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The cinematic life of the Sistren Theater Collective: forays into biographical documentary

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ABSTRACT

This article explores two biographical video documentaries produced by the Sistren Theater Collective of Jamaica. Together, the documentaries, *Miss Amy and Miss May* and *The Drums Keep Sounding*, document the lives of three Jamaican women activists: Amy Bailey, May Farquharson and Louise Bennett-Coverley. Although video/film production never attained a prominent role in Sistren's approach to its activism, which focused on participatory drama to address issues of concern to working-class black women, the documentaries produced in the 1980s and 1990s allowed the Collective to expand its reach beyond the limitations imposed by the geographical proximity necessary for live theater. The article examines the structuring devices of these two biographical documentaries and interrogates how the utilization of the medium of video raises class-based ambiguities within the Collective's mission to celebrate the lives of Caribbean women.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore deux vidéos documentaires produites par la troupe nommée Sistren Theater Collective of Jamaica. Intitulées *Miss Amy and Miss May* et *The Drums Keep Sounding*, ces vidéos racontent en commun les expériences de trois activistes Jamaïcaines, notamment Amy Bailey, May Farquharson et Louise Bennett-Coverley. Même si la production des films/vidéos n'a pu atteindre un rôle proéminent dans l'abordage de l'activisme par Sistren qui, à travers le théâtre participatif, se consacrait aux problèmes particuliers des femmes noires de la classe moyenne, les documentaires produits dans les années 1980 et 1990 avaient facilité la troupe, Sistren, d'aller au-delà des limites imposées par la proximité géographique que toute pièce de théâtre nécessite. Cet article examine les éléments fondamentaux de la structure de ces deux documentaires biographiques et entame l'interrogation de la façon dont le moyen vidéographique dévoile des ambiguïtés de la troupe ci-dessus à propos des classes sociales, dans leur mission de célébrer la vie des femmes Caribéennes.

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The Sistren Theater Collective – a women's theater collective established in Kingston, Jamaica, during the era of Michael Manley's social democratic government in the 1970s – has survived several decades of difficulties in its attempts to use drama as a

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medium of social and political advocacy. This article explores two biographical video documentaries produced by the Collective. Together, the documentaries, *Miss Amy and Miss May* and *The Drums Keep Sounding*, document the lives of three Jamaican women activists: Amy Bailey, May Farquharson and Louise Bennett-Coverley. The article examines the structuring devices of these two biographical documentaries and interrogates how the utilization of the medium of video raises class-based ambiguities within the Collective's mission to celebrate the lives of Caribbean women, and foregrounds some of the limitations of the biographical documentary film.[1]

The Sistren Collective was established by 12 working-class women in Kingston in 1977, with Honor Ford-Smith of the Jamaican School of Drama as their drama tutor. Established during a time when the Manley government's democratic socialism promoted grassroots organization and cultural activity, Sistren was declared subversive and banned from radio and television (Ford-Smith 1989) only a few years later when the conservative opposition swept into power, and programs aimed at building popular power were dismantled. Denied funding from local donor institutions that dismissed them contemptuously – even after several years of drama training – as a bunch of "unqualified untrained street cleaners", Sistren was left reliant on "foreign grants or certain starvation in a society which did not pay for the kind of work we did. Our labour did not produce things which could be marketed for individual profit" (Ford-Smith 1986b, 5–6).

Nevertheless, Sistren went on to achieve international acclaim because its so-called "untrained street cleaners" developed a method of participatory drama and organization in response to the challenges that its members – initially mainly poor, working-class women – faced, and they used Jamaican Creole, which helped them reach working-class audiences. As Wilson (1993, 42) notes:

> They developed the technique – it has made them famous – of creating scripts using improvisation and the strong oral tradition rooted in African ancestry. They always began by examining their own experiences, but very quickly developed the technique of creating characters outside their own lives to enrich and add further meaning to their interpretation of their own social existence.[2]

As a theater collective, Sistren's activism primarily took the form of socially engaged drama, prioritizing interactive performative modes of engagement with those sectors of society it wished to reach. A number of the Collective's productions were staged at the Barn Theater in Kingston, a venue with largely middle-class audiences, but Sistren also targeted working-class women with whom Sistren members engaged in workshops in order to further explore an issue, and to come up with alternative solutions to problems and/or suggestions for action. The plays were developed through improvisation, scripted into short dramatic pieces which were then developed further in subsequent workshops. Initially drawing on personal testimony and experience for their choice of subject matter, the group went on to delve into the history of women in Jamaica in order to contextualize their present-day situations. Sistren's attempts to increase awareness of women's, particularly working-class women's, issues through the production of popular theater resulted in their first play – entitled *Downpression Get A Blow* – which dealt with the attempts of Jamaican women in the garment industry to form a union. *Downpression Get a Blow* also depicted the exploitative relations between the white

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American male management and the black female Jamaican workforce; one that took for granted the availability of women workers for sexual services. The play *Bellywoman Bangarang* highlighted the substandard conditions under which poor women are forced to deliver their babies. Other plays have dealt with poverty, rape, teenage pregnancy, domestic violence, unemployment and other social issues and, crucially, how these are related to one another. The importance of these themes is reiterated by the pervasiveness of violence against women in Jamaican society; a problem faced by some of Sistren's own members.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Collective's feminist activism through what today is often referred to as applied drama/theater attracted international interest.[3] As Smith (2013, 87) notes, "Sistren became the foremost women's popular theatre company in the Caribbean region in the 1980s through its combination of outreach workshops in urban and rural Jamaica and its sophisticated stage productions that were performed not only in Kingston and the Caribbean region, but internationally".

Within Jamaica, Sistren's focus on advocacy theater was aimed at increasing the social, cultural and economic sovereignty of women, particularly black working-class women, and the Collective developed a distinctive esthetic, rooted in the culture of this demographic sector, as noted by the group's drama tutor, Ford-Smith (1989, 31) who points out that Sistren cultivated

> an aesthetic which is based on the daily reality of Jamaican women combined with popular myths, images and dramatic poetry. The use of documentary investigations of women's lives, oral tradition, ritual and popular music have all combined to contribute to the development of Caribbean theatre and literature [… and] a series of screen-printed designs have created alternative visual images of women and gender.

Within this framework, the women draw on their own traditions of storytelling, songs, games and rituals, in line with a long tradition, in many parts of the Caribbean (and other parts of Africa and its diaspora), of protest and struggle expressed through seemingly commonplace cultural practices.[4]

Now, almost 40 years after its establishment, and still in existence after facing and adapting to numerous challenges – including a fire that destroyed the building housing the Collective's offices and archives in 2004 – Sistren's profile has changed substantially[5]:

> It has transformed itself from a part-time theatre co-operative to a full-time professional women's theatre collective and women-in-development organization, and now into a mixed gender non-government organization (NGO) that offers drama workshops and counselling services in some of Kingston's most economically disadvantaged communities. (Smith 2013, 87)

In the 1980s and 1990s, during a period when the Collective engaged in a number of auxiliary activities to supplement its funding and enhance its outreach programs, Sistren produced several documentaries shot on video. Although video/film production never attained a prominent role in Sistren's approach to its activism, the Collective decided to produce the documentaries as part of a fund-raising and educational outreach program. The choice of the documentary genre permitted the Collective to incorporate more of its research findings than the creative use of such information in fiction-based scripts would have allowed. In utilizing the medium of video, however, the

Collective addressed a different audience from its usual one of Jamaican working-class women: mainly a more international audience, including existing and potential foreign donors. This required a shift in its mode of address, away from its highly collaborative and participatory method of interacting with its theater audiences, arguably its greatest strength as a Collective. Nevertheless, utilizing the medium of video expanded the profile and reach of the Collective to an international one, eliciting substantial interest in its mode of organization, its objectives, and its methods at a time when questions were being raised about the ability of the subaltern to speak for themselves (Spivak 1988).

The documentaries were produced by Sistren Research which, at the time of the production of the documentaries, was the investigative and research arm of the Collective, the mandate of which was "to research the undocumented lives of Jamaican and Caribbean women who have made, or are making history".[6] Although the technical aspects of production were farmed out to independent/freelance personnel, Sistren generally utilized its own members to conduct research, write, produce, direct and perform in its video documentaries. Sistren's first video project, *Sweet Sugar Rage* (1985), explores the working conditions of Jamaican female sugarcane workers, and is also a documentation of the Collective's mission and its dramatic and educational techniques. Its second documentary, *Miss Amy and Miss May* (1990), profiles two Jamaican women from very different backgrounds, one white and one black, both social/political activists. Sistren's third production, *Moving On* (1991), reflects on the Collective's achievements and future possibilities. *Carrying A Heavy Load* (1992) utilizes a mixture of dramatic and documentary elements to focus on how the fact that "Jamaica is debt-rich" (Nettleford 1993, 173) affects working-class women in terms of their everyday lives. In 1994–1995, the Collective released *The Drums Keep Sounding*, a documentary profiling "Miss Lou", i.e. Louise Bennett-Coverley, folklorist, poet, actress and activist, who dedicated her life to winning respect for Jamaican Creole (also referred to as "dialect", "patois", "patwah" or "nation language"; all terms which are used interchangeably in this article) as a literary medium.

In this article, I focus on the two biographical documentaries produced by the Collective, *Miss Amy and Miss May* and *The Drums Keep Sounding*. Together they focus on three women activists in Jamaica – Miss Amy (Amy Bailey), Miss May (May Farquharson) and Miss Lou (Louise Bennett-Coverley) – in line with the mandate of Sistren to "research the undocumented lives of Jamaican and Caribbean women who have made, or are making history".

Most of Sistren's documentaries were directed by Cynthia Wilmot. Already in her 70s when she directed the two documentaries discussed in this article, she brought with her nearly 50 years of experience as a writer/director of documentaries and drama, first with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and then the Jamaican Information Service. In 2008, she was among six pioneers of the Jamaican film industry who were inducted into the newly established Jamaica Film Academy (*Six Pioneers* 2008).

Biographical documentaries are often included under the popular term "biopic", which encompasses documentary, fiction or the combination of documentary and fictional elements referred to as docudrama; nevertheless, in each genre, the "actuality" referred to in John Grierson's (1966, 147) characterization of the documentary as the "creative treatment of actuality" is over-determined by its biographical framework, held

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to account regarding the veracity of the subject's life depicted. The "creative treatment" is disciplined, it seems, by viewers, critics, scholars and/or those who personally know/knew the subject all holding the film accountable to a higher standard of fidelity to verifiable *facts* of the life of a historical subject over any attempt by a filmmaker to make visible what (s)he sees as the *truth* of that life.

Many documentaries incorporate re-enactments and a variety of visual and aural techniques to keep viewers engaged. In the case of documentary treatments of biography, notes Corner (2002, 97), "even if they involve dramatization they typically locate their subject within a discursive context of analytic exposition". In terms of structure, Rastegar (2013, 906) argues that "the biopic (either in fiction or in documentary film) is valued foremost for its veracity and structured around a single life-changing event that defines the subject's purpose/direction and provides the broader reason for the audience's interest in his or her life".

As a theater collective, Sistren makes effective use of its resources and skills in the performing arts to document the lives of three Jamaican women activists in the two documentaries under discussion in this article. The notion of a single life-changing event, however, is less a structuring framework for the biopics discussed here. Instead, Sistren's approach to celebrating the lives of the subjects of these documentaries revolves around two other structuring devices: the depiction of multiple memorable moments in each woman's life and her life-shaping relationships with significant others.

Miss Amy and Miss May

Produced in 1990, Sistren's second venture into video production was *Miss Amy and Miss May*. It was directed by Cynthia Wilmot, who conceptualized and directed the documentary. Spurred by the destruction of much of her 40-year collection of historical information and documents as a result of Hurricane Gilbert, Wilmot co-scripted *Miss Amy and Miss May* with Honor Ford-Smith. Using the surviving material, she had the lives of two important Jamaican women captured on film/video. *Miss Amy and Miss May* won a special jury prize at the 1990 Images Caraïbes (Kramer 1992).

Miss Amy and Miss May explores the lives of two women, one black and one white, both of whom were already actively involved in women's movements in Jamaica in the 1930s, well before the second wave of feminism in the USA The film combines interviews with the two women, Amy Bailey and May Farquharson, dramatized re-enactments of their long and sometimes rocky friendship and archival film footage and stills. Each introduces the other; as a creative approach, this formal technique facilitates an easy fusion of past with present while reflecting on issues of race, gender and rights for the elderly.

The documentary opens with a cameo shot (i.e. a small oval frame) with Amy Bailey, played by Sistren member Pauline Crawford, and May Farquharson, played by fellow Sistren member Honor Ford-Smith, seated closely together. They comment on the fact that together they made a "dangerous team" as two Jamaican women who fought for the rights of women, black people, the elderly and the poor. The opening credits, accompanied by the song "Side by Side", reinforce the notion of the women constituting a team. The documentary proper opens in the present, with the two women, now in their 90s, who, in separate interviews, reflect on their pasts. According to Amy Bailey,

what attracted the women to each other was a mutual recognition of what she (Bailey) refers to as an "imprisoned splendour".

This is followed by a sequence in which Pauline Crawford, as the young adult Amy Bailey, provides biographical information and historical contextualization of the development of Farquharson's activist consciousness. Period photographs are accompanied by voice-over commentary by Crawford, illustrating the racially and economically polarized nature of Jamaican society. A transition to a dramatization of May Farquharson as a child follows. Beginning with a shot of Crawford, again as the adult Amy Bailey, standing on the porch of a large house, the shot presents a dual temporality as a little red-haired girl enters the frame, picking flowers. Farquharson, the daughter of a wealthy colonial sugar grower and an English socialite unhappy in the tropics, overhears her parents arguing over her father's involvement in the movement for improving labor rights and working conditions for plantation laborers. Still photographs of her (actual) parents are interspersed with the young girl's response to what she overhears. This sequence demonstrates that, despite her mother's conservative concerns about the acceptance and mobility of her daughters in colonial social circles, Farquharson's activism resulted from her father's insistence that he would not tolerate his daughters becoming "empty-headed clothes-horses".

The real Farquharson, now in a wheelchair, returns to comment on her father, later knighted, and his involvement in labor issues. This is followed by a sequence parallel to the earlier one in which Crawford, as Amy Bailey, had introduced us to the child May Farquharson. Now Ford-Smith, as an adult Farquharson, introduces the child Amy Bailey while standing in front of Bailey's childhood home. Cutting to a little girl, neatly dressed, skipping along in the garden, the camera pans along with her until she walks behind Ford-Smith. We learn that Amy Bailey is one of eight children born to a very proper, middle-class couple, both of whom are teachers (although her mother also works part-time as the local postmistress). Bailey's father organized the first union of Jamaican schoolteachers.

A cut brings us back to the present, with Farquharson remembering that she once got herself into trouble by referring to the Baileys, in a speech, as the royal family of Jamaica. In a dramatization that begins with another shot depicting a dual temporality there is, once again, a parallel to the earlier sequence on Farquharson, when the child May overheard her parents discussing her future. Both scenes reflect an effective use of off-screen sound, conveying the power of authoritative parental influence, and at the same time constituting a low-cost alternative to using actors to depict the parents visually. Bailey's parents inculcated in their daughter a belief that education is the only avenue for black social, political and economic uplift. This belief, as we later see, is the foundation of Bailey's commitment to social justice and equality.

The Baileys share a determination that their daughter would become a teacher, both disclosing a deep faith in education as the path to black Jamaican socioeconomic mobility. In a later dramatization clearly intended to suggest a memorable experience in the life of the young Bailey, she is seen as a child walking through the pews of an empty church. Bailey addresses the camera directly, as she explains the racial/social hierarchy in the seating arrangements, and the differences in the way people dressed when attending church. Revealing a sense of shame at the class differences between black people on the one hand and mixed-race and white people on the other, the young

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girl prays for help in becoming a good student, having pretty, tidy clothes and becoming "a proper Bailey".

The vignettes of representative moments in both women's childhoods establish critical influences on both women, particularly the values and beliefs of their parents. In the case of Bailey, these comprise the twin concerns of education and being "proper"; values with their roots in a middle-class background that was perceived at the time as uncommon for black people in the Jamaican racial hierarchy. In Farquharson's case, the influence of her father prevails over her mother's concerns about her daughters' social eligibility within their social circles (her parents are revealed to have later divorced). This early paternal influence is reinforced by exposure to similar attitudes espoused by a teacher at the fashionable Cheltenham Ladies College in London, which she later attends. The documentary presents the charity work of Miss Faithful, who took her young charges along with her to work amongst the poor, as a significant influence on Farquharson, including Miss Faithful's espousal of the belief that "privilege carries with it responsibility. One of the responsibilities of women of education is to help clean up the mess that men have made of the world!"

The documentary goes on to depict how both women become involved in their respective causes. Farquharson's interest lay in improving access to pension funds for the elderly, while Bailey was passionate about improving black access to jobs in government and the civil service. Both Bailey and Farquharson went on to write for the progressive newspaper *Public Opinion*. Bailey raised issues of racism and pigmentocracy in hiring practices, and Farquharson wrote on concerns for the elderly. Although they did not always share the same priorities, both women were also ardent supporters of birth control as a solution to many of Jamaica's social problems.

Significantly, a dramatized encounter between the women at a social gathering reveals both women's class biases. Note the following dialogue as Bailey responds to having Una Marson – a Jamaican poet, playwright, broadcaster and fellow activist – pointed out to her in the gathering.[7] She states to Farquharson:

> The other day I bumped into her in King Street, carrying a basket on her head. Now, you tell me, black women need to aspire to more than just higglering. We need dignity. And the only way to get that is through education.[8]

Farquharson replies:

> But Miss Bailey, I think you have to see that you can't expect people who sleep in cane fields and who suffer the most dreadful diseases to fight for education. First, you got to get them to stop breeding like flies and give them a decent place to live.

Feminist collaboration among women in the Caribbean has long been hampered by the unequal relations of power among women resulting from social class and pigmentational hierarchies within their broader social contexts.[9] According to Joseph (1980, 154–5), the impact of class on women is the most divisive of the class/race/gender grid, forming the major barrier to the growth of womanist/feminist consciousness in the Caribbean as "high-siddity" (high society) women, educated and professional or semi-professional, did not identify with their sisters of a lower socioeconomic status and guard their privileges. However, Reddock (2007, 4) notes that by the 1990s (when the documentary was released), "the primacy of class in social analysis had been

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increasingly undermined by the defeat of Marxism, the decline of the radical trade union movement and the emergence of social and economic neo-liberalism". Honor Ford-Smith (1989) notes that the Collective's own organization reflected broader societal hierarchies of power based on race, class and skin color, which created a certain level of tension among its members.

It appears that Sistren, in the interest of gender solidarity, uses its scripted dialog to level a veiled critique of the two women even as it celebrates their achievements. Bearing in mind that Sistren saw its mandate very clearly as reaching and empowering working-class black women – and that many of its own members were from that demographic sector – the issue of class biases *among* women hampering gender solidarity is not entirely overlooked.[10]

Amy Bailey and May Farquharson had begun to combine their efforts after their initial meeting in 1935, at a time when Jamaica was affected by labor unrest as workers went on strike in 1938. Period footage and a voice-over commentary reveal that black working-class women played a crucial role in these strikes – many of them leading the struggle and organizing marches and rallies – but that their participation received little recognition. Thus, by the 1990s, when "the language of class struggle was replaced by one of poverty alleviation in development thinking, a process to be accomplished by projects, programmes and micro-enterprise development, no longer through collective struggle and political action" (Reddock 2007, 4), it fell to Sistren to provide a reminder that working-class women did not passively await the benefits of concessions obtained by the efforts of middle-class activists, or of men.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that any critique of the class biases of Bailey and Farquharson remains muted in the documentary. For example, although both women are seen to have participated in organized struggles for women's suffrage, Bailey's faith in education and being proper appears to have played an over-determining role in some of her later choices; some of which were to have negative consequences. That Bailey opposed political enfranchisement for all women in Jamaica is generally glossed over in the documentary. In noting the class-based nature of women's movements in the Caribbean, Reddock points out that, while upper and middle-class

> black and coloured women […] sought to change their status vis-à-vis white women and men, their position vis-à-vis their working class sisters was never in question: not surprisingly, by mid-century both Amy Bailey and Audrey Jeffers voted against universal adult suffrage; i.e., extending voting rights to all – a right which they fought so passionately for themselves.[11] (Reddock 1989, 30)

As noted by Corner (2002) earlier, even dramatized documentaries are informed by a discursive structure aimed at analysis of the subject's life, decisions, actions and values, but as documentary filmmaker Paula Heredia notes, "portrait films" that are "all about people who are alive" face specific difficulties. Heredia observes that the "interpersonal dynamics of making a biographical or autobiographical documentary with the living subject of the film can be challenging" (cited in Cunningham 2005, 285).[12] As a documentary, *Miss Amy and Miss May* hesitates to take up an explicit exploration of the complexity of intersections of race, class and gender; an opportunity afforded by Amy Bailey's concerns and activities and May Farquharson's patronizing attitude towards those less affluent. On occasion, allusions *are* made, but without further

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elaboration. For example, in a dramatized re-enactment, Bailey addresses the first Jamaican women's conference held in 1939 by the Jamaican Women's League, in which she brings to their attention the essential role played by black working-class women during the labor strikes. "Let us not betray them", she states, yet her later refusal to support their political enfranchisement is left unacknowledged by the documentary's analytical address, missing the opportunity to explore the seeming contradiction in her political stance.

Such contradictions pose a difficult challenge for any biographical documentary underpinned by an activist purpose. Gregg (2007, 31) notes that "Amy Bailey […] encapsulates the paradoxes and inhabits the contradictions of her historical moment. She understands herself as part of a confident social group and can sometimes appear to be autocratic and elitist ('Our people should be forced to be decent even against their will')". In this case, the documentary aims to celebrate the life and achievements of a black female campaigner for social justice. Amy Bailey's years of activism in challenging received notions of male and white supremacy, her astute understanding of how the dominant media in Jamaica, for example, used mockery, parody and derision to denigrate those fighting to improve the rights of, and conditions of life for, black or poor Jamaicans, her campaigns to improve access to education, etc., all risk being seen as undervalued if such contradictions as her refusal to support universal enfranchisement for all women is explored.

Both women received several national awards, so they did not go unrecognized. The documentary begins its concluding phase with contemporary footage of photographs, newspaper articles and footage of women working as a comment on both the progress made by Jamaican women towards greater social, political and economic equality, as well as continuing inequities faced by women. Amy Bailey and May Farquharson observe, somewhat reflectively in this documentary, that they could have done more.

Sistren's dramatizations of aspects of both women's lives, as well as some of the encounters between them, betray the theatrical focus of the collective. Some of the dramatized segments display a rather "stagy" performance, the actors utilizing an acting style more suited to live theater than to the medium of film/video, which requires a more natural style of acting. The movement of the actors, use of gestures and facial expressions and the delivery of lines of dialog sometimes appear overly amplified. Dialog is delivered with a degree of enunciation and voice projection not necessary in a medium that utilizes microphones to pick up and amplify the human voice, and gestures and facial expressions need not be magnified, since variable lens magnification and camera movement can be utilized to draw the audience's attention and/or manipulate the audience's point of view.

The documentary ends on a humorous note as the two women, once again in a cameo shot, bicker about their disagreements. A grumbling comment in patwah by Bailey provokes a mocking response by Farquharson about Bailey's insistent refusal over the years to acknowledge any ability to speak patwah, or any knowledge of Jamaican folklore such as the Anancy stories. This suggests Bailey tried to distance herself from what she found embarrassing about Afro-Jamaican culture. According to Altink (2006, 1), "the light-skinned middle class tried to distance itself from the dark-skinned working class by identifying more with English than Afro-Jamaican culture".

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As is the case with Bailey, however, skin color and class values are not always neatly congruent.

Considering Sistren's own commitment to the recognition of patwah as worthy of social acceptance and its integration of patwah and other elements of Jamaican folk culture in its theatrical work, it is noteworthy that the Collective does not explicitly address this attitude by a substantial segment of the middle-class populace in Jamaica; at least not in this documentary. Sistren chooses, instead, to do so by focusing its next biographical documentary on a language activist who recognized the ways in which language hierarchies entrench unequal relations of power within societies.

In her Introduction to Sistren's *Lionheart Gal* (Ford-Smith 1986a), which is a collection of personal stories by Sistren members, Ford-Smith (1986b, xiii) observes that the stories "explore two opposing images of the black woman, which co-exist in the psyche of Caribbean women: the image of the warrior woman as typified by Ni (Nanny), the Maroon leader […] and the image of nanny, the domesticated servant woman". Nanny's exploits as a militant rebel leader who took on the British "drew on the tradition of the Ohemaa (the Ashanti Queen Mother)" (xiv). However, this image was gradually colonized into the figure of the nanny – equivalent to the Mammy figure so beloved of Hollywood – the black matriarchal figure whose complacency as a servant in another's household is depicted as emanating from an instinctive maternal love that is extended to her oppressor. That this benevolent image is a figment of the colonizer's imagination, or betrays the colonizer's efforts to tame the Nanny of the Maroons, is undoubtedly why, as Ford-Smith observes, "behind the familiar image of the domesticated nanny lurks the eternal Ni" (xiv). A more contemporary figure regarded as having embodied an Afro-Caribbean rebel consciousness was the folklorist Louise Bennett (generally known as Miss Lou in Jamaica), who is regarded as a pioneer in popularizing Creole as a medium of cultural expression through her poetry, and who is the subject of Sistren's documentary *The Drums Keep Sounding*.

The Drums Keep Sounding

Scripted and directed, once again, by Cynthia Wilmot, *The Drums Keep Sounding* (1994–1995) profiles "Miss Lou," otherwise known as the Honorable Louise Bennett-Coverley – folklorist, (performance) poet, actress and activist – to whom it is dedicated "with nuff respect".[13] Although not "structured around a *single* life-changing event that defines the subject's purpose/direction" (Rastegar 2013, 906), the documentary – produced 12 years prior to Bennett's death in Canada in 2006 – combines interviews with Miss Lou and several of her friends and colleagues, with dramatized recreations of incidents from her life. *The Drums Keep Sounding* is the longest of Sistren's productions, with a running time of 70 minutes, compared to about 40 minutes each for the others.

The Drums Keep Sounding begins with a short clip from one of Miss Lou's early performances, the grainy black and white images dissolving into a shot in which an actress (Marguerite Newland) portraying Miss Lou comes off the stage, wiping her brow. After the credits, the documentary begins with a dramatized scene, set in 1974, in which Louise Bennett and her husband, Eric Coverley (played by John Jones), a man of many achievements himself, welcome a television crew to their home for Miss Lou to be

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interviewed. Her husband proudly lists her many accomplishments, including being awarded the Order of Jamaica, among many other awards, publication of a number of books of her poetry, her work in Jamaican theater and radio and becoming the first Jamaican to have her own show on BBC TV. Miss Lou is portrayed as extending much hospitality and food to the reporter and crew.

A question posed by the interviewer begins a flashback sequence, beginning with the story of Miss Lou's grandmother, Mimi, and her mother, both seamstresses. "It was a house of women", asserts the character of Miss Lou in a voice-over, as she sketches the biographical details, including a great-aunt's involvement with the Marcus Garvey movement in Costa Rica. "I grew up surrounded by an air of black dignity" remembers Miss Lou, to which her husband adds, "and surrounded by strong black women". The fictional Miss Lou then recites one of her poems celebrating the Jamaican woman, her husband joining in from time to time. The scene captures the deep bond and mutual admiration between the couple.

The sequence cuts to Miss Lou in an interview, talking of her childhood in Kingston, during which local women gathered at her mother's sewing room. This memory triggers another dramatized sequence, depicting a young girl's point of view, powerfully captured in shots of the women as they engage in their various sewing activities. Snatches of eagerly overheard adult conversation in the familiar patwah of everyday life float in the air amidst shots of several pairs of feet, some on sewing machine pedals, beating to some unheard rhythm, while hands move unceasingly to and fro with needle and thread, in seeming autonomy.[14]

Miss Lou directly addresses the viewer to remind us that "they're talking Jamaican, you see, they're understanding Jamaican. My gosh, it was the sweetest thing to me". Miss Lou reveals that she was led, even at an early age (and cocooned as she was in this protective and woman-centered environment), to question why "everything that was black was bad, everything that came out of the people [was bad …] Their songs was bad, their speech was bad, their hair was bad!"

While the official language in Jamaica is English, most of the population speaks Jamaican Creole/patwah. In some of the more isolated hill areas and in rural regions, many Jamaicans speak only patwah, but according to Luntta (1993, 44–5), most urban dwellers "will use varying degrees of Patois depending on those they talk to, or more accurately, those they want to understand them". He also notes that "decreolization, or varying degrees of reverting to English, takes place as Jamaicans move toward social situations where the use of standard English is expected".

Bateson (1969, 161) argues that a society's worldview is deeply embedded in its forms of communication, its "conventions of communication". In Jamaica, the acknowledgment of the validity of patwah as a form of speech that is worthy of recognition and analysis is, according to Watson (1990, 291), a relatively new development, "certainly not predating Jamaica's political independence in 1962". Dismissal and denigration of Creole continued into the 1990s, with newspaper headlines such as "Patois – a barefoot language" and "Corruption of language is no cultural heritage" in *The Sunday Gleaner*, one of Jamaica's major newspapers (Cargill 1989; Hearne 1990). Cooper (1995, 11) argues that poetry such as Louise Bennett's, written in Creole, is still "located on the fringes of literary respectability". More recent attitudes suggest that, while there is increasingly acknowledgement of the now preferred term "Jamaican" (see,

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for example, Cooper 2015), it has yet to achieve widespread respectability within Jamaica itself, as evidenced by some of the user comments following Cooper's opinion piece in *The Gleaner*.

The Drums Keep Sounding includes sequences of Miss Lou reciting her poetry. As a cinematic device in the genre of biographical documentary, Corner (2002, 99) notes the importance of the recorded voice of the subject "in routing the viewer directly into the core of personal identity" and that it "facilitates a discourse of self-accounting". Corner goes on to argue that "of all the constituent modes of documentary biography, perhaps the autobiographical device of subject's voice over image is the most powerful" (Corner 2002, 99). In *The Drums Keep Sounding*, the use of this device functions to simultaneously celebrate both the language and its champion and effectively captures the vivacity and seemingly unending vigor of the charming, generous and committed Miss Lou.

Some scholars (López-Springfield 1997; Mordecai and Mordecai 2001; Vasquez 2009) have noted that Louise Bennett could be quite subversive in her use of humor and sexuality; among other things her poetry proposed a "colonizin' in reverse" and brought together "an oral tradition from Africa and a literary tradition from England, in a unique body of work that […] insists on our Jamaican "generation" (Mordecai and Mordecai 2001, 114). Vasquez (2009, 1–2) describes Bennett's poetry as reflecting a "mento" esthetic characterized by "humor, risque lyrics, and trickster antics".[15]

> Miss Lou's innovative use of the oral tradition gives voice to the folk in new ways. However, it pays particular attention to assertions of female agency expressed through an undertheorized aspect of folklore: a mento aesthetic that relies on diasporic trickster strategies, including sexuality, laughter, and clever wordplay. Writing within a cultural heritage that historically prided itself on respectability and privileged Western literacy and Standard English over folk literacy and Jamaican Creole, Bennett combines the latter with a subversive humor to create a permissive platform for working-class women who were often less affected by notions of propriety.[16]

As a documentary, *The Drums Keep Sounding* extends a legacy of celebrating strong black women within Caribbean oral traditions such as legendary tales.[17] It can be argued that Louise Bennett embodied a contemporary Afro-Caribbean rebel consciousness. As one of the pioneers in popularizing Jamaican Creole as a medium of cultural expression through her poetry, her oral performances have been described as expressing "the subversive creativity of everyday 'Calibans' striving to articulate meaning in a hostile world, to establish – in urgent speech – a site free of colonial inhibitions and paternalistic constraints" (López Springfield 1997, xii). In addition, Brown (1978, 116) observes that "no other West Indian writer has dealt at greater length with the West Indian woman. And in no other writer has the world of the Jamaican (and the West Indies as a whole) been presented almost exclusively through the eyes of women, especially the rural women and the poorer women of the city".

Oppression does not automatically generate a revolutionary consciousness and perhaps Bennett's poetry, in the form of voices of various persona representing women from the working classes, leads us to understand the reason why: the internalization of the values of the middle-class, and the energy spent aspiring to attain these. Consciousness of systemic reasons for one's class exploitation is often occluded

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by both the burden of survival and the ideologies of economic/racial imperialism and patriarchy.

The Drums Keep Sounding also explores Bennett's introduction and partnership – personal and professional – with Eric Coverley, an established actor and impresario. The documentary also briefly explores Bennett's relationship with Lady Molly Hoggins, the Jamaican Governor's wife, and their participation in the Jamaican Women's League. In 1945, upon Hoggins' urging, Bennett applied for, and won, a scholarship to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) in London, where she was introduced as being from South Africa, Jamaica! It was here too that, after being impressed by an audition in which Bennett skillfully utilizes her patwah, RADA director Sir Kenneth Barnes asked her to help another actress with a "dialect role", as a Mexican. Christmas greetings in patwah to her family in Jamaica on a BBC radio show, however, resulted in a contract from the BBC, and she began to make regular appearances on a number of BBC radio and TV shows while still a student.

While in London, Bennett's small apartment became a regular gathering place for many black intellectuals and future leaders, including Michael Manley and Kwame Nkrumah. Manley makes an appearance in the documentary, in which he comments on the turmoil of the pre-independence period and Bennett's "uniquely revolutionary contribution" in validating Jamaican folk culture and Creole.

In the 1950s, Bennett moved to New York, where the pervasive racism of the day resulted in her having to take a position as a clerk at Macy's; a far cry from broadcasting on the BBC. During this time Bennett was introduced to and befriended Alma John, described in the documentary as the only African-American woman in television at the time. John introduced Bennett to a young ballad singer named Harry Belafonte, the son of West Indian parents, who needed some help in learning a few Jamaican folk songs to pep up his act. Upon returning to Jamaica, Bennett took on the nearly all-white Jamaican Pantomime with a fellow black performer and director, Ranny Williams, changing its complexion. They teamed up again later for the Lou and Ranny Show on JBC Radio. The use of patwah as the primary language of the show stirred up controversy for being too local. In 1994, Bennett and Coverley were forced to relocate to Toronto, as a result of Coverley's ill health, and it was here that she died in 2006.

In the last segment of the documentary, Miss Lou is depicted reiterating that "our drums never stopped beating, that's why our culture has survived". The rebellious spirit of folk culture may be expressed in Jamaican patwah but is symbolized by the drum, reflected in the title of this documentary; it emerges from a childhood memory, shown in flashback, as Miss Lou is wakened by the sound of drums. In voice-over, she remembers that, "sometimes at night, the drums sounded like a heart beating. My mama said that they wouldn't allow drums in town anymore. But at night, from the hills, I could always hear the drums".

Notwithstanding arguments that Sistren has been de-radicalized in recent years (Smith 2013; Green 2006), Sistren's commitment to Jamaican folk culture is demonstrated in the manner in which the Collective used a dramatic performance that included both patwah and the drum as their means of expression in a 2009 presentation to a Select committee of the Jamaican Parliament regarding women's reproductive health and rights. Heron, Toppin, and Finikin (2009, 52–4) note:[18]

> Compounding the impact of Sistren's presence and presentation in the hallowed halls of Parliament was their use of the drum to accompany the songs and dances woven throughout the dramatic presentation. An instrument associated with Jamaica's dominant African heritage, the drum is antithetical to the reserved Anglo-Saxon tradition which prevails in Parliament. Alongside the use of patois as the language of performance, the use of the drum was instrumental to Sistren's breaking down of the cultural and class barriers and outdated norms that generally keep 'others' outside of that political space.

In producing its video documentaries, Sistren expanded its reach, going beyond the limitations imposed by the geographical proximity necessary for live theater, to utilize the electronic medium of video. As a cheaper, more accessible medium than film at the time, the use of video allowed a group such as the Sistren Theater Collective to produce several documentaries and to bypass the limitations arising out of insufficient funding, government regulation, broadcasting policy, lack of film processing facilities and distribution resources in the 1980s and 1990s. Shot on the ¾" video format, and then made available for consumer use in the VHS format, Sistren itself distributed many of these videos, although some titles (such as *Sweet Sugar Rage* and *Miss Amy and Miss May*) were made available via distributors in the USA. Within Jamaica, Sistren distributed its videos to schools, libraries and museums, but the Collective did not develop an effective campaign for promoting its video documentaries or the structures necessary for distributing them (Telephone interview with Foster-Marshall, 10 September 1997).

A respect for alternative systems of knowledge not only includes their acknowledgment as a subject of interest but also their inclusion as a mode of expression. Arguing that the use of oral tradition is a tactical strategy in the decolonization process, Katrak (1989, 176) notes that the women of Sistren do not simply use these traditions as a form of nostalgia but also as a framework that is appropriate for the concerns they articulate. She notes that Sistren's use of "testimony" and other elements of oral tradition, including ritual, proverbs and riddles, its workshop method of producing drama (which does not always result in a written script) and its use of Jamaican patwah constitute cultural and linguistic violence to the norms of the (neo)colonizer.

Referring to Sistren's publication *Lionheart Gal* – the collective autobiography of Sistren's members – Carr (1994) observes that while the theatrical productions targeted poor women living in similar circumstances to themselves, and facing similar challenges, the shift in medium to the printed word meant abandoning patwah for the more standardized version of English, resulting in a different audience, i.e. the petit-bourgeoisie.

Despite entering the more bourgeois context of Jamaican literature with its privileging of standard English in which, as Carr (1994, 134) notes, "many of the novels include local speech as the language of the majority at some level, [but] it is always in direct speech, [while] the place of authority – of reported speech, commentary, and plot development – is in English", *Lionheart Gal* is primarily a record of its members speaking in patwah. Carr (1994, 135) argues that "the 'barefoot' woman here enters the stage of national literature to be counted, and to speak for herself".[19]

However, the use of patwah, folk culture and a collectivist esthetic is much less evident in the video documentaries than in the plays of Sistren or in *Lionheart Gal*. Although dance, song and drama are prominent structural elements in several documentaries, it is interesting that the Collective did not choose to remain faithful to their communalist mission and produce (a) a collective biography of (b) working class

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women activists – in the vein of *Lionheart Gal* – but chose instead to profile the individual lives of three women activists from a middle-class or privileged background, especially in the case of *Miss Amy and Miss May*. The shift in medium from live, often highly participatory, performance to film/video facilitated the Collective's ability to reach an international audience; so the choice to profile the selected individuals may have resulted from a combination of pragmatic, artistic and political factors. The choice may have also resulted from the involvement of the (now) late Cynthia Wilmot, who scripted and directed both documentaries, and whose previous work as a writer, editor, director and producer included the profiling of Jamaican folk heroes.[20]

Of the three women profiled, Louise Bennett could perhaps be characterized as closest to growing up in a working-class environment: her parents were lower-middle class (a baker and a dressmaker), but her father died when she was very young and she was raised by a single mother. Thus, Bennett's cause and approach is more firmly located within Jamaican working-class culture and offers a more revolutionary paradigm than the reformist strategies of Bailey and Farquharson. The two biographical documentaries together reveal, however, the extent to which campaigns for social justice are located within class-bound paradigms and perspectives, and also that they are arguably complementary strategies necessary for effective gender/race/class-based activism.

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Notes

1. I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and comments.
2. Collective improvisation as a method for developing a dramatic script, as well as songs, was also common practice among South African theatrical groups, and is known to be practiced in other African countries, such as Kenya.
3. Since about the year 2000, advocacy theater has often been subsumed under the term "applied theater", together with community theater, drama-in-education, theater for development, and drama therapy. For an interesting discussion of the (sometimes problematic) discourses of applied drama/theater, see Ackroyd (2007). I should note, however, that the term is rarely used in the context of scholarly discussions of the work of Sistren.
4. Smith (2008) interrogates the division of labor and the methodology used the create Sistren's "aesthetic space", although her account includes a somewhat problematic reading of theater production through collective collaboration as having a linear trajectory within an international context.
5. For discussions of the various challenges faced by Sistren members as individuals or as a collective – among others, threats of physical violence, class-based divisions of labor within its membership, the impact of globalization and development agency funding on its methods, approaches and audiences and its apparent shift from politics to therapy – see Smith (2008, 2011, 2013), Green (2006) and, of course, the works of Honor Ford-Smith.
6. This statement appears on the blurb of the box cover of the video documentary *The Drums Keep Sounding*.
7. Una Marson was an activist who attempted to link black consciousness with women's struggles, explore and address women's issues and mobilize and organize women through esthetic forms (Ford-Smith 1988).
8. Carr (1994) explains the important economic role of "higglers", noting that "Much of the flow of goods that keeps the bottom from completely falling out in Caribbean/Latin American societies comes not from the sources predicted by either neo-classical or

Marxist economics, but from a group of women who thrive throughout the region, known in Jamaica as 'higglers.' These women who sell goods on the sidewalks and roadsides become integral to providing commodities in countries suffering the deepest throes of underdevelopment […] These women, through their economic activity, provided a buffer when the government and the official sector was at a loss. They also represent economically successful women from the lowest classes, and their role in the lives of the women of Sistren is documented throughout *Lionheart Gal*".

9. As a result of interracial mixing – whether voluntary, coerced or forced – a complex relationship developed between social status and race/color in many parts of the Caribbean. On some islands, by the mid-eighteenth century, a bewildering range of terms of classification had developed, indicating proportions of African or Amerindian blood, with attendant legal privileges or taboos. What they all shared, however, was a fundamental hierarchy in which white, or white-likeness, is privileged and which facilitated social class mobility.
10. Reddock (2007) also notes that, in places like Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname and Guyana, there was also a notable absence of solidarity and collaboration among women of color of different ethnicities, such as Indo-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean women.
11. Altink (2006) notes that, "By equal access to the political process, black feminists did not mean the equalization of the franchise requirements for women and men. Instead, they meant that those women over 25 who paid 2 pounds in taxes per year or earned 50 pounds in salary and had been given the vote in 1919, should also have the right to be elected into office". Audrey Jeffers was the first woman to be elected to municipal office in Trinidad and Tobago.
12. Heredia is an award-winning Salvadoran filmmaker based in New York.
13. Louise Bennett's remains have been interned in the National Heroes Park in Kingston, Jamaica.
14. This shot evokes Aimé Césaire's description of his mother sewing late into the night, described in his epic poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook on the return to my native land*), in which he recollects being awakened by the sound of his mother's "tireless limbs which pedal the night, by the bitter puncture in the soft flesh of the night made by a Singer machine my mother pedals, pedals for our hunger" (Césaire 1971).
15. The trickster figure – usually male – is a common feature of African and African diasporic folk culture as a selfish but cunning figure whose social and political marginalization makes him not only particularly cognizant of societal taboos but also emboldens him to find ways of circumventing or reconfiguring social norms to achieve his objectives.
16. Vasquez explains the term "mento" as a folk tradition drawn from mento music, "a complex mix of styles that became 'traditional' Jamaican music – in which sexually evocative humor and Jamaican [patwah] were central for the discussion of socially taboo issues".
17. Paradoxically, in Caribbean societies in which contemporary women continue to struggle to assert their rights, improve access to education, etc., tales from the oral tradition celebrate the rebellious activities of female warrior leaders such as Nanny, Mama Juba (Jamaica), Melchora (Cuba) and Queen Mary and her aides Queen Agnes and Queen Matilda (Danish Virgin Islands), all of whose femaleness, in terms of both their sexuality and their religious power, played an important role in their military prowess and their tactics against their slave and colonial oppressors. In Jamaica, the legend of Nanny as an invincible warrior became a cornerstone of Maroon feminism, and Nanny is today officially designated a national heroine.
18. It should be noted that Lana Finikin is currently (2016) the Executive Director of Sistren.
19. Of the 15 life stories documented in *Lionheart Gal*, 11 are in patwah, two in standard English and two combine linguistic registers.
20. I thank the anonymous reviewer who drew my attention to this, and to Ms Wilmot's prior career trajectory.

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Audio-visual

Carrying A Heavy Load. 1992. Jamaica. 36:00 minutes, colour, English.
Miss Amy And Miss May. 1990. Jamaica. 40:00 minutes, colour, English.
Moving On. 1991. Jamaica. 40:00 minutes, colour, English.
Sweet Sugar Rage. 1985. Jamaica. 42:00 minutes, colour, English.
The Drums Keep Sounding: The Story of Miss Lou. 1995. Jamaica. 70:00 minutes, colour, English.

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