LOUISE BENNETT

Jamaican Dialect Poet and Comedienne*

Nesha Z. Haniff

Meme, her grandmother, called her "Bibs"; everyone in Jamaica calls her "Miss Lou"; her name is Louise Bennett. She was born in Kingston, Jamica, on the seventh day of September, 1919. She was the only child of her mother, a seamstress, and her father, Bennett the baker, who died when she was seven years old. Her grandmother Meme was her favourite. She loved the warm, secure feeling of being rocked in her lap, and she was devoted to her Meme as many children are to their grandparents. When Meme wanted to go to the country to die, "Bibs" went with her.

> *I remember the day when the car came, and she said I was to go with her. She used to love me. And I loved that old lady, oh my gosh! When she died it was one of the saddest, saddest times in my life. I can remember that I was a little girl and how I wept.*

These ties to relatives and adults were commonplace in Miss Lou's youth. She was surrounded by loving, caring people.

> *This is the way I grew up. Beloved, when I tell you beloved, I just found a lot of love around me.*

Her childhood, although marked by the deaths of her father and Meme, was a happy one. She was an extroverted child who had a quick mind, an ear for sounds and a knack for recitation and performance. These qualities made her popular. She was always making up stories on the teacher, coining phrases, poems, songs and rhymes. She got into many scrapes and had her share of licks, but she remained irrepressible. She was never shy and she loved to perform.

All her performances were based on what she observed in the people around her, particularly adults. As a child, she wrestled with the double messages around her. The people she loved, and who loved her had dinkyninnies, sang folk songs, had wakes, and pocomanias and spoke in dialect. Yet at school you were supposed to recite English poems, speak "cor-

*This is reprinted from Nesha Haniff's Blaze a Fire. Toronto: Sister Vision, Black Women and Women of Color Press, 1988.

rectly" and write with "proper" grammar. The people she loved were different from the person she was being schooled to become. This was not true just for herself, but true for all the other children. When she began to create her dialect poems and recite them, she was in an unconscious way legitimizing herself and her friends. They listened to her not only because she was creative, funny and a good performer, but because in expressing the humour, beauty and love around her, she was speaking not only for herself, but for them too. She spoke what they knew and understood. What was Jamaican and black also belonged on centre stage.

> *When I used to go to school the folklore was very strong. You would hear people singing the folksong on the streets. The first time I heard a whole lot of them was when Meme died at the Dinkyninny. Dinkyninny is a function that they have to cheer up the family of a dead person. They would sing and dance. A lot of families don't allow "Dinky" in their yard,because, you see, anything black was sad.*
>
> *Anything that came out of slavery that was a tradition of the black people was not good. But the people were never phased, if you don't have it in your yard, then they will have it in another yard. As a child I couldn't understand why these songs were ostracised or disparaged.*

Seeing these cultural expressions prevail, despite restrictions to their very existence, was an important lesson in her early life. She appeared in all sorts of school plays and concerts. When she was nine years old she appeared in one particular play that was so successful that it was put on at other venues with special requests for her performance. At that time a man by the name of Cupidon saw Bibs. He was reported to be the greatest comedian in Jamaica. He was so impressed that he asked Bibs' mother to allow her to appear in a play. Her mother refused, saying that she was too young. Cupidon died in the 1940s. All throughout school Miss Lou performed and attracted many outsiders who came to see her performances, including Eric Coverly. He wanted her to perform in one of his Christmas shows and asked her mother's permission, which was given. It was her first professional performance; she was sixteen years old. She received one guinea (about five dollars). Much later she married Eric Coverly.

Miss Lou's ambition was always to write. At first she wrote poems, but they were in standard English, not in the dialect form for which she is now famous. Her first dialect poem was written when she was fourteen years old.

> *The first one. I can always remember the first dialect poem I wrote. I was in high school and I was going to what we call 'movies theatre' and you paid nine pence and you went to matinee. So now any day we come home from school early and we have matinee money, we could dress up in we clothes and we go pan tram car and we go to cross roads. Well my dear one day I was dressed and waiting on a tram car. This car was a market tram, it wasn't really a market car. The market people sat at the back with their baskets, so they cannot sit in front, so they are very annoyed when anybody come and sit in the back -- that is anybody who is not a market person. When I was on the tram that day, there were no seats in front, so I decided to go in the back. Well I was fourteen and portly and was dressed up so I didn't look like a fourteen year old. So one woman said to another woman,*
>
> *'Pread out yourself, one dress women a come. Pread out.' And me dear everybody start pread dem apron all over de seat dem. And I wrote the first set on this, when I went home I wrote it. The next day I tried it out in school and it sweet them.*

This was the start of her writing career, but most importantly, she began to write material which she herself performed. They were always based on her own experiences, things she observed or heard.

> *Then I started to write and I realized more and more that this is what I should do because this is what I understand and this is what the people were saying. More was being said in that language than in any other thing and nobody waslistening to them.*

Her writing and performing careers were

now inextricably linked. She belonged to youth groups, church groups and the Y.W.C.A.; these were the main arenas for her performances. Still she was determined to make it as a writer and went almost dally to the *Jamaica Gleaner*, the City newspaper, seeking to have her poems published, but with no success.

Soon one of her performances gained her a radio spot. Following her radio performance, she was asked to read some of her poems at a private dinner party the next evening. A guest at this party was the managing director of the Gleaner where she had been taking her writing repeatedly. He said, "Why don't you bring some of your work in tomorrow morning." She said "Certainly I will." She said nothing about seeing him previously. When she left the next morning to meet with him, her mother said "Whatever he offers to take it. This will be your chance to see how well you can do."

He offered her a weekly column in the *Sunday Gleaner*. Her pay was half a guinea, approximately two dollars and fifty cents. The column grew immensely popular.

> *I used to write on very topical things, on whatever was happening. It was in the Sunday Gleaner, and people would just buy the Sunday Gleaner to read it. People would say to me on the street, "I looking for you in the Sunday Gleaner."*

She became Miss Lou, a national figure. As the popularity of her work grew, she became conscious of the legitimacy and importance of what she was doing and started to study the Jamaican dialect in earnest and to gather stories and sayings and other expressions of the folk culture. She was constantly being invited to village festivals where people not only recited her poetry, but performed and interpreted her poems. She started a movement that took on a life of its own.

Although a natural and skilled dramatist on her own, she soon realized she needed additional skills and exposure. She was encouraged to apply for a British Council Scholarship. One evening she was performing at a function which was attended by a high-ranking official of the British Council. A week later she received a telegram from England offering her a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts.

The Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts is a highly prestigious institution. Only the very talented are accepted to study at this academy and only after competitive auditions. Miss Lou arrived at the Academy. It was her first time abroad and she was determined to succeed. The room was filled with people and she was standing there trying to get her bearings and to understand what she was supposed to do. A woman came into the room and said, "Numbers one to ten follow me."

> *Dem no give me no number and she calling numbers and I getting vexer and vexer now you know. "Numbers ten to twenty!" De room a get empty and empty. Me say dem people here very bad. Dem don't want no black people a dem yard. Next thing, the woman come back and said, "Number thirty-three!" No answer. "Number thirty-three!" No answer. "Number thirty-three!" No answer.*
>
> *I jump up and I gone wid her. Next thing I know I am on the stage and there is a flood-light on my face. I hear a voice say, "Number thirty-three will you do something for diction?" I said slowly, "you are a very funny old gentleman and very long and skinny." (Much laughter, she did not know that she was looking at a man who fitted this description exactly.)*
>
> *"Do something for dramatic expression."*
>
> *I said I didn't know I had to do something, but I'll do something in Jamaican dialect. This is about a Jamaican boy who came back from America and his mother is very upset with him because he doesn't have an accent. I did it slowly. After I finished he said,*
>
> *"Do another."*
>
> *I said I'll do a scene. It is a court scene and I will play all the characters in the court. I did this court scene and when I finish, he said,*
>
> *"Thank you number thirty-three."*
>
> *I ended up back in the same room I started from. Well the woman come back and she reel off a whole heap a number and said,*
>
> *"You may go home."*
>
> *Me sit down there and she sendin home everybody but she not sendin me. Finally she said, "Number thirty-three follow me." She took me aside and said,*

"You have passed on a scholarship."
I said, "But I am here on a Jamaica British Council scholarship."
"Jamaica?"
*Me dear it turn out I was in de wrong room, I was no number thirty-three. Number thirty-*three had mumps.

Miss Lou not only had a scholarship to attend the academy but having got there, she auditioned and won a scholarship on her own merit, error that it was. She did what she knew best, Jamaican dialect, and she did it in the highest seat of drama in England.

Of course we must learn English but I think that Jamaican people have more to say in their language than in English. It is the language of the country. It is three hundred years we been taking it. It is not a corruption of anything. It is, mind you, a regional dialect because it belongs to an island, we can't expect everybody to understand it. After all English only start pon a little island over there and we still learn it.

Louise Bennett's life has been full of awards, from a little book of Claude McKay's Poems given to her by Miss Biggs in school, to the Musgrave Gold Medal of Jamaica. The awards, the books, the poems, the articles are too numerous to mention. She has appeared on film, been written about, talked about and interviewed. She has taught and performed in England and in the Caribbean. 1986 marked her 50th year as a performer, an event celebrated in Gordon Town her home, and in England and North America.

Her eyes reflect the light and laughter that her artistry evokes. She has seen the Jamaica that she knew and loved at first disparaged and then take centre stage. Now the beauty and integrity in the language and culture of the Jamaican people is a force because Louise Bennett was among the first to stand up for it. In her book *Jamaica Labrish*, Miss Lou has a poem called "Him Deh Yah." It is a poem about the great black actor, Paul Robeson, who was an outspoken advocate for racial equality at a time when this was dangerous for a black man. Paul Robeson visited Jamaica in 1948 and the poem was written in commemoration of his visit. Some of the sentiments she expressed in this poem are today applicable to Miss Lou.

An doah de voice like it dah -
come out o'him mout part,
it soun to we like him dah -
An wen him done de clappin an
De Cheerin' from the crowd!