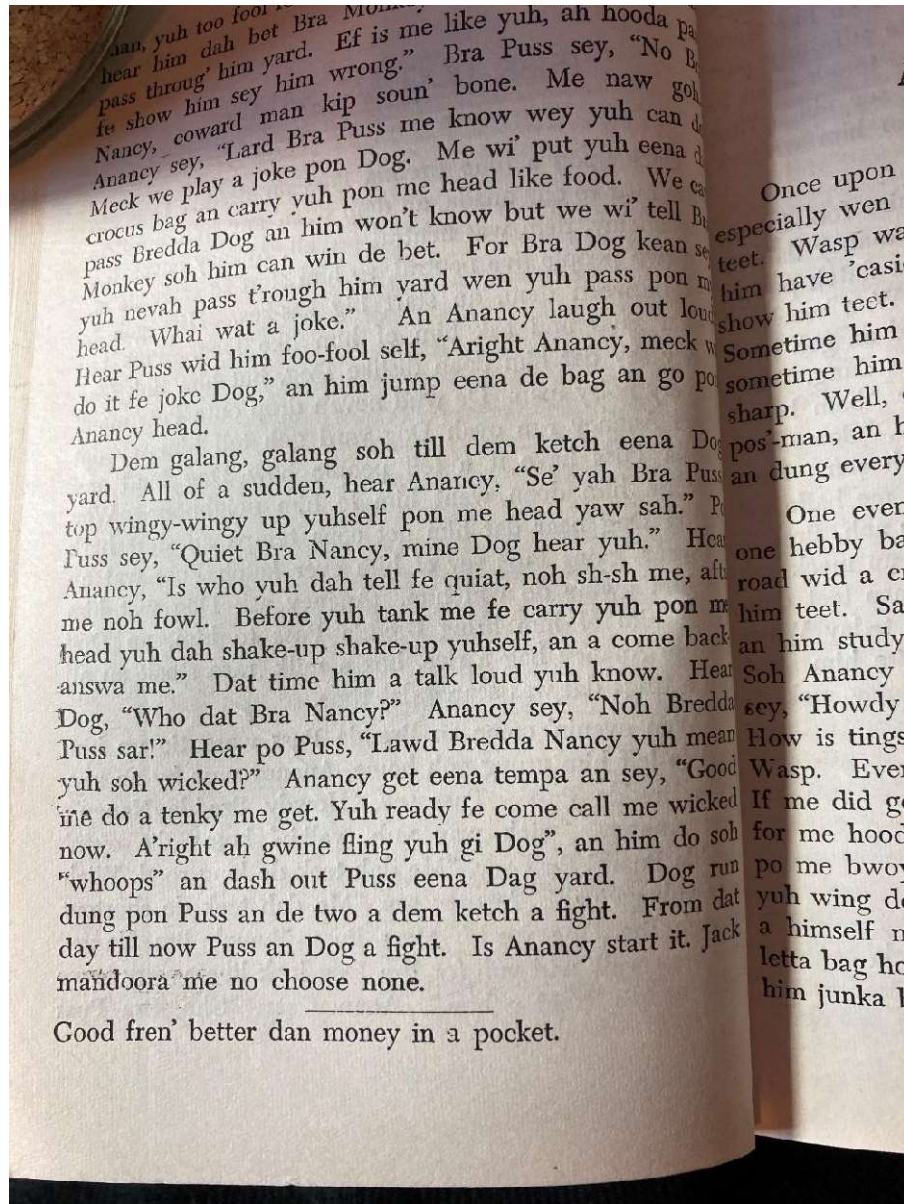


Figure 21

In ‘Puss, Dog an’ Nancy’ there are two proverbs ‘included’ in the story: one proverb is incorporated into the main body of the text (‘coward man kip soun bone’; he who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day); and another one is listed beneath in the footnote-like position as seen above (‘Good fren’ better dan money in a pocket’; Humanity serves one better than material things’).⁴⁸³ The second proverb’s placement after the story’s end allows me to assume that Bennett wished the proverbial message to be aligned with the story in order to deepen understanding of its moral message. However, the

⁴⁸³ Bennett et al. *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*, 34.

proverb operates ambiguously, both inside and outside the story. The implication from the word ‘fren’ in ‘good fren better than money in pocket’ triggers us to think about what a friend means, and to keep considering the implications of friendship when framed in the context of the story. The proverb works with an image which is not only visual but demands a more considered reaction. It includes a twofold image of money in a pocket and the image of a good friend, so that the audience must imagine the picture and the significance of this picture. A pocketful of money can encourage us to think about wealth and security, power, freedom and choice. This would need to be contrasted with what friendship offers. So, the proverb becomes about testing the idea of value — what is of most importance, riches or friendship? The proverb stresses the importance of friendship and the abstract richness of that relationship. This leads us into thinking about the practice of interpretive reading, transforming abstract wisdoms into complex representations. These complex proverbial representations can be analysed further by using the *Proverb Manuscript* as a source for an intertextual interpretative approach to the Anancy stories, just as I suggested for Bennett’s poetry and monologues. A reading that uses Bennett’s *Proverb Manuscript* in conjunction with Bennett’s Anancy stories now attracts a fluid interpretation and supports an expanded method of interpreting both the stories and the proverbs.

Proverbs, with their malleability, form a seam running through the stories so that they can be both integral to Bennett’s storytelling practice but also viewed as framing the stories externally.

In this story, Anancy tricks Puss into going into the dog’s yard where he is too scared to enter: ‘Bra Puss seh, ‘No Bra Nancy, coward man kip soun’ bone’⁴⁸⁴ In the *Proverbs Manuscript* this proverb appears as:

‘coward man kip soun bone’; he who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day (*Character*, 22).⁴⁸⁵

Bennett’s translation, like Bra Puss, emphasises what is gained by the action of running away or keeping away, rather than focusing on the nature of ‘cowardness’. This direct use of a proverb within the text strengthens the narrative and adds a deeper understanding of

⁴⁸⁴ Bennett et al. *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*, 34.

⁴⁸⁵ Bennett et al, *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*, 34. This is placed under *Character* in the *Proverb Manuscript*; cross refer with SP 122/ and ARS 133.

Puss's character — he would rather live than be brave and have his bones broken. However, Bra Puss was then tricked by Anancy into thinking he could be brave and play a joke on Dog by hiding in a bag on Anancy's head while Anancy walks through the yard —

Anancy seh, 'Lard Bra Puss me know wey yuh can do. Meck we play a joke pon Dog' — An Anancy laugh out loud. Hear Puss wid him foo-fool self, 'Alright Anancy, meck wi do it fe joke Dog,' and him jump eena de bag an go pon Anancy head.⁴⁸⁶

Here we see the trickster figure manipulating the relationship between the dog and the cat, who had until then been neutral towards each other. Anancy plays upon the trust between Bra Puss and himself and persuades Bra Puss to play the joke on Dog. Anancy desires power over a weaker character and in so doing, resorts to embroiling the cat in his own meddling. Our attention on Anancy's perspective is pronounced, and when we read the line 'Hear Puss wid him foo-fool self', it can read as both the narrator's voice or the free direct speech of Anancy. Anancy makes the cat believe he is his friend and, as we have seen, there is a further interpretation to consider by looking at the proverb written on the page below the story: 'Good fren' better dan money in a pocket' (Bennett's translation in the *Proverb Manuscript* is 'Humanity serves one better than material things') and it is categorised under the heading *Friendship*.⁴⁸⁷ These multiple connected proverbs encourage us to consider the values within a friendship and Bennett's collecting and storytelling all comment on the moral of appreciating the value of a good friend. However, Anancy proves, yet again, that, as an apparent friend, he is not to be trusted and the conclusion of the story shows this. Anancy throws Bra Puss out in the dog's yard and 'Dog run dung pon Puss and de two a dem ketch a fight. From dat day till now Puss an Dog a fight. Is Anancy start it, Jack Mandora me no choose none'.⁴⁸⁸

This story may not initially present as a story about friendship — it is, on the face of it, a story about living beside one another despite our differences. However, returning to consider Hugh Hodges's observation that proverbs introduce something new and surprising, a 'turn' which is something shared with the Anancy stories, we can now re-evaluate the impact of the proverbs. By reimagining the story through the 'implied'

⁴⁸⁶ Bennett et al, *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*, 34. The description of 'foo-fool', meaning simple minded or slow, illustrates how Anancy has taken advantage of Puss who does not understand the consequences should the trick go wrong.

⁴⁸⁷ This is placed under *Friendship* in the *Proverb Manuscript*.

⁴⁸⁸ Bennett et al, *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse*, 34.

proverbial meaning activated by the proverb at the bottom of the story, we can now see how Bennett makes us reconsider the behaviour of Anancy in tricking Puss into trusting him. The proverb in the text suggests that Puss should not actually be brave in order to protect himself (‘coward man kip soun bone’; he who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day’) but unfortunately he is not clever enough to realise that he is being manipulated by someone posing as a friend. Although the narrative ends by encouraging us to think of this as a story about cat and dog becoming enemies, the implied proverb reminds us that Anancy was no friend to Bra Puss. So, rather than just thinking about the inherent wisdoms within a proverb about ‘friendships’, Bennett teams the proverb with a story to add both an interpretation and a twist to the tale.

The addition of the proverb at the end of the story might itself be called a ‘trickster’ move, offering an unexpected turn in the story. In ‘Puss, Dog an’ Nancy’, Bennett’s creativity bridges the past and present, not only through recreating the Anancy stories but by the way she reclaims them through proverbial thinking. If we consider the collective nature of cultural wisdoms and teachings, we can acknowledge the heritable values which Bennett claims through the rediscovered proverbial voice inserted into her versions of the Anancy stories. This can then be said to echo Brathwaite and Harris’s arguments about healing the past and liberating the future through creativity and artistic sensibility. As we have seen, Brathwaite looks to the past to heal the present and the future; Harris promotes the artist’s creativity for which Anancy becomes symbolic. In the story of ‘Puss, Dog an’ Nancy’, expressions of ‘wisdoms’ are layered, with Puss knowing how to keep his bones safe even as he is still at risk. The notion that the proverb offers a turn, a surprise, encourages us to keep proverbial thinking at the forefront, where Bennett embraces Anancy as a symbol for the past and the present and as a medium to offer new perspectives. We know that the proverbs are mutable and complex and I propose that a plurality of proverbial messages can be activated in a story. My readings illustrate the multiple meanings that Bennett writes into her stories which emphasise the links between proverbs and Anancy stories. The proverbs listed at the end of the stories raise the question of the morality embodied in the proverbs themselves which, in turn, questions the perceived morality in the Anancy stories. There is more often than not a contradictory element to proverbs – whereby, for instance, a proverb that advocates for a potentially worthy collective folk ethos, such as the proverb ‘John crow fly too high’, might equally be construed as internalising and excusing vanity, idleness or greed. These are examples of character traits that Bennett points up in

the Anancy stories and by the often multiple categories under which she places each proverb in the *Proverb Manuscript*.

Therefore, even if a proverb is absent from the text, a proverbial message can be inferred from a story in order to provide a tool for an exegesis of moral didacticism. If we return to *Anancy an Toad and Donkey* and the quotation from above — ‘Cho, Bredda Toad, man - me no want yuh fi run fass, me only want fi prove dat Donkey is not no race horse, him is a jackass’ — we can see how the name ‘jackass’ can ignite proverbial thinking. By proving that donkey is a jackass this comes close to framing the donkey in the story as the archetypal ‘jackass’ that we see in multiple proverbs.⁴⁸⁹ This is strengthened by referring to the moral and thematic headings in Bennett’s *Proverb Manuscript*. I propose also that theoretically one, if not several, proverbs could be implied in the stories and, as the proverbs are fluid, there are many possibilities. When reading Bennett’s ‘Anancy an Toad an’ Donkey’ the following proverbs offer two such examples of possible proverbs that might be implied: ‘Jackass tink him cub a race horse’; and ‘no put yourself in a barrel whe match box can hol’ you’. The first proverb refers to those who overrate what belongs to them. In the *Proverb Manuscript*, it is placed by Bennett under the heading of ‘boastfulness’ and ‘foolhardiness’ and she translates it as ‘we think well of our own’.⁴⁹⁰ This applies to the big headedness of the donkey thinking that he would always win against the toad, and his foolhardiness in not being prepared to think differently. Another cautionary proverb which could potentially be read into the story above is ‘no put yourself in a barrel whe match box can hol’ you’. This is translated by Bennett as ‘do not pretend to be more important than you are’.⁴⁹¹ It is placed under Bennett’s heading of *Caution and Precaution* in the *Proverb Manuscript*. The inference from this proverb is of a metaphorical lesson of caution, a warning against being boastful and too proud. These two proverbs fit with this story because of the specific character of the donkey, and because of the warning carried in the second proverb of the consequences of arrogance. Of course, there are multiple other proverbs that could be thought of when reading each of Bennett’s Anancy stories. The point, however, is that by approaching the stories through proverbial

⁴⁸⁹ Bennett, “Anancy an Toad an Donkey” in *Anancy and Miss Lou*, 78-80.

⁴⁹⁰ Bennett, “Anancy an Toad an Donkey”, 78 In the story Bennett writes that Anancy ‘want fi prove dat Donkey is not no race horse, him is a jackass’ which links in to the proverb that I read into the story by implication.

⁴⁹¹ The translation of the proverbs listed above are all taken from Bennett’s own translations in the collection.

thinking, the scope for identifying the influence or ‘implied presence’ of multiple proverbs is expanded.

Bennett’s personal *Proverb Manuscript* provides a tool by which to apply an understanding of an Anancy story over and above a singular moralistic reading. As we have observed, she links proverbs with specific human character traits through the moral and thematic headings. In the end, the tale ‘Anancy an Toad an Donkey’ morally teaches us that clever thinking can win over strength and size. As I illustrated with Bennett’s poetry and monologues, the insertion of a further proverbial message into her Anancy story adds an element of didacticism and affords a unique method of interpretation in conjunction with the moral and thematic headings in the *Proverb Manuscript*. When Bennett chooses to place a proverb under a particular heading, she is directing the reader to acknowledge not only the familiar wisdom in the proverb itself but also to embrace the wider interpretive and collective wisdom implied by the category heading. Some of the proverbs straddle several categories and this adds to the complexity, often even slipperiness, of an interpretative reading of both the proverb and the text it is instructing. This illustrates the malleability within the different interpretations a proverb can produce depending on the heading or headings under which Bennett chooses to categorise them. Whilst didacticism is important to Bennett, my readings show that singular messages are less important than malleable proverbial thinking.

In this way, we can take a plural perspective by recreating a new way to approach the stories through proverbial thinking. We can see that the proverbs are active, emergent and latent in Bennett’s work on Anancy and this reinforces the idea that Anancy and Anancy stories teach us and make us reflect on morality. However, it also serves to remind us to question Bennett’s own sense of morality and meaning as being straightforward. Her interview might suggest this, but reflecting on the complexity of Bennett’s artistry and the particular moment of Jamaican national stability that she inhabits, such questions of meaning are never straightforward. Accounting for proverbial thinking in the Anancy stories reminds us of this. As we saw above there is more often than not a contradictory element to proverbs which contributes to the complexity of the moral link between proverbs and Anancy stories. With the entwining of the proverbs, the stories take on a multidimensional texture, once again mirroring the multiplicity of Bennett’s creativity.

Throughout the thesis I have argued that Bennett identifies certain human traits, which she highlights in specifically chosen headings in her *Proverb Manuscript* and under which the proverbs are categorised, for example greed, ambition, caution. These headings mirror the general human character traits that are illustrated in her Anancy stories. I have considered the transformative nature of proverbs as part of Bennett's armoury as a collector but also a creator, and I now suggest that we might expand the idea of creative multiplicity and open interpretations of the Anancy stories even further. I propose that we could describe the Anancy story itself as a form of 'elongated proverb'. Here the story itself takes on the nature of a proverb; this exposes the story to a sophisticated cultural transposition whereby the emphasis within the narrative can be re-stressed. Bennett's regeneration of traditional proverbs frames a contemporary and fluid interpretation of her stories in the same way proverbs, as Jamaican philosophy, are framed by a language that represents a folk culture that has had to accommodate the transitional and repetitious nature of the Caribbean historical inheritance. This reading is substantiated by the fact that the stories themselves embody four characteristics of proverbs that I have noted in Chapter One: that proverbs have oral origins, are moral, are didactic and are embodied in the traditions of Jamaican culture. The one proverbial quality which differs in the Anancy story is the relative pithiness (the shortness of length and the 'epigrammatic authority of the proverb'⁴⁹²). However, to counterbalance this, perhaps the epigrammatic element can be seen in the concluding messages of the Anancy stories, in that the moral of the story is summarised and explicated briefly at the end. We have also seen that the twist in the tale can come from the insertion of a proverb, which then requires the reader to reconsider the perceived message. Like the proverbs, short stories have their origins in folklore and fables passed down through the oral tradition. The form of the short story has changed over the centuries, but the essence is one of economy of setting, concise narration and completeness. Short stories of the past often revolved around a central theme or moral lesson, and Francis de Caro writes that for authors of short fiction 'proverbs are a useful way of simplifying communication, they are valuable to writers who can use them to unify aspects of their literary creations'.⁴⁹³ These are qualities that we can see in Bennett's Anancy stories themselves — that of condensing communication but also of using proverbs to unify and disrupt communal understanding. Accordingly, if we think of the Anancy stories as

⁴⁹² Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 7.

⁴⁹³ Francis A. De Caro, "Proverbs and Originality in Modern Short Fiction." *Western Folklore* Vol. 37, No. 1 (1978): 38.

elongated proverbs, we can redefine the moralistic force of both genres as being transformative and, if they are didactic, what exactly they are teaching us is radically open.

For my own reading of Louise Bennett, the Anancy stories are representative of the folktale's fluctuating status as an art form that can accommodate contemporary interpretations. This chapter has emphasised the reshaping of the stories to incorporate Bennett's distinctive proverbial thinking. For Ramazani, Anancy is Bennett's mythical avatar. Her knowledge of Jamaican folklore is central to her practice of taking stories and spinning them into a different representation. Furthermore, Bennett appropriates Anancy's 'tricksterism' and, through him, makes the stories her own. Part of this tricksterism involves her inventive incorporation of proverbs into her storytelling practice, complicating her stories and blurring any sense that form and meaning might be straightforward when Anancy is involved.

Chapter Five

‘A Poet of Utterance’: Bennett’s Proverbial ‘Voice’ in Performance

Throughout this thesis I have been looking at how proverbs change their emphasis within each genre of Bennett’s works according to the motivations within her poetry, monologues and storytelling. This final chapter looks at the emphasis Bennett places on proverbial thinking within her performances and how her voice comes alive in performance. Once again referring to Norrick’s definition of the qualities attached to proverbs, two components of the proverbial genre are particularly relevant to an examination of proverbs in the context of performance: the orality (the voice) of the proverb, and the didactic nature of the proverb which Bennett continues to emphasise in innovative ways.⁴⁹⁴ Attending to these two proverbial qualities forms the broad framework of this chapter.

In considering the oral nature of the proverb, Africanist scholar Ruth Finnegan observes the general connection between proverbs and acts of performance within interactive oral contexts. She notes that proverbs are verbal in origin and stresses how they work across formal and informal settings: African groups, such as the Yoruba people, use proverbs in formal speech occasions such as in legal courts to solve disputes, or in less formal situations such as in the educating and disciplining of children.⁴⁹⁵ Paremiologist Wolfgang Mieder has traced the persuasive power of proverbial language within the diverse political oratory of Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Winston Churchill and Barack Obama.⁴⁹⁶ More recently, in *The Transatlantic Culture Trade: Caribbean Creole Proverbs from Africa, Europe and the Caribbean*, Desrine Bogle frames her multilingual collection of proverbs from the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean as a means to ‘highlight the commonalities in the Caribbean region rather than their differences’.⁴⁹⁷ An awareness of a

⁴⁹⁴ Norrick, “How Proverbs Mean”, 1985.

⁴⁹⁵ Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*. For a further in-depth look at the use of proverbs by the Yoruba tribe in legal cases, see John C. Messenger, “The Role of Proverbs in a Nigerian Judicial System”, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 15 (1959): 64-73.

⁴⁹⁶ For a more modern take on proverbial use in political rhetoric, see the insightful book by Wolfgang Mieder, *‘Yes We Can’: Barack Obama’s Proverbial Rhetoric* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

⁴⁹⁷ Desrine Bogle, *The Transatlantic Culture Trade; Caribbean Creole Proverbs from Africa, Europe and the Caribbean* (New York: Peter Lang, 2020), xiv.

global perspective on proverbs as oratory tools in formal and informal contexts helps us when comparing Bennett's use of proverbs within her more open and less formal performance contexts. Bennett is a creative artist and, whilst she takes a didactic approach, we need to adopt an open understanding of the multiplicity of the proverbs we read in her art. Arguably this in itself is part of her didacticism — to train her audiences to recognise the fluidity and open nature of proverbial thinking.

Proverbs overlap with various forms of verbal art such as riddles, fables, sayings and songs, and in form they straddle both linguistic and literary expressive patterns. For the purposes of this chapter, the relationship between linguistic and literary forms creates a focus through which to explore other wider aspects of Bennett's performances, such as the elements of voice, locality and the role of the audience. In exploring her performances, it is the sound of Bennett's performances that attracts attention — not only does she reanimate the musicality of the Creole language but her use of non-verbal interjections such as her laughter and sound reinforces the relevance of Rex Nettleford's description of Bennett as a 'poet of utterance'.⁴⁹⁸ She uses the normally *spoken* language, not the normally *written* tongue. In considering Nettleford's description of Bennett as a 'poet of utterance', we need not only think of her shaping of the words, and the musicality of the Creole language, but also observe the sound of her presentations: the interjections of the non-verbal 'mmmm', her frequent interjections of 'Yes, my dear', and the infectious laughter which accompanies her performances. When listening to and watching the recordings of her live performances we can hear and see Bennett's performance persona coming through in her vocal renditions and we better understand Nettleford's description of her as a 'poet of utterance'.

In considering the sound of the Creole in performance, I will re-enter the continuing debate regarding oral and scribal representations of Creole and find that Bennett's sense of local Jamaicanness is expressed in her performance of an everyday manner of conversation. When she performs, she enters into a form of conversation with her audiences. As we will see, Bennett's relationship with the audience is distinctive and this is where her didactic impulse becomes a key factor. Within a conversational context, Finnegan observes that the proverbs, whilst being speech elements, differ from ordinary speech:

The question thereof of the actual style of proverbs appears to demand further research. Whatever the details, however, it is clear that some sort of heightened speech

⁴⁹⁸ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, Intro 16-17.

in one form or other, is commonly used in proverbs: and that this serves to set them apart from ordinary speech.⁴⁹⁹

Finnegan's differentiation between speech and proverbial speech highlights the argument that I have proposed throughout the thesis: proverbs can 'mean' in multiple ways in different verbal and textual contexts. In the context of performance, they are used by Bennett as specialised verbal elements which are to be noticed and stressed. In differentiating the proverbs as specialised verbal elements within the framework of performance, Bennett clears a way for the proverbs to fulfil her didactic impulse. As observed in other genres, she juxtaposes the proverbs, which are embedded in Jamaican heritage, culture and tradition, with that of her own artistic creativity in performance. We know that proverbs were traditionally passed down as elements of spoken interactions, encapsulating generational wisdoms, and not initially captured in text. In this way, the performance genre is closer to the original manner in which proverbs were used in social circumstances, interactions and in education. The analysis of rare audio-visual footage of Bennett released by the National Library of Jamaica, outlined at the end of this chapter, will visually demonstrate this with Bennett's physical presentation of proverbs.

The inclusion of proverbs was comfortable for Bennett, and the proverbs are embedded seamlessly in her performances, although perhaps a more expansive word here would be that proverbs are 'embodied' in her performances. If we think of the proverbs being embodied within performance, this foregrounds a different perspective, one of being incorporated into the physicality of the performance itself. This is a thought-provoking concept whereby proverbs are embodied in an oral representation, and now become part of a physical interaction. Hannah Silva writes, regarding the connection between page and performance embodied in the self of the poet, that 'separating out the performance version of a poem from the page version of a poem is hardly a feasible approach; the two are connected and exist in the same psychophysicality of the poet'.⁵⁰⁰

The art form created by embedding traditional proverbs into performance is important from a folkloristic, preservationist aspect where the ephemeral nature of oral representation highlights the fragility of oral transmission. The oral does not receive an archival sanction and therefore preservation of the oral representation is uppermost in the mind of a

⁴⁹⁹ Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, 392.

⁵⁰⁰ 'Hannah Silva, "Live Writing: A Psychophysical Approach to the Analysis of Black British Poetry in Performance." (Ph.D. thesis, University of Stirling and The British Library, 2018), 33.

folklorist such as Bennett. The challenge that faces the folklorist now is whether today's generation can see or value the currency of this way of expression. As I observed earlier in the thesis, in the 1960s Bennett was in many ways regarded as a visionary in her awareness of spreading the knowledge that is inherent in the proverbs through entertainment and in attempting to demonstrate the connection between the Creole usage and Jamaican nationalism. By positioning proverbs within live oral performances, Bennett continues to contribute to this need to preserve cultural memory through performance.

Reception and Perception of Performance

As we proceed to explore Louise Bennett's role as a performer, it is important to understand how she regards her audiences. John Miles Foley writes that 'oral poetry requires an audience. It is not complete without one'.⁵⁰¹ To expand on this, Julia Novak observes that 'communicating effectively with the audience is a central concern for many poets as they view their craft as a form of communication'.⁵⁰² They write for the audience, they write for reaction, they write for politics, they write for entertainment. Throughout the thesis I have argued that one of Bennett's foremost drivers is to draw out the didactic element of her work. I suggest that, as well as seeing performance as a generalised form of communication between performer and audience, as Novak suggests, a key focus for Bennett when she enters into conversation with the audience is to teach, through aural reception and repetition. This is where attention on proverbial thinking is consistent with her performance practice — the didactic nature of proverbs resonates with Bennett's desire to teach and to preserve. So, whilst she did perform copiously and was trained professionally to perform, the act of performing to an audience can be seen as a key mode through which she could transfer stories from folklore, and equally to comment on the issues faced by her nation. In other words, Bennett used entertainment to motivate her audience to remember, preserve and more fully understand the Jamaican culture linguistically and from a folklore perspective. As she herself quotes, she has always

⁵⁰¹ John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 11.

⁵⁰² Julia Novak, *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance*. (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011), 22.

thought it important that ‘de pickney – dem learn sinting dat belong to dem’.⁵⁰³ For Bennett, children must learn about their heritage. Learning and belonging go together in this statement, and her role here is to help children learn something new while also realising that this cultural inheritance was always theirs. This is echoed by Morris, who writes that it is ‘her vocation: to share her pride in Jamaican culture. This pride is at the centre of her work’.⁵⁰⁴ It is this pride in her Jamaican nationhood that we see present in all of Bennett’s works.

And what of Bennett as an entertainer? Nettleford writes that he seeks to capture Bennett not only as a ‘valid literary figure but also as an entertainer and documenter of aspects of Jamaican life’.⁵⁰⁵ Dana Gioia discusses entertainment within the wider discussion about the role of the poet and the movement from a reading public to that of an audience who sees the book as just one option for accessing poetry. He claims that ‘like virtually everything else in contemporary mass culture, the new popular poetry resembles entertainment more than art. It courts its audience too assiduously’.⁵⁰⁶ However, I would argue that we do not need Gioia’s sense of ‘too assiduously’. Bennett courts her audiences with her oral performances to become involved to understand how they are experiencing the performance and contributing to the social commentary. I will argue that Bennett made the audience involved in her subtle subversions and critiques of social norms, creating an inclusive art form that depends on humour and laughter. Equally, each time Louise Bennett performed her poetry it could change depending on the social context, whether, as at the outset, she was performing in local church halls, or whether later in her career when she was performing in her own theatre group or in her recordings and broadcasts. She was continually teaching, and it is here that once again we can reflect upon the importance of the proverbs as educational and traditional tools. Proverbs can be understood as being localised and ‘for the community’ in the same way that live performance can be embedded in the community that is present to watch it. Thinking about performance and proverbs reminds us that proverbs should not be taken in isolation, but as part of a whole, which

⁵⁰³ Louise Bennett (performer), Miss Lou: ‘Yes M’Dear’ Live in Concert. (Special Edition Mix edited for the On A Level talk show) Caribbean Rhythm 10.50; YouTube Video, 57:32, posted by “Ankhobia” August 11, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OH6gYqrFLdQ>

⁵⁰⁴ Mervyn Morris, *Is English We Speaking and Other Essays We Speaking and Other Essays* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1999), 18.

⁵⁰⁵ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, intro 16-17.

⁵⁰⁶ Dana Gioia, *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2004), 19.

here means sitting within the wider frame of her performances and taken as a form of communal expression.

Before exploring Bennett's use of proverbs within performance, there are difficulties to consider regarding the accessibility of her performances not only for the purposes of this study, but as an ongoing concern. This is a practical point to note about the difficulty of accessing Bennett's performances as a 21st century viewer and listener. When approaching Louise Bennett's works, we are aware that what we see is only a small section in the printed word, and that we have, in fact, already lost access to a wide range of her works within performance. Therefore, it seems to be a race against time to preserve what is left and to recognise the importance of seeing and hearing Bennett's works, presented (and represented) in her performances. There is an urgency to remember and actively seek out the audio and visual recordings of her in performance for today's digitally and technologically sophisticated audiences. As Carolyn Cooper pertinently wrote in her column in *The Gleaner*, in 2017:

Miss Lou will have to find her way into a video game or become a retro heroine of an animated series in order to remain relevant for young people in the digital age. They can't even watch her classic "Ring Ding" TV series to learn about her appeal. Some short-sighted person at the JBC taped over the "Ring Ding" programmes because they didn't have money to buy new tapes, what shame! The culture of poverty!⁵⁰⁷

The issues of accessibility are particularly highlighted here when Cooper mentions that the *Ring Ding* programmes were not preserved. Evidently the cause for taping over was the lack of money; had this not been the case, visual and audio records of *Ring Ding* would have been invaluable now in looking at Bennett's dramatic talent when working with the children to produce a show every Saturday for twelve years (1970-1982). To the best of my knowledge there is in the public domain only four minutes of grainy footage of *Ring Ding* that is to be viewed both on YouTube and in the archival footage on Louise Bennett in the National library of Jamaica.⁵⁰⁸ In terms of listening to her monologues, there are outdated

⁵⁰⁷ Carolyn Cooper, "I Have a Tablecloth Dress", *The Gleaner*, July 21 2017, Instagram. <https://www.scribd.com/article/353936894/Jamaican-Dancehall-Star-s-Instagram-Diss-Of-Cultural-Icon-Sparks-War-Of-Words>

⁵⁰⁸ National Library of Jamaica, "Behind the Scenes of Ring Ding" YouTube Video, 4:28, posted by "National Library of Jamaica", September 7, 2012, accessed October 31, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgS1mSWpP9s> and "Miss Lou's Archives", National Library of Jamaica, N.D., accessed 31/10/2019 https://www.nlj.gov.jm/archives/Miss_Lou/bennett-3.html.

modes of LPs and cassettes for determined listeners, but otherwise, the monologues too are lost to the public.⁵⁰⁹ The monologues are primarily available textually in Morris's edition of *Aunty Roachy Seh*, but, as I noted in Chapter Three, they comprise only a selection and there are as many left unpublished and therefore unheard and unread by the public in the archives. Therefore, in order to analyse the incorporation of proverbs in any performance of Bennett, we rely on what recordings were preserved and are available to today's viewer and listener through YouTube, archival holdings, digitised recordings, and increasingly rare vinyl and cassette formats. I turn now to consider a timeline of her performances where we will see that she took advantage of every form of media to communicate and reach her audiences.

A Short Overview of Bennett's Performance Career

The previous chapters have served to show that readers nowadays are predominantly introduced to Louise Bennett's poetry/monologues and stories on the page. Indeed, in a 1960s interview Bennett herself stressed, 'I started to write before I started to perform'.⁵¹⁰ At that time, we have seen that Bennett was emerging as an advocate for national and cultural sentiment with her career spanning Jamaica's position pre and post-independence. Her writing and her performances co-existed as her career progressed, so here it would be valuable to consider Bennett's performance career within a timeline. In doing this, the various moments which shaped her performance career will be noticeable.

From an early age Bennett remembers being first introduced to her Jamaican heritage at her grandmother's knee: 'it was in Mimi's lap that I fell in fascination with our folklore

I wish to state here that a comprehensive study of Bennett's recorded performances would be too large a topic for this final chapter but it is an issue that deserves further examination. I have worked on records that are noted as being in the archives in Jamaica, or Canada, but which are not accessible from distance. The point is that I, as a researcher, face the same issues as a public audience in that recordings of Louise Bennett have either been destroyed, or are preserved on tapes in the archives. In previous chapters, I have been working from text-based sources and have accessed necessary paperwork from the archives which have been photocopied or downloaded digitally. This is not possible for live recordings. I have accessed LPs and cassette tapes of her recordings. Scholarly works on Bennett and performance include Opal Adisa Palmer, "Culture and Nationalism on the World Stage: Louise Bennett's Aunty Roachy Seh Stories." *The Global South* Vol. 4, No. 2 (2011): 125 – 135, which I cite and where she discusses Bennett on a more global scale through the Aunty Roachy monologues.

⁵⁰⁹ For instance, Louise Bennett, *Miss Lou's Views*, Toronto: Syncona, N.D., cassette.

⁵¹⁰ Scott, "Bennett on Bennett", 97-101.

and learned all about this rich heritage of songs, legends, folk customs and proverbs'.⁵¹¹ From that beginning, as the recipient of intergenerational cultural transmission, she was to become a lifelong ambassador for this rich heritage. Bennett began to emerge as a new and exciting talent in a politically charged and changing Jamaican landscape. Norman Manley, leader of the National movement in Jamaica at that time observed:

This political awakening...goes hand in hand with cultural growth, and this is the change that we are seeing taking place. Around us and before our very eyes are stirrings of the first shoots of a deeply felt 'national artistic and intellectual life'.⁵¹²

This national artistic and intellectual life became the wellspring for Bennett's creativity. Several factors encouraged her on the way. At the age of seventeen, Bennett earned her first professional fee (1 guinea) for her performance at a Christmas morning concert, after Eric Coverley heard her perform at her Excelsior school leavers' ceremony.⁵¹³ During the following decade of the 40s there was a literary campaign in Jamaica, 'Each One Teach One'; Bennett accepted the invitation to be involved in this and helped people to learn to read and write. As part of this she went 'all over the countryside, at the same time collecting folk songs, stories and rich proverbs'.⁵¹⁴ Another important focal point was when she held the position of Drama Officer for Jamaica Social Welfare Commission (JSWC) between 1955 and 1959. Here, Bennett rose to Norman Manley's recognition of the 'role of the artist to shape the culture and ethos of the Jamaican people', teaching drama and folklore to local groups on verandas, under trees and in halls on behalf of the commission.⁵¹⁵ It is here that we see the emphasis on 'localness' and the 'face to face' approach to live teaching that Bennett embraced at the same time as she recognized the importance of collecting local wisdom and knowledge that people possessed in other forms. During this time, she also lectured for the University College of West Indies. Throughout her long career, she moved between Jamaica, Britain and New York, finally retiring to Canada. Her travels between these countries exposed her to folklore in wider fields; for instance, on her return to Jamaica from Britain in 1947, she gained a scholarship

⁵¹¹ Morris, *Miss Lou*, 3. Morris notes here that this is from "The Gift of Laughter", Louise Bennett's address on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate from York University, Toronto on June 10, 1998 (McMaster University Archives). It is not available online.

⁵¹² Norman Washington Manley, *Norman Washington Manley and the New Jamaica: Selected Speeches and Writings, 1938-1968*, (Kingston: Longman Caribbean, 1971), 109.

⁵¹³ National Library of Jamaica, "Miss Lou and the Early Jamaican Theatre". In the book Louise received on leaving Excelsior School, Eric Coverley wrote the following inscription for her: "Great success to you, you possess great talent, develop it".

⁵¹⁴ National Library of Jamaica, "Miss Lou and the Early Jamaican Theatre".

⁵¹⁵ Manley, *Selected Speeches*, 108.

which allowed her to spend time collecting folklore while travelling in other West Indian territories.

As her career took shape, we see that Bennett used every mode of communication available to her — the written word, the stage, radio and television — to increase recognition of her national heritage. Her writing and performance careers intertwined throughout her long lifework, and it is interesting to observe the various hotspots of activity at particular times, either in writing, in recording, or in acting. Her publications became more spaced out from the first flurry in the 1940s, two publications in the 1950s, two more in the 1960s, one in the late 1970s (*Anancy and Miss Lou* was published 1979)⁵¹⁶ and one in early the 1980s. If we now overlay the history of her TV and radio appearances, it is clear that she was concurrently hosting shows and making appearances from the early 50s onwards, with phases of longer-term commitments, which must have encroached upon the time she had available for writing. Between 1950 and 1955 Bennett was lighting up a path for Jamaican folklore in Britain and New York principally through live recorded broadcasts. In England she hosted a one hour long weekly show, the *West Indian Guest Night* (recorded on Tuesday and broadcast to West Indies the next day); she also worked on TV as a storyteller (in traditional Jamaican costume, which is perhaps the start of her dressing this way for her iconic persona of Miss Lou and her related character Aunt Roachy). At aged 34, she moved to New York, where she broadcast for the WWRL, also singing folksongs in Greenwich Village and teaching folksongs to artists. It was then that Eric Coverley moved to New York and contacted her. He joined her in New York where they co-directed a folk musical *Day in Jamaica* (folksongs, Anancy stories, Louse Bennett poems and routines by Eric). Before she returned to Jamaica in 1955, Bennett recorded *Jamaican Folksongs*.⁵¹⁷ Back in Jamaica once more, Bennett began to broadcast her show, *Laugh with Louise* (on Radio Jamaica) and four years later she joined the staff of Jamaica Broadcasting Company (JBC). She gave radio performances of *The Lou and Ranny Show* on Tuesday evenings with Ranny Williams (recorded live at Carib Theatre on previous Sunday evenings).⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁶ Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, 1979.

⁵¹⁷ Louise Bennett, *Jamaican Folksongs*, Washington: Folkways Records, 1954, LP. This (along with others) is still available today on CDR or cassette via mail order from Smithsonian Folkways Records. The album contains many songs that are part of the mento repertoire with a sparse arrangement of backing vocals, hand drum and occasionally acoustic guitar.

⁵¹⁸ Scripts of a few of these programmes can be found in the National Library of Jamaica – some incomplete, and some with mainly air date information, etc (scripts: from programme 1, 14 Jan 1959, to programme 24, 22 Nov 1959 (incomplete)).

From then on, Bennett undertook two more long term commitments, which demanded a great deal of time and effort. This might account for the reduction in written publications in the 1960s onwards. From 1966 to 1982 she performed radio monologues three times a week (*Miss Lou's Views*, later *Aunty Roachy Seh*).⁵¹⁹ In conjunction with this huge commitment on the radio, Bennett also hosted and ran *Ring Ding*, which was a half hour Saturday morning children's programme on JBC TV. This ran for an astonishing twelve years between 1970 and 1982 and was clearly time consuming as she also prepared conscientiously for the recording for an hour beforehand.⁵²⁰ We are told on the recording that the technicians and the crew were also 'proceeding according to a plan', despite the seeming chaos on stage.⁵²¹ In addition to her numerous performance commitments, throughout her career she also made many recordings. This is testament to her inexhaustible drive to communicate with and educate her audiences.⁵²² Bennett released two LPs (78s) in the 1950s on the Tri Jam Ba label. In 1957, she recorded *Children's Jamaican Songs and Games*⁵²³ and *Bre' Anancy and Miss Lou*.⁵²⁴ In 1966, in the same year that *Jamaica Labrish* was published, the recording of *Miss Lou's Views* came out.⁵²⁵ Numerous records followed in the following years.⁵²⁶

In 1983 Bennett made a recording that represents what might be called her greatest hits: *Yes M'Dear: Miss Lou Live*.⁵²⁷ This record demands our attention as it showcases Bennett's

⁵¹⁹ On Radio Jamaica and JBC; it is interesting to see in this visual recording from within the recording studio that she is dressed in national costume even in an anonymous studio with no audience. National Library of Jamaica, "Miss Lou and the Early Jamaican Theatre"; Bennett, *Miss Lou's Views*.

⁵²⁰ National Library of Jamaica, "Behind the Scenes of Ring Ding". YouTube Video, 4:28. Posted by "National Library of Jamaica" September 7, 2012

⁵²¹ National Library of Jamaica, "Behind the Scenes of Ring Ding". YouTube Video, 4:28. Posted by "National Library of Jamaica" September 7, 2012; 1:27.

⁵²² In 1951, Louise Bennett and the Caribbean Serenaders recorded one single of dance band mento on the UK melodisc label. Linstead market" (described on the label as 'Jamaican Rhumba' backed with "Bongo Man" – described as a 'Jamaican Christmas Song' (Now unavailable).

⁵²³ Louise Bennett, *Children's Jamaican Songs and Games*, Washington: Folkways Records, 1957, LP. Notably, this is now available digitally to audiences today through Smithsonian Folkways Records, New York, 2007.

⁵²⁴ Louise Bennett, *Bre' Anancy & Miss Lou*. Toronto: Syncona [date unavailable – 1970s?], cassette.

⁵²⁵ Louise Bennett, *Miss Lou's Views*, Federal label, 1967.

⁵²⁶ The LP *Listen to Louise* was released in 1968, followed by *Jamaican Anancy Songs* in 1970; both on the seminal Federal Records label. Another rare blank label Louise Bennett single called 'Immunisation' offers two renditions of different tempos on either side of the single to "Sweet Charlie melody". This marks the first time Bennett sings to a rural mento backing – complete with banjo and shakers. 1977-1978 – *Come Home to Jamaica* featuring Louise Bennett and her friends. In 1981 she recorded an LP of *The Honourable Miss Lou* on the Boonoo Noonoo label — songs from Jamaican folk mento. See Edric Connor, *Louise Bennett & Jamaican Folk Music* (Last Revised: 12/09/20)", *Mento Music*, Dec. 9 / Sept. 12, 2020], <https://www.mentomusic.com/edricConnor.htm#LouiseBennett>

⁵²⁷ Bennett, "Yes M'Dear". The original recording of this 1983 performance in London was released on Island Records in 1983 and subsequently re-pressed in Miami & Kingston under Sonic Sounds in 1995. Note

entwined commitment to musicality, storytelling and poetic performance. For this chapter, in particular, it reminds us of Bennett's interests in creative repetitions, didacticism and performance as community building. In this performance, she presents a range of folk music, digging songs, love songs and lullabies; she shares street cries, riddles, proverbs, and the rhythm pattern of a children's game. *Yes M'Dear* is important in that it constitutes a moment of maturity where Louise Bennett is looking back at her lifetime of recording and choosing which moments of performance to focus on. As we will see, the repetition of material in this case represents the richness of her catalogue of creative works and the range of material that she can choose from. In addition, the fact that *Yes M'Dear* was recorded in London and is now globally accessible, draws us away from the specific local face-to-face nature and Jamaicanness of the performance, although in the analysis to follow we will still see clearly the centrality of her Jamaican focus, and the notion of that local relevance in Jamaica for those within the diaspora.

Although I am claiming a key status for *Yes M'Dear* in Bennett's recording history, it was not the end of her recording career. In 1987, Louise recited the folk tale 'Ribba Muma' on the cassette collection *Jamaican Folk Tales and Oral Histories*. This release accompanied a book of the same name by Laura Tanna, referred to previously in Chapter Four on Anancy Tales. Bennett recorded *Miss Lou and Friends* in 1990;⁵²⁸ and in 1999 she made an audio recording *Lawd... Di Riddim Sweet* which includes poems, personal anecdotes, folksongs, information about children's games, and other Jamaican folklore and was recorded by Miss Lou and Eric in their Toronto apartment.⁵²⁹

Finally, an overview of Bennett's career is not complete without mentioning her contribution to the pantomime. Bennett was an active and enthusiastic champion of the pantomime. She performed her first Little Theatre Movement (LTM) pantomime, *Soliday and the wicked Bird* by Vera Bell in 1943, and in 1949 she co-authored *Bluebeard and Brer Anancy*, a landmark in Jamaican theatre, with Noel Vaz, in which she played Nana. Ruth Egglestone explains that in this 1949 production, Vaz introduced Anancy to the LTM performance stage and by:

that it is billed as Miss Lou as opposed to Louise Bennett. She sang with an 8 piece band and also performs some songs a capella 'which sounds like a sweet from of dub poetry'. It also has a cameo with Linton Kwesi Johnson. From this, a 45rpm single was produced with Side One: *Long Time Gal*; Side Two; *Balan-ci* (see "Connor, Bennett & Jamaican Folk Music").

⁵²⁸ An audio visual of *Miss Lou and Friends*, excerpts from a 1990 performance in Kingston, Jamaica at the International Theatre Institute, distributed by Reckord Films Ltd., Kingston, Jamaica.

⁵²⁹ Louise Bennett, *Lawd... Di Riddim Sweet*, Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1999, cassette.

interweaving elements of both British and local folk culture into a highly successful production, he developed a concept which he had worked on, with the help of Louise Bennett, at Knox College summer school. It was a ‘Jamaicanised’ version of the story of Bluebeard who married several wives and murdered them, Bluebeard needed an adversary, so Anancy, who could be anything and played a number of characters, was brought in to challenge him.⁵³⁰

This show was apparently so popular that it was revisited in 1957 and then taken to Trinidad in 1958 as the major contribution from Jamaica in the first Caribbean Festival of Arts, Drums and Colours. Composer Barbara Ferland’s opening number, ‘Evening Time’, for which Louise Bennett provided the lyrics, has now become ‘such a part of national heritage that few Jamaicans realise that it is less than 50 years old and only a ‘folksong’ by adoption’.⁵³¹ This was the turning point for the Jamaican pantomime, and Bennett continued to ‘Jamaicanise’ the genre as she took on yet another long-term commitment, acting annually from 1955 to 1975 in almost every pantomime and co-authoring five shows. She also co-directed *Carib Gold* (1960).⁵³²

Louise Bennett’s Place in Oral Versus Scribal Debates

From the overview given above of Bennett’s performance career, she was clearly a prolific artist, and a significant performer on stage, radio and TV. Notably, the actual content she uses is finite, and not as prolific as may first appear. As will be illustrated in the close analysis of her techniques in *Yes M’Dear*, she repeats her material constantly, reconstituting the written texts which then become the content of many of her performances. In so doing, she transforms her creative art through different mediums, eliding the written with the oral, and vice versa. The overview of her poetic career allows

⁵³⁰ Ruth Minot Egglestone, “A Philosophy of Survival: Anancyism in Jamaican Pantomime.” *The Society for Caribbean Studies Annual Conference Papers*, ed. by Sandra Courtman, Vol. 2 (2001): 4.

⁵³¹ Egglestone, “A Philosophy of Survival”, 5.

⁵³² Time and space in this thesis denies me an opportunity to explore Bennett’s engagements in the pantomime fully, but this would be valuable further research. Scripts of some of the pantomimes can be found in McMaster Series 3: Bennett, “Miss Lou’s Fonds”. Songs - “Jamaican Songs from Pantomime Compiled and Published by Louise Bennett.” Series 3: Writing – 1941-2008. – 48 cm of textual records. – Title based on content of series. – Series contains prose, poetry, songs and other genres as well as writing by others. – Recordings of some of this material can be found in Series 6, beginning in Box 24. Box 7, F.2 Songs - “Jamai-can Songs from Pantomime Compiled and Published by Louise Bennett”; 16 page leaflet, dated 12 December 1941 in handwritten note. Also in the National Library of Jamaica which contains scripts of pantomimes written by Louise Bennett and others for the Little Theatre Movement (LTM), other play scripts, and related material. Plays for radio are found in MS 2177.3.5.6. Material relating to pantomime songs is found in MS 2177.3.7.

two opinions: first, that as her career progressed, she spent more of her time performing and recording through channels of oral transmission than she spent writing new poetry; secondly, the poetic texts were used in different forms. She wrote her poetry in textual form, which she then used in performances and recordings — so we begin to hear her poems as performances.

To do this, we need to recognise that there is a fluidity to Bennett's creative practice. Arguably, she learned, taught and spoke in the oral medium, but, as we have seen, she was simultaneously performing her written work, which equally classifies as scribal. Then, in performance, Bennett transposes her work again to become oral. Indeed, initially one can claim that her work was written and read through *The Gleaner* newspaper in the forties, so it was transferred scribally. This highlights the complexity of fitting Bennett's texts into a particular classification of orality, which, in fact, reflects the status of Bennett's work in general – throughout her life she has avoided 'classification'. As we have already seen throughout the preceding chapters, the relationship between oral and textual representation has been the focus of a long-standing debate and scholars have constantly attempted to attach a definitive form to Bennett's works. In doing so, several scholars emphasise different aspects of the 'voice' within Bennett's performances. Her contemporary, Rex Nettleford, called attention to the vitality within Bennett's performances, to elucidate his point of view on the distinction between representations on and off the page:

For Miss Bennett is a performer, accomplished and unrivalled. If on the printed pages her poems appear to be dated frozen jingles, in the renditions she gives of them they take on vitality and meaning – capturing all the spontaneity of the ordinary Jamaican's joys and even sorrows, his ready poignant and even wicked wit, his religion and his philosophy of life.⁵³³

Whilst championing her as a performer, Nettleford makes a clumsy juxtaposition of her performances and the 'frozen jingles' of her words on paper, which are then given vitality and meaning when Bennett lifts them off the page and gives them voice. By using the pejorative term 'dated frozen jingles', Nettleford associates Bennett's work with popular forms such as sloganeering, advertising and catchy tunes, as well as raising an issue of transposing a language, which is essentially an oral, vernacular language, into text. Nettleford's description of Bennett as a 'poet of utterance' in this context is much more

⁵³³ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, intro 16.

helpful than his fear of the work being reduced to slight artistic expression. The idea of ‘utterance’ encourages us to view Bennett in relation to the spoken word, vocal sounds and expressive practices without the need to devalue the work on the page. Historically, and as we have seen in previous chapters with Bennett, vernacular language has been devalued and marginalised in the ideology of language hierarchies and standardization. There is now a move to generate a transnational conversation across national literary traditions, and Bennett would sit within this wider debate as she is introduced more and more into the curricula of education to ‘advantageously decentre standard English’.⁵³⁴ As we continue to consider the ‘voice’ of Bennett, Rohlehr comments that

Bennett’s poetry depends so much on tones of voice, on the fluidity of the voice as it breaks out of the strict metrical limitations of the quatrain, that one ought to comment on the words in audible motion, rather than in their comparatively frozen form on the page.⁵³⁵

Although no longer conceived here as ‘jingle’, the idea of the page as a reductive place for Bennett’s work is still present. It is this binary notion that Morris addresses when he questions ‘why it has to be one rather than the other?’ and decisively writes that ‘Louise Bennett’s art is both oral and scribal; the forms are not mutually exclusive’.⁵³⁶ As an expansion of this, Morris does suggest that ‘some features become apparent only after close examination of the text. But the words on the page should not simply lie there: they have meaning, they represent sounds, and they sometimes imply movement’.⁵³⁷ We saw him pose this same argument in a conference in London (held in Beacon Books in 1981) which preceded the publication of *Selected Poems*, where he suggests that audiences might miss the details and skill in Bennett’s poetry in performance. This articulates fundamental concepts which adhere to the core concerns of this chapter: that performance means something in context, that words sound in particular ways in performance, and that the verbal performance can be viewed as physical. I will expand on these areas of discussion in the following sections which analyse Bennett’s specific performances.

⁵³⁴ Ahmad and Nero, “Productive Paradoxes”, 82.

⁵³⁵ Gordon Rohlehr, “The Folk in Caribbean Literature” in *Critics on Caribbean Literature: Readings in Literary Criticism*, ed. by Edward Baugh. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978), 8.

⁵³⁶ Morris, *Selected Poems*, xviii.

⁵³⁷ Morris, *Selected Poems*, xix.

To take a more recent view on this long-contested debate on the oral/ scribal division, critic Julia Novak, in *Live Poetry*, uses the phrase the ‘Great Divide’:

This notion of a Great Divide is manifest for instance in the idea that the written poem is a stable, tangible and timeless artefact that exists independently of situational context. Performance is envisaged as unstable by contrast, a transient process that depends on its occurrence and disappearance in time and is therefore often regarded as a mere variant to the printed ‘original’. Such set ideas of an opposition between the two modes have often obscured the diverse and complex relations that may exist between writing and speech...

A general opposition of the written poem as a stable artefact to the variable versions of oral performance is unjustified. A poet’s writing process often involves elements of performance; during the first conception of a text as well as at a later stage, where oral performance may function as a corrective device.... The activity of poetry comprises both writing and performing. Writing and speech are therefore not opposed to each other along the lines of a Great Divide but are integrated processes of the art of poetry.⁵³⁸

Novak adheres to the same argument that Morris proposes, that is to say that writing and performing are not opposed and both are integral to the art of poetry, whilst highlighting that stability and transience are both part of writing and performance. The idea of stability and transience are central to my examination of how proverbs are used by Bennett in her performances. We also see in Novak the idea of performance as part of a creative process, for example as a compositional tool in the way that some poets habitually incorporate oral elements whilst composing and publishing in the written form. John Miles Foley further discusses methods of ‘reading’ oral poetry and much of his argument pertains to an approach we can take towards Bennett’s performances. He notes that ‘spoken word poetry identifies as voiced verbal art, verse that is lifted off the page and into the world of presence and experience’.⁵³⁹ Foley identifies the difference between poetries that come under textual rules and live only as texts, and oral poetries. ‘Oral poems’, he notes, ‘are different because of composition, performance and reception’.⁵⁴⁰ He further argues that most of us get to know oral performance only in textual format where we are restricted to reading carefully configured editions of these live events — and that these are not themselves oral performances because another medium has intervened. They therefore become ‘refractions’ of the event.⁵⁴¹ With Bennett, we have seen that utterance is to make

⁵³⁸ Novak, *Live Poetry*, 22.

⁵³⁹ Foley, *How to Read*, 30.

⁵⁴⁰ Foley, *How to Read*, 38.

⁵⁴¹ Foley, *How to Read*, 41.

a sound and to give voice. As we shall see the tonality of her voice range, the nonverbal interjections and her frequent laughter add to the sound of the performances and create an orality which allows her performances to be related to and differ from their form on the page and become a physical oral event.

Sounding and Performing Creole

Viewing performance in terms of voice and community can be linked to the rise of studying Creole linguistics. Between 1951 and 1952 Fredric Cassidy travelled around Jamaica's countryside, recording on a tape recorder the voices of local people, gathering thirty 7 inch reels to take back and analyse and which ultimately were transposed into the *Dictionary of Jamaican English*.⁵⁴² His travels pre-date Bennett's travels in her role as Welfare Officer, where she too gathered and recorded the folk stories, the proverbs and the songs. Cassidy's historical and in-depth research meant that he collated and presented the first extensive lexicography in the Caribbean on English language which I referred to in Chapter One. Cassidy's aim was to raise language to the 'level of an art, an art which expresses the values of human life... we couldn't get along at a high level, at a satisfactory level without poetry, I mean such things as the poetry of folk songs and so forth...'.⁵⁴³ Both Bennett and Cassidy recognise that the identity of a people or community lives through this expressive language. It was the sound of this language that they both heard and wanted, in their own way, to preserve. Cassidy says that he 'wanted to get people in their normal environment, doing their normal jobs, and record them'.⁵⁴⁴ In this interview with Velma Pollard, Cassidy explains the attitude in schools at that time to Creole-speaking children, making them think there was something degraded about it – 'it was not degraded — no language is in itself degraded, it was simply that it was economically and socially the "wrong" language because it belonged to the people'.⁵⁴⁵ This phrase, 'belonging to the people', is the key factor when considering identity and community.⁵⁴⁶ It is important, in situating the voice of Bennett's performances, to consider the localness of

⁵⁴² F. G. Cassidy and R. B. Page, *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967; repr. University of West Indies Press, 2002.

⁵⁴³ Velma Pollard "Frederic G Cassidy: Dictionary maker", *Jamaica Journal* Vol. 16. No. 2 (1983):18.

⁵⁴⁴ Pollard, "Frederic G Cassidy: Dictionary maker", 15.

⁵⁴⁵ Pollard, "Frederic G Cassidy: Dictionary maker", 11-12.

⁵⁴⁶ Pollard, "Frederic G Cassidy: Dictionary maker", 13.

the community that Bennett honours in the Creole language, which reflects a specific place, the ‘home’, that is, as Olive Senior writes, ‘a sound returned to you when you speak to a community and it speaks back to you’.⁵⁴⁷ That home, for Bennett, was Jamaica.

The ‘home’ that Senior speaks of here is, in the first instance, the ground that elders put their ears to in order to gain wisdom and answers.⁵⁴⁸ In using this natural space as a way to find resonance, she links this space to where the condition of resonance becomes ‘home’ and where the sound of the community reverberates and speaks back.

What I do as a writer, I think, is mediate the worlds I have inherited, the worlds of the oral and the scribal. While writing is a private act, speaking is a communal one: it implies a teller and a listener, as traditional song consists of call and response. It implicitly invites the community to participate by approval, disapproval, or persuasion, or by contributing different versions of the event.⁵⁴⁹

The shift from writing being a private act to it becoming communal when it is spoken encapsulates the idea of the sharing and inviting response from those around you in your own community and space. For Senior, the idea of community is in the concept of voicing home and identity through performance:

in our culture, there is the collective voice that might not be written down in books but is nevertheless an equally potent force: the voice of ancestral heritage that is labelled - in academic circles - orality.⁵⁵⁰

This, for Bennett, was a key motivator: to recognise and contribute to ‘the collective voice’. Her practice enables her to create, communicate and preserve her heritage, which we see in the dedication to teaching in local environments, no matter how small or outlying.

While reflecting on the voice as a form of verbal art, Richard Bauman brings together folklore, anthropology, linguistic and literary criticism which focus on performance as ‘an organising principle for the study of folklore’.⁵⁵¹ He sees verbal art as based upon

⁵⁴⁷ Senior, “The Poem as Gardening, The Story as Su-Su: Finding a Literary Voice.” *Journal of West Indian Literature* Vol. 14, No. 1/2 (2005): 36.

⁵⁴⁸ Senior, “The Poem as Gardening”, 35. This then translates to a real garden for Senior, which in turn, becomes a metaphorical one that turned into her book of poems called *Gardening in the Tropics* (Canada: Insomniac Press, 1995; reprint 2005).

⁵⁴⁹ Senior, “The Poem as Gardening”, 46.

⁵⁵⁰ Senior, “The Poem as Gardening”, 36.

⁵⁵¹ Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1977; repr. 1984), 306, footnote 1. Bauman also drew up an elaborate typology of performance keys of framing signals, which carry

understanding performance as a mode of speaking, integrating the social and cultural life of communities:

All framing, including performance, is accomplished through the employment of culturally conventionalised meta communication – each speech community will make use of a structured set of distinctive communicative means from among its resources in culturally conventionalised and culturally specific ways to key the performance frame, so all communication taking place within that frame is to be understood as performance within that community.⁵⁵²

Bauman places stress on the conventions of both community and communication that enable some utterances to be considered as ‘performances’. Even though Bauman did not write on Bennett or the Caribbean, his observations on the topic resonate with Bennett in terms of her approach to folklore performances which is community-led and takes advantage of the conventions of her community. Another scholar who frames the link between folklore and the voice of the community through the performative use of proverbs is Anand Prahlad. Although Prahlad does not directly reference Bennett in his next observation, he links proverbs within a discussion of the voice of the community, which resonates with my own focus on Bennett. Prahlad writes:

[My] hypothesis suggests that proverbs are linked not only to a historical past on a societal level but also to the personal past and in addition, that the user is in some way mediating the link between the past and present as well as mediating the components of symbolic meaning each time a proverb is spoken. Rather than defining a particular meaning, the proverbial item carries symbolic meaning.

I propose the term ‘symbolic value’ to designate the degree of importance of the symbolic meaning for a given speaker of a given proverb. In other words, a proverb that was learned by someone whose parents used it repeatedly would have a greater symbolic value for that person than a proverb overheard incidentally in the conversation of co-workers.⁵⁵³

Bennett represents the past for many people, a link to the cultural memory for her audiences who relate to Miss Lou as the voice of the community. In this way, perhaps one can identify Bennett with Prahlad’s symbolic meaning; in other words, she is the person that people hear frequently on radio, on TV and in live performances, and therefore she

instructions on how to interpret the other messages being communicated. A scholar attending to this debate in detail would need to be aware of these keys in relation to the culture being studied. This is not a central concern for this present chapter.

⁵⁵² Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, 16.

⁵⁵³ Prahlad, *African American Proverbs*, 127.

herself is the figure who carries the symbolic meaning of proverbs. The past and present conjoin in her use of proverbs. The proverbs act as a mediating force within Bennett's performances, encouraging us to think about meanings of folklore, voice, and performance. Here, we can remember Brathwaite's Anancy poem with his notion of the past and present, and the 'threading' that Bennett, as a creator, weaves between traditions of folklore, genres and performative mediums.

The debate continues surrounding the issues of writing in the vernacular, in terms of presentation of the Creole language. Morris concludes that most scholars agree to compromise on the textual representation of Creole, either writing it phonetically, or alternatively he writes in the 'Note on the Text' in his edition of Bennett's *Selected Poems*, that 'anyone familiar with Jamaican Creole will "hear" the Creole sounds even when the spelling looks like Standard'.⁵⁵⁴ Locating the debate within a larger sphere, Belinda Edmondson draws attention to the movements in the Caribbean within which Bennett finds herself as an ambassador in this first wave of modern Creole performers. In looking at the wider societal view of the oral in the Caribbean at this time, Edmondson calls this the

Push and pull factor – the simultaneous recognition and rejection that accounts both for the popularity of dialect poetry and performance in the Caribbean and for the traditional academic difficulty encountered in attempting to move these art forms beyond the ephemeral level of popular performance to the printed page. Print means "for the record" and the record is inevitably aimed at the international audience – it means analysis and analysis is "real". Performance is fleeting and local, it cannot be pinned down, it is inevitably tied to entertainment. In other words, it is popular culture. For the logocentric professional classes, the oral and the written have inevitably occupied two separate spheres of existence. With the surge of nationalist sentiment that accompanied independent in 1962 most of the dialect performers could now be celebrated for the very quality that rendered them unserious – their local appeal. It was indigenous, it was popular, its reliance on old folk stories and proverbs accorded with the state's imperative to elevate folk culture to reflect a more autonomous version of Caribbean history.⁵⁵⁵

Here we see Edmondson addressing the notion of the ephemeral nature of performance and returning to the limitations of recordings to catch the essence of live performances. For those of us who have never witnessed Bennett perform live, this is a regret. Edmondson continues by arguing that the aim of printed records of these performances is to allow

⁵⁵⁴ Morris in Bennett, *Selected Poems*, xxvii.

⁵⁵⁵ Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow*, 91-92.

academic international audiences to access them in what she calls a ‘push and pull’ scenario — a tug of war — where she suggests that it is the professional classes who take two opposing views of the oral and the written. However, she balances this with the argument that post-independence, and with the dramatic surge in nationalism, there is a detachment from academic censure to the realisation that the dialect poets are to be celebrated for a localness that is now reframed as ‘autonomy’ through the new nation-state. What is important to note, however, is Bennett’s constancy in using Creole and her desire to perform and teach local heritage. Bennett’s didactic drive to elevate the folk culture was always interested in an ‘autonomous version of Caribbean history’. Within this context of nationalism, the use of Creole, once seen by the middle class as the antithesis of Standard English and tied to ‘popular culture’ is elevated both on the page and in performance. These two spheres of existence that Edmondson mentions are blurred by Bennett’s rising popularity and drive to preserve the rich national culture. Bennett’s desire to situate her work within the local, with its reliance on the old folk stories and proverbs, answers this challenge to reflect upon the representation of Jamaican cultural expression and similarly reflects the fact that she herself continues to be non-classifiable as an artist who works in both mediums of print and performance. Finnegan, in *Oral Literature in Africa*, points to the ephemeral nature of oral performances and transmission, and for those cultures that are more used to printed records, when looking at the African traditions of embracing both oral and written, they are more likely to turn to the written word. This is relevant when thinking about Bennett’s modes of communication, where recordings of her live poetry and story performances are rare and we, as an audience today, need to rely on the printed word which, as we have seen, is challenging when representing the Creole language and the orality of Bennett’s non-verbal sounds on the page.

Furthermore, in considering the sound of the Creole when performed by such an artist as Bennett, the Caribbean critic and poet, Kamau Brathwaite, draws attention to the poetic sound of the language itself where he observes that the concept of noise is part of the semantics of oral tradition and ‘if you ignore the noise you lose part of the meaning, when it is written you lose part of the sound’.⁵⁵⁶ This is the same noise that I mentioned in Bennett’s performances, where her interjections and laughter create part of the meaning as well as the sound of the language. The repeated concluding phrase to the monologues in *Aunty Roachy Seh* is an example of this expressive noise. Morris notes how Bennett signs

⁵⁵⁶ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, 17.

off each monologue with “‘Ay ya yie!’” a more or less untranslatable expression of pleasure’.⁵⁵⁷ These repeated utterances, sounds, noises are part of Bennett’s meaning-making, although exactly what meaning is open to debate.⁵⁵⁸ Nevertheless, we might conclude that in order to understand the Creole language of Bennett’s printed poetry, stories and monologues, the reader needs to say it out loud, that is to say they have to ‘perform’ it. We saw how she has claimed Creole as part of a reaction to the hegemony of the coloniser’s Standard English; and, indeed, how the sound of Creole brings her art alive. As part of that, Rohlehr, picking up Brathwaite’s observation of the musicality within the oral tradition, suggests that ‘an appropriate criticism would function more like the criticism of musical performance’.⁵⁵⁹ The written Creole text should therefore be lifted off the page, into sound. Susan Gingell terms this process as ‘see –hear aesthetics’.⁵⁶⁰ The pun on ‘hear/here’ is intentional, bringing the attention to the here and now moment of the auditory performance. She encourages readers of Bennett’s poems to move beyond silent reading out of their mind’s ear, to “re-oralise” the text which engages the reader almost physically in the process from reader, listener, to speaker. Gingell’s argument is that the reader, listener, speaker, viewer, needs to move away from the silent reader of the printed word, assumed earlier in the previous chapters, to the utterance of Bennett’s Creole texts.⁵⁶¹

Performance, Performability and Bennett Studies

Apart from the oral and scribal debate which I have discussed above, there are at present few critical works that look specifically at Bennett’s performances in detail. Scholars such as Morris and Cooper originally focussed on orality since their main aim was to develop a terminology to identify the aesthetic techniques of oral performance poetry and consider its

⁵⁵⁷ Morris, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, ix.

⁵⁵⁸ The sound of ‘Ay ya yie!’ on the tracks of *Miss Lou’s Views* LP appears as a habitual concluding expression, subconsciously uttered, as if she uses it to close off one thought process to start the next track.

⁵⁵⁹ Rohlehr, “The Folk in Caribbean Literature”, 10.

⁵⁶⁰ Gingell, “Coming Home through Sound”, 1-15.

⁵⁶¹ Gingell, “Coming Home through Sound”, 7. Cassidy is a valuable source to consider here. His two books are particularly important in this context, *The Dictionary of Jamaican English* (1967) and the earlier *Jamaica Talk* (1961) in which he described the Creole as “folk talk”. It was the language of those people that he wanted to preserve and yet, as the argument above has highlighted, this of course, raised issues regarding how to transpose the recorded, living speech of the people into written format. It prompted Cassidy to pioneer an orthography, initially proposed in 1961 and known as the ‘Cassidy System’, developed specifically for Jamaican that uses a phonemic system that closely reproduces the sound of the language.

relationship to print matter. In focusing on this aspect, neither presents a specifically driven analysis of Bennett's performance techniques. One valuable and, in my opinion, valid approach would be to apply to Bennett the self-evaluative word that Rommi Smith applies to her work: the term "performability". In a personal interview with Julia Novak, Smith (writer and performer of poetry) rejects the label 'performance poet' although she notes that there is a "performability" about her work and insists that everything stems from writing.⁵⁶² In my opinion this is an appropriate way to approach Bennett as a performer: her work stems from the written word, but there is an integral 'performability' about her work, and she herself was a sharp performer. We get an insight as to how Bennett regards herself as a performer in this illuminating interaction with Dennis Scott:

Scott: Do you think that one cause of your having to wait for the recognition we all agree you do deserve is that you work in an extremely theatrical way and so often in the theatre itself – so that one tends to think of you as a performing artist primarily?

Bennett: Definitely, though I did start to write before I started to perform! My work does lend itself so much to performance because it is oral in its tradition, legendary. People are not as accustomed to reading the dialect as they are to listening to it and I found it a wonderful medium for the stage.⁵⁶³

In addition to validating the Creole language as a poetic resource, the didactic element of the proverbs sits as a key focus to Bennett's performances which is in line with my argument that she created her works through a proverbial lens. She taught in every performance, not only teaching a local audience about the wisdoms within their cultural heritage and the importance of preserving the language and legitimising their identity, but also educating a wider audience on the values of those Jamaican traditions. The point that Rohlehr makes in observing the transformative period of decolonisation is not just about language. It also moves the concept of folk and folklore into the forefront. This moment brought with it the need to establish a new identity based on the heritage of the past, and with that came a new rise in interest in folklore at a time of cultural independence.

⁵⁶² Julia Novak personal interview with Rommi Smith, 2008, quoted in Novak, *Live Poetry*, 32. I was in email contact with Julia Novak to request the transcript of this interview, but she replied that sadly she did not record the interview fully.

⁵⁶³ Scott, "Bennett on Bennett", 47.

Understanding Bennett's performative voice demands attention to oral heritage, didacticism, linguistic creativity, and language preservation.

Yet, the definition of 'performance poet' needs attention as this term itself is now seen to be slippery. Certainly, Bennett was a consummate and professional performer and she was a poet but can she be described accurately by the phrase 'performance poet'? There are qualifications to linking both of these words. This debate circles around the term 'live poetry', but for Novak performance poetry is a variety of live poetry at the extreme end of its spectrum which, as the name indicates, is entirely conceived in relation to oral performance.⁵⁶⁴ Hannah Silva, in her recent doctoral thesis on live writing, notes that:

Neither critics nor poets work in vacuums. When analysing poetry in performance the critic needs to consider the poet's possible influences, heritages and roots alongside an awareness of their (our) own experiences, influences and limitations. There are no definitive ways of analysing a poetry performance. We need a multiplicity of analyses from a multiplicity of critics to begin to truly appreciate and enjoy the art and craft of poetry in performance.⁵⁶⁵

There is, naturally, a demand by many critics and poets nowadays that the literary canon should be extended to include poetry that depends on performance for its full effect.⁵⁶⁶ It is true that poetry performances have been little reviewed, unlike printed collections, so there is lack of a field for comparative reference. Moreover, Novak considers that:

the neglect may be due to the fact that live poetry bears not only literary but also musical (speech melody, rhythm etc.) and theatrical (mimic, gesture, etc) features, which complicate its unambiguous allocation to traditional research disciplines and review categories [...]. Although poetry has long been an object of literary studies, the discipline offers no systematic methodology, no analytical "toolkit", with which to address the distinctive characteristics of *live* poetry.⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁴ Novak, *Live Poetry*, 29.

⁵⁶⁵ Silva, "Live Writing", 84.

⁵⁶⁶ See arguments on this area referred to by Julia Novak from Steven Athanses "When Print Alone Fails Poetry: Performance as Contingency of Literary Value" *Text and Performance Quarterly* Vol. 11 (1991): 116-127 and Peter Middleton, *Distant reading: Performance, Readership and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*, (USA: University of Alabama Press, 2005).

⁵⁶⁷ Novak, *Live Poetry*, 11.

The lack of agreed method for analysis of live poetry is further complicated in relation to Bennett's performances, which include poetry as just one part of her creative practice, but also do not seem fully defined as music or theatre.

In an insightful move that is typical of the critic himself, Morris now flips the question of performance and discusses it from the reverse perspective by asking can one print the performance?⁵⁶⁸ In doing this, he re-illuminates several of the characteristics of print and performance. Once again, he touches on Louise Bennett as an example but does not develop a full argument about her status. However, some of his comments begin to chime with my understanding of Bennett as a performance poet. First of all, Morris reiterates the point of view that:

we can never put the performance in print. The performance is an oral - or an audio-visual – event. The end of the performance exists at a time when earlier moments of the performance have already vanished.⁵⁶⁹

Unlike textual presentations, the performed sound leaves the minute it is spoken and heard in a live forum and is a live event (hence the need for recording, and even then, as observed by Foley, the recording becomes a different representation). Morris asserts that the best performance poets are poets in command, as he puts it, with the 'dance of language'.⁵⁷⁰ We are therefore rewarded by close readings of their words on the page, because, even though these poets may communicate more fully in performance, we do not need to consider them prisoners of print.⁵⁷¹ The text brings out many subtleties and nuances lost in performance. Morris exemplifies the subtle allusions to be found in print which would be missed in performance. For instance, he refers to the parody of Charles Wolfe's 'The Burial of Sir John Moore' found in Bennett's poem 'Independence Dignity'.⁵⁷² Her third stanza is as follows:

not a stone was fling, not a samfie sting,

⁵⁶⁸ Mervyn Morris "Printing the Performance" in Morris, *Is English We Speaking and Other Essays*, 50.

⁵⁶⁹ Morris, "Printing the Performance", 46.

⁵⁷⁰ Morris, "Printing the Performance", 50.

⁵⁷¹ Morris, "Printing the Performance", 50.

⁵⁷² Morris, *Selected Poems*, 188. In his notes on Bennett's poem 'Independence Dignity', Morris writes that in the parody of 'The Burial of Sr John Moore at Corunna', a British piece much recited by Jamaican schoolchildren in the colonial period, it is as if the colonizer was being buried while a new nation is born. In the preceding stanza Bennett writes that the Jamaican people 'deestant up demself fi greet/ de birt a dem new nation!' This suggests that the Jamaican people have changed their usual demeanour to become decent to greet Independence without any form of violence – and here we see the precursor to the didactic nature of the proverbial phrase that comes next.

Not a soul gwan bad an lowrated;
Not a fight bruck out, not a bad-wud shoul
As Independence was celebrated.⁵⁷³

In performance, the allusion may be lost to the listening audience; it is only in a comparative close reading of the stanza that the significance can be seen. Bennett's poem reflects the battle ahead for Jamaica's independence, as a new nation emerges, just as Wolfe's poem foregrounds another battle ahead. The poem's intertextuality is mediated Creole expression and, I would argue, proverbial thinking. The poetic lines which this stanza ends with — 'not a fight bruck out, not a bad wud shoul / As Independence was celebrated' — could be understood as Bennett making new proverbial speech. Here we can see reflections of the proverbial characteristics which Norrick identifies, such as pithiness, didacticism, and traditional expressions. The fact that the message is condensed and reflects a cultural moment of significance for the Jamaican people responds to the weight of historicity that is embodied in proverbial thinking; Wolfe's source poem is creolized into a pithy statement about how independence was gained. Furthermore, the lines also carry with them a didactic quality, where the reader of the epistolary poem is told that the Jamaican people won Independence non-aggressively; in other words, Bennett is teaching us about non-violent nation-building through a distinctive mix of intertextuality and proverbial thinking.

Miss Lou Yes M'Dear: Linkage and Repetition Within Creole Creative Utterance

As we look at examples from two specific recordings in this chapter, *Miss Lou, Yes M'Dear* and 'When Trouble Tek Man', it is important to take forward the issues debated above concerning the Great Divide between oral and scribal, and the concepts of place and locality which Bennett emphasises.⁵⁷⁴ In my analysis of the recording of *Yes M' Dear* I speculate that there is a carefully planned linkage of the tracks where the notion of place

⁵⁷³ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 116.

⁵⁷⁴ Bennett, *Miss Lou, Yes M' Dear*, Island Records, 1983, LP; "'When Trouble Tek Man, Pickney Boot Fit Him!' Miss Lou Talks Jamaican Proverbs." YouTube Video, Posted by "National Library of Jamaica", 2012.

and home are important to the structure of her recording. In both recordings we shall also see the dichotomy between what appears to be spontaneous live performance and yet what is more likely scripted and crafted by Bennett with great attention to detail. In *Miss Lou Yes M'Dear*, Bennett incorporates every genre of her own work – songs, parables, proverbs, monologues, stories and poetry.⁵⁷⁵ The concepts of ‘spontaneity’ and ‘authenticity’, of seemingly effortless speech is one that Dora Ahmad and Shondel Nero address in their discussion of the paradoxical complexity of vernacular literature. They note that:

vernacular literature has the appearance of immediacy (both in the sense of being newly created and also being unmediated by social propriety or literary convention) but in reality, it is highly crafted and not spontaneous... the appearance of spontaneity contained within a piece of vernacular writing, in fact, comes from hard work that then erases its own presence.⁵⁷⁶

Equally, they write that vernacular literature also involves more than the element of transcription and that we need to recognise that:

authentic expression is itself fabricated and that vernacular literature always involves an element of performance one that both emphasises and understands its own performativity. As such it allows us to recognise the subtle, complex and constant negotiation between authenticity and fabrication.... To summarise this paradox, vernacular literature is authentic – or at least authenticist – in appearance and sometimes in intent, while in reality it is inevitably manufactured.⁵⁷⁷

Although Ahmad and Nero are concerned with writing, both of these issues come into play when discussing Bennett’s performances and her presentation of the proverbs.⁵⁷⁸

To consider how Bennett was working to a carefully thought-out plan, I have examined the linkage between the tracks and identified that there is a thread of three ideas that she weaves through this one-hour performance: these broader themes follow the pattern of language, travel and home. These themes echo the tropes I have been looking at throughout the thesis and in the discussion above on Bennett’s performance. As for every deceased performer, there is necessarily a finite amount of material. With Bennett, I have found that she often repeated her material in the shows that I am able to access. There may be two

⁵⁷⁵ Bennett, “Yes M'Dear”, LP.

⁵⁷⁶ Ahmad and Nero, “Productive Paradoxes”, 79.

⁵⁷⁷ Ahmed and Nero, “Productive Paradoxes”, 79.

⁵⁷⁸ I refer back to the archival pages of the monologues in Chapter Three where the meticulous preparation and planning was recorded in the images attached.

reasons for this, the first being that one learns by repetition: children learn by rote, and, as educating her audience is vital for Bennett, repetition of proverbs, stories, monologues and songs allows the audience to remember them better. She uses this repetitive technique as a didactic tool in her other work, as she herself explains: ‘I have a show, *Ring Ding...* I make certain the children know about their songs, like lullabies...’. She repeats: ‘I make certain children know traditional games you see.’⁵⁷⁹ Secondly, repetition allows for easier memory of material for the performer. The proverbs in particular arguably act as epithetical and mnemonic tools for Bennett since she has many at her finger tips. She can quote them whilst summoning up what she will say next as part of a series of crafted transitions that are experienced as a spontaneous flow.

Bennett starts this performance in *Miss Lou Yes M’Dear* with a song, ‘Come let me hole yah han gal’, and immediately says ‘that is a Jamaican welcome song — sing with me!’ From the start she engages the audience, interacting with them as part of a two-way exchange, almost creating a party atmosphere. However, there is a slipperiness to the comment ‘that is a Jamaican welcome song’ in that this is a culturally inclusive comment with people experiencing the invitation in different ways. There are several invitations layered in the complete comment: although the first phrase suggests that the audience need educating (‘that is a Jamaican welcome song’) the second phrase ‘sing with me’ carries the assumption that the audience can and will sing along with her. She is in fact leading us all to be able to sing the song, so she is still teaching and is inclusive in her didactic framing. Even in this short invitation, ‘that is a Jamaican welcome song — sing with me’, we see Bennett guiding the audience with a well-constructed and sophisticated format. She is making a considered decision to invite the audience here, where once again it feels like it is spontaneous but carries the practiced effect of authenticity that helps her to connect to her audience.

Bennett’s repetitions draw creatively on her full body of work. After the first song, Bennett refers to her Aunty Roachy, and performs a variation of the monologue in *Aunty Roachy Seh* on ‘Jamaican Language’.⁵⁸⁰ She says:

⁵⁷⁹ Bennett, “Yes M’Dear”, LP.

⁵⁸⁰ Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 1.

My Aunty Roachy vex when she hear that Jamaican language is “corruption of the English language”. English is a derivation but Jamaican Dialect is corruption! What an unfairity! We derive too!⁵⁸¹

The inclusivity of the pronoun ‘we’ shows Bennett building up a community around her in performance. Notably, Bennett’s language is taking on a proverbial charge where ‘English is a derivation but Jamaican Dialect is corruption’ is voiced like an adage — short, didactic and building on established knowledge — but in Bennett’s voice we know immediately its wisdom is to be rejected. ‘We derive too!’ becomes an empowering slogan, equally short and didactic but offering new ways of thinking. She continues to use this pronoun to involve the audience when she says, ‘All this folklore and culture from all the people who have lived in the country and we just use it and now we have a real West Indian, Jamaican culture’.⁵⁸²

This short statement summarises Bennett’s commitment to collect, preserve and communicate a ‘real’ Jamaican folklore and heritage. She continues to bring the audience into her way of thinking about the derivation of the Jamaican language:

now hear sinting about the English language, the English is ‘derived’ but Jamaican is ‘corrup’ – but Jamaican is ‘derived’, now hear de word, derived, Jamaican is derived! Yes my Dear! My Aunty Roachy seh, the basic thing we are derived from is the African language...

When the Asian culture and the European culture
buck up on African culture in the Caribbean people,
we stir them up and blend them to we flavour!

we shake them up and move them to we beat,
we wheel them and we tun them and we rock them
and we sound them and temper them

⁵⁸¹ My transcript from *Yes M’Dear*, CD; LP, *Yes M’Dear, Miss Lou, Live*. For simplicity I refer to the CD recordings in future references as it is easier to note the timing of each reference.

⁵⁸² My transcript *Yes M’Dear*, CD (5.14)

an lawks de riddim sweet.⁵⁸³

She recites the words almost like a poem which is why I have presented the lines accordingly to represent the pauses. In performance particularly the audience can hear the beat in the repetition of the word ‘them’, both within the lines and stressed at the end of lines like a base note – ‘we wheel them and we tun them and we rock them’. The rhyme scheme of ‘beat’ and ‘sweet’ is noticeable, framing the second quoted stanza, and the explosive ‘t’ creates a clear and strong ending. Returning to the inclusive pronoun ‘we’, the anaphoric repetition illustrates Bennett harnessing poetic forms which are inherent in the structure of the language not just the performance. Bennett laughs when she performs this poem, and the audience laughs with her, adding to the feeling of building a community as the audience contributes to her live performance. Her voice vacillates when rolling the words around her own tongue, and she adds stress to the words ‘flavour’ and ‘beat’, encouraging us to consider the distinctiveness of Caribbean expression. It is interesting to notice that she calls on ‘my Auntie Roachy’ here which stresses that her narrative method is composite and complicated — here we have Miss Lou, and Louise Bennett in performance, calling on a third person, Auntie Roachy, to voice the narrative.

In this section of *Yes M’Dear*, she alludes to (but does not perform) her famous and vibrantly humorous poem ‘Ban’s a Killin’, where she ridicules the idea that ‘dialec’ is inferior:

Dat dem start fi try tun language
From de fourteen century-
Five hundred years gawn an dem got
More dialec dan we!

Yuh wi haffe kill de Lancashire,
De Yorkshire, de Cockney,
De broad Scotch ad de Irish brogue
Before yuh start kill me!⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸³ My transcript *Yes M’Dear*, CD (5.26 – 6.12) In speech form, this has pauses, exclamations such as ‘Lawks’, and run ons which are hard to convey in the transcript.

⁵⁸⁴ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 4.

She responds to this idea in performance, saying that ‘we don’t need to be ashamed — we have a wonderful heritage of songs and stories and proverbs and language, and the rhythm in the language’.⁵⁸⁵

It is important to notice the intertextual layering within Bennett’s performances of her own monologues and stories, and the leaps that her audiences might make to the allusions within these performances to her other works, such as her poetry, as illustrated above. In the monologue ‘Jamaican Language’. Bennett does not incorporate any of her poems but in this performance we see how she is able to use her performance as a creative link to her poetry and commentaries. This consolidates my wider argument that her works are intrinsically linked to each other and speak to each other across genres. For instance, as the performance continues, Bennett performs all but one verse of her most recognised poem, ‘Colonisation in Reverse’, which raises claps and whistles from the audience.⁵⁸⁶ The placing of her works alongside each other also reinforces the didactic drive in her performances, a point which she continues to reinforce in this recording. She pauses in her performance to explain that ‘dutty tough’ does not mean dirty but comes from the word ‘ground’ in the Twi language — ‘Dutty tough – the ground hard, yes ma’am’.⁵⁸⁷ I have heard her explain this in other interviews, again teaching an awareness of the Creole language and heritage by repetition. The themes also seem particularly significant given that this performance was recorded in London and so framed within a diasporic setting for a potentially diasporic audience.

The two other themes by which Bennett links the tracks of her performance, are those of travel and home. This allows her to tell stories of going abroad but then allows her to return to her third theme of home. She says in the performance that even when we go away ‘we will never forget home though... we come home at festival and Christmas time’. Her reference to Christmas is also a reminder to those who know how she first got into radio speaking her Christmas message in Creole to those back home. She goes on to say that of course ‘everyone brings something home for Christmas as long as it is foreign’ and this is the sequester she uses to lead into two more poems, ‘No Lickle Twang’,⁵⁸⁸ and “‘Dry-foot

⁵⁸⁵ My transcript *Yes M’Dear*, CD ‘Long Time Gal’ (5-6.24)

⁵⁸⁶ Bennett, *Yes M’Dear*, Long Time Gal CD (17.06-18.12) for the text of this poem see Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 117; *Jamaica Labrish*, 179.

⁵⁸⁷ Bennett, *Yes M’Dear*, Long Time Gal CD (8.14).

⁵⁸⁸ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 3; *Jamaica Labrish*, 209.

Bwoy'.⁵⁸⁹ She performs lines from both poems: from 'No Lickle Twang' she quotes 'Yuh spen six mont a foreign, an / Come back ugly same way?'.⁵⁹⁰ In performance, the stress is on the word 'ugly' which also raises a laugh from the audience. From 'Dry Foot Bwoy' she quotes the lines, 'For me notice dat him answer / to nearly all me seh / was 'Actually', What', Oh deah! / An all dem sinting deh'.⁵⁹¹ She expresses these words in Standard English and with an exaggerated accent, emphasising a dramatic voicing of the poem. Moreover, for those members of the audience who know Bennett's work in print, it is a striking instance of what Gingell calls Bennett's 'see-hear aesthetics', where hearing Bennett's dramatic voices complements any reading of it. She then leads into a story about her cousin who has a guest house at the top of a hill and rents out his car where the only problem is that the trunk doesn't close. I transcribe part of the narrative here:

A woman got to the top of the hill in the car, but when she got out she shouted – 'help, I 've been robbed!' 'Lady, who robbed you?' 'I don't know but I had a case of whisky in the trunk at the foot of the hill and it is not there now. Call the police!' At the same time we heard a shout 'Hold dog on! Hold dog on!' [here Miss Lou raises her voice and mimics the call] and a man arrives carrying two bags. The woman asks him where he got the bags and he explains that he found the whisky at the bottom of the hill and carried it up. She looks into the bags and exclaims, 'Goodness, it's all there! I'd like to give something to you and the little boy'.⁵⁹²

It is here that the first proverb is quoted when the man comments on her assumption that she had been robbed. He says: 'A man of understanding holds his peace' (no translation of the proverb is given in context) but the wider understanding is that even if the man has taken offence at her assumption, he does not say anything.⁵⁹³ Instead he continues to say that this was an act of kindness among neighbours and quotes the second proverb: 'A friend is finer than fine gold'.⁵⁹⁴ Miss Lou finishes this story by saying 'so that brings out a

⁵⁸⁹ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 1; *Jamaica Labrish*, 205.

⁵⁹⁰ Bennett, *Yes M'Dear*, Long Time Gal CD (21.45) for the text of this poem see Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 3, lls. 19/20.

⁵⁹¹ Bennett, *Yes M'Dear*, Long Time Gal CD (23.37) for the text of this poem see Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 1, lls. 17-20.

⁵⁹² Bennett, *Yes M'Dear*, Caribbean Rhythm CD (3.22).

⁵⁹³ Bennett, *Yes M'Dear*, Caribbean Rhythm CD (6.04). This is not included in the *Proverb Manuscript*.

⁵⁹⁴ Bennett, *Yes M'Dear*, Caribbean Rhythm CD (6.23). Bennett records this proverb in *the Proverb Manuscript* as 'good frien better dan money a pocket'; Humanity serves one better than material things (*Friendship*, 3).

proverb – Every fish in the sea is no shark’.⁵⁹⁵ Notably she speaks each proverb in Standard English, perhaps to make them stand out more clearly. Here, the translations in the *Proverb Manuscript* give us a wider interpretation of what the proverbs mean when taken together in this context. The translations stress that material things are less important than human kindness, and that it is good to appreciate the good things in life. This adds weight to the values that the man holds, even in the face of an accusation by the lady. Equally, the headings that the proverbs are under in the *Proverb Manuscript* also stress the idea of *Friendship* and *Consolation* which underpin the story that Bennett is relating, and the heading *Hope* adds an extra dimension of positivity to the proverbial impact. Bennett embeds the proverbs of the Jamaican culture which she spoke about at the beginning of the recording, again relying on a communal understanding. The phrase she uses in the performance, ‘so that brings out a proverb’, reminds us of the idea of an implied proverb that I have discussed in earlier chapters. This reasserts Bennett’s practice of mixing explicit and implicit proverbs into her storytelling and performative practice.

The discussion on the extract above leads us to think that Bennett crafted her works skilfully and deliberately, where the effect of spontaneity is created through careful and meticulous preparation. This is shown where she uses the flow between certain tropes and where the repetition of material is used as aide memoir. In this extract we still see that Bennett’s drive for didacticism is ever present, even in the short invitation at the start of the record where she reaches out to the audience to encourage them to join in and teaches them as she performs. Her performance is joyful and the beat of the mento, with her musical renditions of the street cries and the interjections of the ‘ha-ha’ all add up to Nettleford’s description of her as a ‘poet of utterance’. We see once again that proverbial thinking is central to her practice and in this extract she uses her bank of proverbs as a form of mnemonic and epithetical tool. In the following extract of a live performance, Bennett focuses even more on the proverbs as an element of Jamaican philosophy.

⁵⁹⁵ Bennett, *Yes M’Dear*, Caribbean Rhythm CD (6.33). Bennett records this proverb in the *Proverb Manuscript* as ‘Tengad every fish ina sea no shark’; Appreciation for the good things in life (*Consolation*, 25; *Hope* 6).

Proverbial Energies Within Performance: ‘When Trouble Teck Man, Pickney Boot Fit Him!’

When the National Library of Jamaica released a short video in 2012, they opened up a vital resource for the study of Louise Bennett. The 4:06 minute clip is a rare, recorded performance where we are able to see Bennett performing in person, in front of the camera.⁵⁹⁶ In this valuable black and white footage Bennett discusses proverbs, in particular the proverb ‘When trouble teck man, pickney boot fit him’.⁵⁹⁷ In the clip, she recites one of her own poems, ‘When Trouble Tek Man’,⁵⁹⁸ where she uses this proverb and we are able not only to hear her, but to witness her perform the poem and the introductory proverb. We must assume that this recording is part of a longer programme,⁵⁹⁹ but as this particular clip starts, we cut straight to Louise Bennett who is already sitting in a low backed chair, on her own, talking straight to the camera which is focused on a close up of her head and shoulders. The focus of the camera angle allows the viewer to feel as if Bennett is in the same space as them, creating a personal and intimate atmosphere. Throughout the clip, even as Bennett talks and slightly shifts her body position, the camera remains fixed and focused on her face, which captivates and holds our attention. Despite the fact that the film is in black and white, we can see that Bennett is wearing patterned clothes, a headscarf of the same pattern, and large solid hooped earrings. This is striking against the blank canvas of the background.

⁵⁹⁶ National Library of Jamaica, “‘When Trouble Teck Man, Pickney Boot Fit Him!’ - Miss Lou Talks Jamaican Proverbs”, YouTube Video, 4:06, Sept. 7, 2012, accessed Sept. 20, 2013 & June 20, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7htbzK69iA>

⁵⁹⁷ The word ‘pickney’ means children.

⁵⁹⁸ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 30.

⁵⁹⁹ To date, I have not been unable to confirm this supposition.



Figure 22

I refer to the person in camera as Louise Bennett. However, there are in effect four layers to the persona that we see in this clip. There is Louise Bennett herself, also known affectionately as ‘Miss Lou’. ‘Miss Lou’, as we know, is a nickname that Bennett has used in her published work, it is also the name Jamaican people call her, and it has now become an internationally recognised name for her. In this clip, the person we are also reminded of is Aunty Roachy, the key character in Bennett’s monologues, whose opinions and activities are always reported or performed by the narrator. In Chapter Three I discussed Aunty Roachy, who is a composite character representing Jamaican female candidness, who speaks the Jamaican language, and who embodies the fiery independent spirit of the street seller, the importance of extended family, and the knowledge of the community.

Bennett created Aunty Roachy in order to comment on Jamaican issues. She distances herself from the commentaries by using the Aunty Roachy persona, but equally, claims a familial relationship, calling her ‘My’ Aunty Roachy in the monologues. Opal Adisa describes Aunty Roachy in the following way: ‘Louise Bennett’s Aunty Roachy is the cultural voice of reason that serves as both guide and mentor to her beloved Jamaican people’.⁶⁰⁰ According to Adisa, ‘Bennett’s objective in creating Aunty Roachy was to come up with an organ for nation building, Aunty Roachy is a staunch Jamaican, full of pride, determined to “big up” Jamaican culture and guide the masses on different topics’.⁶⁰¹ In pausing to consider the terms that Adisa uses, such as ‘big up’ and ‘nation building’ and

⁶⁰⁰ Adisa, “Culture and Nationalism”, 134.

⁶⁰¹ Adisa, “Culture and Nationalism”, 128.

‘full of pride’, these echo terms I have used throughout the thesis as being key elements of the force behind Bennett’s works. These are framed within the discussions of locality and didacticism which I have also identified as driving her creative voice, either when read on the page, or when heard in her performances through different media channels.

The perspective that Jamaicans heard over the radio, from 1966 to 1982, can be considered as that of Aunty Roachy, mediated as we have seen by another voice: Bennett, Miss Lou or a performative version of Louise Bennett. She is always announced by the phrase ‘my Aunty Roachy Seh’ and this was the composite figure which helped the ‘average Jamaican to cope with the changing times and to embrace a more “Jamaican” identity, while instilling a deeper appreciation for their society’.⁶⁰² In this clip we can now see the blurred lines between Aunty Roachy, Miss Lou and Louise Bennett. Dressed in a colourful outfit of almost traditional costume, with headscarf and earrings it is tempting to see this character as Aunty Roachy, especially when we consider how Bennett incorporates the reported speech of Aunty Roachy in *Yes M’Dear*. In that performance there is no mention of the all-important Aunty Roachy in the discussion of Jamaican language, which encourages an inventive slippage between the characters of Miss Lou and Aunty Roachy. However, unfortunately the clip does not include enough footage to either show the character introducing herself or any of the familiar framing of Aunty Roachy that we see in the monologues.

The final and fourth persona in this clip, is that of the street seller, the higgler. Bennett acts out the part of the higgler, alternating between her own voice and the street cries of the market seller, as if she is on stage rather than performing to the static camera, so this diversity of persona captivates the viewer, creating a memorable mini performance within this short clip. The focus of this clip, as Bennett herself clearly states at the beginning, is to ‘talk about Jamaican proverbs — our Jamaican philosophy — it’s a big word but we have great philosophy in our proverbs’.⁶⁰³ Notably, she uses five proverbs in this four-minute clip. I refer to the *Proverb Manuscript* and the headings under which they appear. This allows the reader to take forward the wider interpretation that is afforded by the

⁶⁰² Adisa, “Culture and Nationalism”, 129.

⁶⁰³ See Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, 7-8. In the monologue, Miss Lou says, “All like de great philosophy of we Jamaican proverbs-dem.mmm”. As we have seen in Chapter Four, Bennett then cites 13 proverbs in relation to the ‘serious significance of Jamaican proverbs in their culture and tradition and birth right’, in order to convince Muches to ‘follow de philosophy a we Jamaica proverbs’. I draw attention to the monologue here as an example of the intertextual relationships between Bennetts’s own works, previously mentioned, where she draws on concepts and phrases that she has used across the different genres.

categorisation in the *Proverb Manuscript*. I have noted the five proverbs numerically and chronologically for ease of reference in the following discussion.

1) Cotton tree tumble down, meagre cow/dawg jump over it; when the mighty has fallen the lowly will take advantage (*class*, 30)

2) So cow a grow so him nose hole a hoppen – [spoken sotto voce, almost conspiratorial]; so you grow, so you improve in knowledge, yes? As we get older we get more knowledge [not in the *Proverb Manuscript*]

3) Howdy tenky bruk no square; how do you do, and thank you doesn't harm anyone [not in the *Proverb Manuscript*]

4) When trouble teck man, pickney boot fit him; When a man is in trouble he will attempt the impossible (*Misfortune*, 28)

5) Before me tumble dung me hole macca; choose the lesser of two evils (*Caution and Precaution*, 16).

The following analysis of this clip is framed by an understanding of the compelling and deliberate ways in which she uses these proverbs. Bennett communicates with the audience using seamless transitions between Creole and Standard English, where, notably, she glosses her own work whilst performing. For instance, when using proverbs 2, 3, and 4 above she breaks into her performance to explain certain Creole words, which builds a particular idea about performance, one that can be adjusted and edited as she recites. Silva incorporates this concept as part of 'live writing' which creates various performative layers that have to be understood as intrinsic to the performance and not separate from it. She writes:

The notion that *writing* can make *itself* present encourages the idea that is contained within my use of the term 'live writing' – that 'writing' is understood as an active verb in the present continuous, something that happens live in performance.⁶⁰⁴

Therefore, a tool (the gloss) which is normally associated with written textual representations now interrupts an oral performance and becomes *itself* part of Bennett's live performance. Later, it is also seen as serving a mediatory purpose.

⁶⁰⁴ Silva, "Live Writing", 63.

It is clear that Bennett brings to this mini performance a rich repertoire of skills and techniques: body language, vocal and presentation skills and her specific use of laughter. Bennett's motivation is also driven by her didacticism and this clip provides a valuable micro study of Bennett's constant desire to educate. Throughout the clip Bennett keeps returning to hold eye contact with the camera, and de facto, with the viewer. By doing so, she engages with the viewer personally. This one on one or face-to-face interaction reflects how a teacher would teach an individual pupil, which reinforces my argument that, for Bennett, her relationship with the audience takes on the specific role of teacher alongside that of entertainer. This is enhanced by the fact that the camera remains static and focused on her face, until it pans out at the end of the clip. Her face throughout is animated. Without full space in the frame for her arms, her hand gestures are restricted but her face is continually expressive. She continually smiles, moving her eyebrows up and down, and nodding her head to encourage the viewer to participate and agree with her. This is enforced when she points her finger at the camera, notably at the end of a proverb, to encourage the viewer to pay particular attention to the proverb and its meaning. Her body language is constantly inclusive of others — even when seated, she shrugs and uses open hand expressions to achieve this feeling of inclusion and intimacy.

Bennett also interjects with repeated asides of 'yes m' dear', which again speaks to the viewer. She frequently makes little comments such as this, which suggests that she is working out what to say next. This sounds, and looks, as if she is ad-libbing, which is a sign of a consummate performer (as captured in the still frame in Figure 22, she looks upwards as she ponders, just as many people do when they are thinking what to say next in everyday interactions). This could be viewed in relation to 'the authenticity and virtuosity trap' discussed earlier.⁶⁰⁵ However, in terms of this particular clip there is a suggestion that it is not as rehearsed or prepared or scripted as her other performances. In the clip, she uses the titular proverb to finish the poem ('when trouble tek man, pickney boot/ fit him') and not the one that finishes the poem in text ('before me tumble dung me hole macca').⁶⁰⁶ The interchanging of the proverbs suggests that she might have forgotten what she was saying, perhaps because it was not a fully prepared or rehearsed script.

⁶⁰⁵ Ahmad and Nero, "Productive Paradoxes", 78.

⁶⁰⁶ See the poem, 'When Trouble Tek Man' (Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 30).

In the poem Bennett illustrates the usage of the proverb ‘when trouble tek man, pickney boot fit him!’ through the story of a higgler and her niece.⁶⁰⁷ She explains that she wrote the poem in order to frame the proverb: ‘Now I’m going to tell you some verses that really illustrate this little proverb...’⁶⁰⁸

When reciting the poem, Bennett speeds up the delivery as she knows the poem by heart. She talks faster in Creole, then she slows down slightly to explain certain words or phrases in Standard English; for instance, she takes a moment to explain that the word ‘higgler’ means a market trader. Again, the aim here is to ensure that the audience is clear about what is happening in the poem. Her delivery of the poem is captivating; first, she imitates the cries of the higgler woman selling her wares:

Ackee! Pear!

Ripe plantain goin poo!

Me have breadfruit!

Here, her voice changes to a higher register to cry out, as she looks upwards and shouts like she is selling the wares in the market-place. She is playing the part of the higgler herself. We can observe the great variety of tonal levels in her voice where Bennett uses her voice as her own musical instrument. The viewer can hear the musicality in Creole, in her poem and in the proverbs.

Then, imitating the girl’s attempts, Bennett’s voice slides up on the scale to an even higher pitch, when she cries, ‘me too!’ It transfers on the register into the head voice. She herself says that the girl’s voice is a ‘scritch scratchy’ sound which she performs perfectly. It adds an element of humour for the audience, but within the context of the poem, the girl’s cry attracts a frustrated reaction from the higgler. At this point, Bennett’s expression becomes cross and she frowns to convey the higgler’s annoyance with the girl. When she discovers that the girl has sold all her wares, her face shows surprise in the widening of her eyes and almost in the shape of her mouth.

On the one hand, the poem creates laughter by building a humorous story. Bennett performs a kind of comedic ‘double act’ between the higgler and the straight part of the

⁶⁰⁷ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, 31. This poem was not included in *Jamaica Labrish* so we assume it was written later than that publication.

⁶⁰⁸ Interestingly, she calls them ‘little verses’ rather than a poem. Arguably the story is the focus to illustrate the proverb, and the verses are the medium she chose to narrate the story. It illustrates that proverbial thinking undoubtedly directed her creativity in writing the poem.

niece. This is a common comedic strategy: the clown and the straight actor. On the other hand, underlying the poem there is a more critical point to notice. A power dynamic is being acted out, where the niece undermines her aunt, dismissing her role as a higgler. The higgler has to work hard to sell her wares and make a living, and she symbolises a certain kind of Jamaican knowledge and power embodied in the female role of the market seller. The niece had lost her job as a nurse and needs money. Bennett's observation is that the higgler is already earning money and the niece would have to learn a new skill if she wants to earn. Her refusal to call out the wares properly frustrates the higgler. However, in an ironic twist at the end of the poem, and on point with the message of the proverb, the niece sells all her wares out of the necessity to earn. The niece, in effect, comes out on top. Culturally, there has been a shift between the old and the new, between the recognised trade of the higgler and the new voice of an up-and-coming youngster. This is an example where a deeper consideration of the text and the representation through performance is required. Bennett continues to play the performance for laughs, creating the voices and acting the parts, but this does not shield the audience from considering the power struggle occurring between the two different ethical and moral stances of different generations. Both stances are performed under the heading of the proverb 'when trouble tek man, pickney boot fit him!' Bennett does not return to the proverb in the performance, leaving her audience open to consider its meanings for the poem. We could say that in the poem the niece acts as the 'man' needing to fit herself into the higgler's life or 'pickney boot'. But Bennett's performance also encourages us to think about the costs of this approach to life, reminding us that even when a poem 'illustrates this little proverb', the meanings and uses of a proverb will not be fully pinned down. And of course, Bennett places it under the heading of *Misfortune* which may apply here to either the higgler or the youngster, or perhaps to draw attention to a more communal misfortune in the need to earn money as a higgler.

Bennett continually intersperses the clip with short bursts of laughter — it is not the 'big' laughter of big audience performances, but this is almost a giggle and therefore, more intimate. We understand that she uses laughter in many ways — as irony or to enable her to make pointed comments underscored by humour. However, there is a pretence within laughter which is key to the complexity underlying Bennett's performances. Everything, as she herself says, is couched in humour: 'I have found a medium through which I can

pretend to be laughing'.⁶⁰⁹ The quotation continues, however... 'otherwise, I would weep'. This is an important addendum to stress, as it underscores the pretence within the laughter that we have seen in the poem about the higgler. The slight to the higgler by her niece is representative of a slight to the traditional, time-served means of earning; and it becomes a class statement whereby the girl looks down on her aunt's position. It is clear that Bennett takes her role(s) as a commentator, a wordsmith, an artist, a writer and a performer seriously.⁶¹⁰ Therefore, underpinning this mini performance is, once again, the compulsion to validate the Jamaican language, cultural identity and traditional heritage, and in this clip we see how proverbial thinking frames these issues in open and complex ways.

But who is she performing to? The clip is available in the National Library of Jamaica's archive under the heading title "when trouble tek man, pickney boot fit him!" – Miss Lou talks Jamaican proverbs'.⁶¹¹ The recording is going out to an unseen audience, for whom, presumably, she wants to explicate these proverbs. The audience now becomes multiplied, first as a split audience: the "we" in the phrase 'we have great philosophy in our proverbs', refers to a Jamaican audience, and Bennett's own indigenous place within that society and culture. This would have been seen by a Jamaican audience, so Bennett is reaching out to a local understanding of the proverbs. The drive is to remind the Jamaicans to preserve, conserve and to engage themselves in the transference of proverbs through social interaction. Furthermore, another potential audience is those for whom Creole is not a commonly used form of language. Here the purpose of mediation would be to help those outside the culture to recognise the value and contribution that the Jamaican cultural heritage lays on proverbs. With its new digital life on YouTube the audience may also now include those distanced from their homeland in the diaspora. Bennett's mini performance could prompt them, through this channel, to remember, share, and preserve their Jamaican inheritance, even at distance. As noted, this clip would only have been seen locally in Jamaica at the time it was recorded and released; but it can now be accessed on YouTube by those in the diaspora today. This means that the audience becomes fluid, and this particular performance is now, through digitisation, not temporally or spatially limited or restricted. Therefore, the fact that Bennett glossed while performing becomes an

⁶⁰⁹ Scott, "Bennett on Bennett", 45.

⁶¹⁰ This ties in with Mervyn Morris's article "On Reading Miss Lou Seriously" (discussed in Chapter One). He was the first to advocate for Bennett to be taken seriously as a poet, and within that, for her to be recognised as an ambassador for the Jamaican language and cultural identity and traditions.

⁶¹¹ There is no information about the date of the recording or the title of the programme from which it is taken.

increasingly important component to the comprehension from a wider, and future audience. We see how the gloss has become intrinsic to the performance of the poem and of the proverbs, and not separate.

Mediation such as Bennett's is not just about internal or external politics of a postcolonial country; it is also about the fear of losing this channel of communication over generational time. Adisa writes;

Until about two decades ago, in Jamaica in particular, storytelling was still fundamental to the culture and much of what was and is referred to as Jamaican ethos can trace its genesis to one or more stories. While story telling continues and serves mostly as cultural memory and a source of information, the advent of satellite and the obsessive gaze towards the U.S. as a measure of culture have diminished its widespread impact and appeal.⁶¹²

Bennett anticipated all of these complexities, and her layered use of proverbs and the artistic skills she developed are central to her creative didacticism. The importance of didacticism is manifested in the manner with which Bennett deals with the proverbs — as seen in this clip, the proverbs are the stabilisers of the performance. The term 'stabiliser' can be viewed here first in terms of steadying the shape of the performance itself, whereby the proverbs create stability in the momentum of the performance. The regularity of the proverbs being recited and explicated creates a foundation to the performance. Secondly, stabilisation can imply the attention to the timing within the performance. Bennett pauses after each proverb, as if to give it space. This pause allows the audience to assimilate the importance of the proverb and contemplate its translation, meaning and uses. The pauses that Bennett leaves around the proverbs anticipate and leave room for audience participation, even when there is no live audience. She asks after each proverb: 'do you know what that means?', or she repeats the proverb twice, once with the translation and then what it means, in order to educate the viewer with a translation. For instance, she repeats the proverb 'Howdy and tenky bruk no square': the first time she gives the translation, how do you do and thank you doesn't harm anyone; then she repeats it, saying 'you see, 'howdy and tenky bruk no square' – good manners don't hurt anyone, yes m' dear'.

⁶¹² Adisa, "Culture and Nationalism", 126.

As stated, the space which she allows around each spoken proverb, utilising subtle pauses or moments of contemplation, allows the viewer to focus on the proverb and its possible meanings. The translation that she affords for the proverbs allows her to teach the audience what the proverbs can mean, and to place it in a meaningful context. Thirdly, the term ‘stability’ could imply a demand for concentration and attention on the proverbial thinking concerning societal issues that are threaded through the clip, particularly in the poem. Looking at the wider picture which this point raises, proverbs have historically been used to create a stabilising influence on the moral compass of Jamaican culture, providing constant lessons in behaviour and morality and encouraging social consciousness.

Using a quotation from Abrahams, Mieder emphasises this idea of stability within society:

Proverbs can be seen to regulate people’s relations with others by setting forth solutions to the problems that repeatedly arise between them, phrasing them in a way that is at one and the same time concise, witty, memorable, forceful and illustrative of past usage. Most importantly for their rhetorical strategy, they are phrased impersonally, so that the very personal problem at hand becomes universalised.⁶¹³

Mieder’s response to the quotation is to note that ‘what is at work here is the communicative or rhetorical strategy of indirection that is at work with verbal folklore genres in general and with proverbs in particular’.⁶¹⁴ We have seen Bennett deflect through using Aunty Roachy as a medium for her own opinions; similarly, the proverbs, which are vessels for the wisdom of many, are mediums through which teachers, and elders can direct, educate and stabilise the behaviour of the community.

To conclude, this valuable audio-visual recording shows the relationship that Bennett creates between herself and the viewer /audience is one of intimacy. It is clear that the constructed face to face nature of performances is important for Bennett where she exudes inclusivity, personality and professionalism. For her, this intimacy solidifies the notion of locality and place of Jamaican community and nationhood. This clip shows how she presents her performances as personal and conversational, and how, through her wide range of performative utterances, we witness her unique examples of non-verbal communication, as well as hearing the musicality of the Creole language. We know that her performances are skilfully crafted for all that they appear spontaneous, and notably this

⁶¹³ Abrahams, quoted in Wolfgang Mieder, “The Dynamic Qualities of Proverbs in Performance: Roger Abraham’s Pioneering Contributions to Paremiology”, *Western Folklore* Vol. 75, No. 3/4 (2016): 413.

⁶¹⁴ Mieder, “Dynamic Qualities”, 414.

clip show us how seamlessly she incorporates the proverbs as didactic tools. The space which she allows around each spoken proverb, utilising subtle pauses or moments of contemplation, allows the viewer to focus on the proverb and its possible meanings. In short, through her performances, Bennett invites us all to join her in her proverbial thinking.

Conclusion

This thesis has advocated for an approach to Louise Bennett's work through the organising principle of proverbial thinking. The synergy between proverbs and her poetry, monologues, Anancy stories and performances leads to a re-evaluation of the proverb as an art form moving between spoken and written texts, and in this way Bennett's work becomes a valuable site of proverbial expression. Looking at Bennett's specific use of proverbs, in close conjunction with her own collection in the *Proverb Manuscript*, allows us to see the breadth and reach of proverbial thinking in Bennett's work and the usefulness of this phrase as a critical term in Louise Bennett studies. Some of my approach to reading Bennett comes directly from the *Proverb Manuscript*. For example, the multiplicity of meanings that arise from the placement of proverbs under moral and thematic categories in the *Manuscript* advances a deeper understanding of Bennett's use of the proverbs in certain poems, monologues and stories. However, all of the discussions and explorations in the thesis are founded on the central relationship between Bennett's works and proverbs, and my chapters show that Bennett takes creative advantage of the multiplicity of proverbial expression and proverbial meaning.

Within the thesis I have explored several themes that underpin Bennett's works, such as the use of Creole; the multifaceted figure of Aunty Roachy where the narrator's voice is complicated by the different personae represented in that figure; understandings of the 'local'; the complexities of the terms 'folk' and 'folklore' and how they relate to Bennett; the issues of recording; performance, and the issues of authenticity and spontaneity. Norrick's definition of proverbs as self-contained, pithy, traditional expressions with didactic content and fixed poetic form has provided a framework to explore the proverbial impact on the different genres of poetry, monologues, Anancy stories and performance.

However, it is not only the specific analysis of proverbial impact on each of the genres used by Bennett that has carried weight in this thesis. The idea of proverbial thinking fuses together themes of the folk, and folklore, genderedness, Creole expression and the 'local', allowing me to explore the coherence of Bennett's multimedia work. Proverbial thinking has created a central lens through which to discuss the important themes and interests that

are raised when looking at Bennett as a creative artist in Jamaica from the 1940s, through the gaining of Independence, and into her later career.

In discussing Bennett's use of Creole several issues were raised. Historically, Creole was considered 'a prism of languages a submergence of imported language where its status was one of inferiority'.⁶¹⁵ Another characteristic of the Creole that Brathwaite discusses is that the 'nation language originates first of all from an oral tradition. The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word'.⁶¹⁶ The fact that it was a spoken oral language, as Mervyn Morris has shown, initially limited Bennett's reception as a recognised poet. She fought against this throughout her career and it is testament to her persistence that she is now regarded as a national hero who validated Jamaican language. Her role in cultural expression is summed up in this statement: 'no single individual has been more responsible for the Jamaican nation's emancipation from colonial cultural slavery'.⁶¹⁷

Bennett's own identity as a narrator was multifaceted. My argument has been that attention on the figure of Aunty Roachy allows us to consider many personae – the narrator, Miss Lou, female elders, and Bennett herself. Therefore, the figure of Aunty Roachy always needs to be distilled through these personae, and as such there is a complexity and nuance to the figure who is central to the monologues discussed in Chapter Three. The notion of the 'local' is also teased out in Chapter Three where Bennett / Aunty Roachy / Miss Lou / the narrator present a commentary on local issues throughout the periods of pre and post-independence in Jamaica. In Chapter Two, I briefly discuss the way in which Bennett's use of the folk directs her approach to gender and feminist issues through the Tante figure, another form of the Aunt figure representing the composite woman. These issues are linked to Bennett's proverbial usage, where the proverbs give an understanding of her composite approach to gender from within her poetry.

The use of the *Proverb Manuscript* prompts various interpretations of the proverbs in Bennett's poetry and gives a unique and multiple perspective on the significance of proverbial thinking for this genre. In advocating that her poems can be linked by proverbs, I suggest a poetic conversation across Bennett's poetry through proverbial thinking. This

⁶¹⁵ Brathwaite, 'History of the Voice', 261-262.

⁶¹⁶ Brathwaite, 'History of the Voice', 271. For his differentiation between nation language and dialect see 'History of the Voice', 266.

⁶¹⁷ Morris, *Miss Lou*, 39. Quote from Kevin O'Brien Chang, 'Miss Lou for national heroine, anyone?' *Sunday Herald*, 22 March 1998, 4C [unavailable].

notion of a poetic conversation has also led me to consider Bennett's performances, which I explore in Chapter Five. Recordings of her live and studio performances are rare because economic circumstances led to many of her radio recordings being taped over. However, I have shown that there is still a rich body of recordings to consider. The recordings I have used, in conjunction with the archival material noted in Chapter Three, raise important questions about authenticity and spontaneity in performance. It becomes clear that Bennett prepared immaculately and thoroughly, and therefore, what appears as spontaneous was meticulously prepared in advance. This is not to detract from her performance skills as we equally see the talent and joie de vivre that she brought to each of her performances.

This thesis uses the *Proverb Manuscript* to explore a unique perspective of Louise Bennett's work, where the placement of proverbs under moral and thematic headings enables me to offer a different commentary to her works. The *Proverb Manuscript* is a valuable addition to the legacy of Louise Bennett, where we can see the importance she placed on collating, preserving and 'translating' the proverbs. The value of the *Proverb Manuscript* for scholars of Louise Bennett's work is clear and editing it for publication is a short-term objective.

The recognition of Louise Bennett within Caribbean and Postcolonial Studies has created a wide-ranging critical conversation about the significance of her work. My research has benefited from this on-going debate. In particular, the 2019 centenary of Louise Bennett's birth provided focus for celebrations. These celebrations illustrate how much she was loved and admired and show her impact in validating Jamaican language and identity. Her legacy still clearly reverberates today.

To start the celebrations, Radio Jamaica News reported the launch of 'Miss Lou 100' as follows:

Minister of Culture and Entertainment Olivia Grange has officially launched *Miss Lou 100* — commemorating the centenary of the mother of Jamaican culture, Louise Bennett Coverley. *Miss Lou 100* is being celebrated over the course of 100 days, which started on September 1. The celebrations will include the official renaming of Gordon Town Square to Miss Lou Square by Prime Minister Andrew Holness on Sunday'.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁸ Radio Jamaica News, 'Miss Lou '100' Launched', 2019: Advert. <http://rjnnewsline.com/arts-entertainment/miss-lou-100-launched#.XhhqQYRkDUU.email>

The events were hosted as part of 100 days of celebration to honour Miss Lou who, to quote the report, was widely regarded as the ‘Mother of Jamaican Culture’. This initiative was spearheaded by the Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport.⁶¹⁹ Speaking at a Service of Honour and Praise at Coke Memorial Methodist Church in Downtown, Kingston, Minister Grange said: ‘Miss Lou devoted her life to restore and redeem the language of the mass of the people. Amid great criticism from the well-to-do who now ruled the society, Miss Lou almost single-handedly brought confidence and respect to our Jamaican Language’. Minister Grange said it was fitting to begin the celebrations at Coke Memorial Methodist Church, where Louise Bennett, at the age of 17, made her first public appearance, reciting a Jamaican dialect poem she had written.⁶²⁰ The diverse approaches to the celebrations seem appropriate as a way to celebrate Louise Bennett and her impact on Jamaican cultural expression.

Throughout the thesis, I highlight Bennett’s persistent use of Creole which validated the culture and identity of the Jamaican people. I also highlight the multiplicity of interpretations through proverbial thinking and this is mirrored in the breadth of events held to honour Bennett in *Miss Lou 100*; for instance, Jamaicans were encouraged to visit the Miss Lou Archives at the National Library of Jamaica (NLJ) to learn more about the life and work of late cultural icon Dr. the Hon. Louise Bennett Coverley.⁶²¹ Exhibitions were mounted all over the island in parish offices and parish libraries by the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission (JCDC) as part of the celebrations for the centenary anniversary. Notably, the way that the celebrations were recorded and heralded also echoes the different forms of media that Bennett embraced as her career progressed. For instance, celebratory events were announced by *The Jamaican Information Service* which carried an article on a cake cutting ceremony which was attended by Fabien Coverley, her adopted son.⁶²² *Jamaicans.com* carried an article about a floral tribute.⁶²³ *The Gleaner* promoted

⁶¹⁹ Rochelle Williams, ‘NLJ to Stage several activities to remember Miss Lou’, Jamaican Information Services, 2019., <https://jis.gov.jm/nlj-to-stage-several-activities-to-remember-miss-lou/>

⁶²⁰ Jamaican Information Service, Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and sport, “Grange Launches 100 day tribute to Miss Lou” 2019. <https://jis.gov.jm/grange-launches-100-day-tribute-to-miss-lou/>

⁶²¹ Rochelle Williams, “Miss Lou Archives on display at National Library”, Jamaican Information Services, 2019. <https://jis.gov.jm/miss-lou-archives-on-display-at-national-library/>

⁶²² Jamaican Information Service, “Photos: Cake cutting ceremony for Miss Lou”, 2019. <https://jis.gov.jm/photos-cake-cutting-ceremony-for-miss-lou/>

⁶²³ Elaine Hartman Reckford, “Floral Tributes for Miss Lou on her 100th Anniversary”, Jamaican Information Service, 2019. <https://jis.gov.jm/floral-tributes-for-miss-lou-on-her-100th-anniversary/>; another article about the floral tribute was printed in *Jamaicans.com*, staff writer, “A special gathering – Miss Lou centenary Floral Tribute, 2019 : <https://news.jamaicans.com/special-gathering-miss-lou-centenary-floral-tribute/>

events in its commemorative article on Miss Lou's 100th Anniversary and the Entertainments section of *The Gleaner* carried an article on her influence on music.⁶²⁴ And it was not just the local Jamaican population that were informed of the celebrations; the *Jamaican Information Service* reported that 'Jamaicans at home and abroad were encouraged to attend the events in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Dr. the Hon. Louise Bennett Coverley, popularly called 'Miss Lou'. Special events have been organised in Jamaica and the diaspora over a period of 100 days, September 1 to December 10, to celebrate the Jamaican cultural icon'.⁶²⁵

All of these celebrations encapsulate the diverse way that Bennett influenced perceptions of and relationships with the nation and its culture throughout her career. Olivia Grange described Bennett in the quotation above as the 'Mother of Jamaican Culture'. In some ways this might be seen as a reasonable description of Bennett, given the matriarchal figure of Aunty Roachy and the volume of work that demonstrates Bennett's wide knowledge of Jamaican culture. And yet, in itself, the term 'mother' suggests that there was no culture before her — that she effectively gave birth to the culture of the nation. Contrary to this, it is that very culture, the culture of the folk, that is so important to Bennett. She recorded it, preserved it and spent her working life communicating that culture in a creative artform.

Bennett's proverbial thinking is particularly evident in the way she continuously modified her work to embrace the challenges and opportunities of different media from face-to-face storytelling, through to the channels of radio, TV, and the recordings of live stage performances. The recent centenary celebrations suggest that this adaptability and openness to creative experimentation, that I have shown to be fundamental to her proverbial thinking, already shape her afterlives and will remain key to re-evaluating her significance and rejuvenating critical approaches. More recently the Instagram dispute I discuss in Chapter Two suggests how complex Louise Bennett's legacy is likely to remain. For many Jamaicans, Bennett represents a particular incarnation of Jamaican culture, via her 'table-cloth costume' of the folk that has endured and is respected, even beloved. And yet for a certain younger online generation, represented by DJ Ishwana, who infamously

⁶²⁴ Michael Reckford, "Miss Lou, A pioneer in Jamaican popular music," *The Gleaner*, 2019. <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/entertainment/20191011/miss-lou-pioneer-jamaican-popular-music>

⁶²⁵ Elaine Harman Reckford, "Jamaicans at home and abroad to commemorate Miss Lou's 100th Anniversary", *Jamaican Information Service*, 2019. <https://jis.gov.jm/features/jamaicans-at-home-and-abroad-to-commemorate-miss-lous-100th-anniversary/>

claimed in her Instagram post that ‘ Mi nuh dress inna table cloth like Miss Lou’, Bennett is clearly being mediated in an entirely different way.

To close, I return to her mother’s sewing room as the place where Bennett first heard and understood the power of proverbs and which I discussed in Chapter Three. This was a maternal space, highlighting the knowledge that is learned at a mother’s knee, a space of gossip and commonality and a space to share an understanding of proverbs as part of everyday conversation. This is where Bennett first recognised the power of the proverbs as a form that she could use in multiple ways, and which she harnesses in her creative works. Proverbial thinking is the focus of this thesis, and this allows us to gain a fuller knowledge of Bennett’s literary complexity, where we can recognise the value of her works through an informed, open and expansive perspective. Proverbial thinking further allows us to view Bennett’s creative work as grounded in methods of thinking and speaking from Jamaica’s past and to see how these methods are constantly being adapted and reinvented, a reinvention which will continue for every one of us who encounter Louise Bennett for ourselves.

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[Discography](#)

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