

DR STEPHANIE MCKENZIE

DR Pamela Mordecai, accomplished Jamaican-Canadian poet and novelist, has recorded nearly 25 years of poetry. Mordecai recorded her five single-author collections of poetry in March 2015 in Newfoundland, Canada, in the studios of the Centre for Innovation in Technology and Learning (CITL, formerly DELTS), at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), St John's. MUN, in tandem with an international partner, The Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC), both now house Mordecai's readings. This video collection is being shared with the world under a Creative Commons License at the following link: www.mordecai.citl.mun.ca/

In the spring of 2015, Mordecai travelled to the island of Newfoundland for the second time in three years where she and her husband and fellow writer, Martin Mordecai, were invited to Corner Brook, Newfoundland to read at the March Hare Literary Festival (Atlantic Canada's largest literary festival). While in Corner Brook, Mordecai also launched her first novel, *Red Jacket*.

Author of more than 30 books, Mordecai has written five books of poetry; a recent long-verse play, *de book of Mary* (published by Mawenzi House); a collection of short stories; five books for children; a well-received play for young people; a novel and important scholarly articles on other writers' works. She has co-authored numerous textbooks and is a prolific editor and anthologist. Mordecai holds a PhD from the University of the West Indies in English literature and is the recipient of numerous awards, including Jamaica's Centenary Medal and the Vic Reid Award for Children's literature.

Before this video collection was made of Mordecai reading and performing her work, there was only one rough recording of her poetry made in Norris Point, Newfoundland. When Mordecai travelled to Newfoundland in 2012 to give a lecture at Grenfell Campus, Memorial University, about celebrated poet Dionne Brand's poetry, "The Uses of Literature: the Poetry of Dionne Brand," Pamela and Martin Mordecai accepted an invitation to Norris Point where they performed *de Man: A Performance Poem* at the Bonne Bay Marine Station for an eager crowd. *de Man: A Performance Poem* is a fictional re-telling — in Jamaican Creole — of the crucifixion of Christ. A rough recording was thankfully made by one in attendance. But when Pamela and Martin travelled to St John's after their participation in the March Hare Literary Festival in March 2015, *de Man* was recorded professionally, along with all of Mordecai's other poetry collections, in CITL's production studios.

Why all the fuss? In Jamaican poet/scholar Mervyn Morris's words (when he speaks of Jamaican work related to oral performance), "some features [of poetry] become fully available only when the work is actually voiced" (1982). Morris reflects West Indian critic Gordon Rohlehr's concern that there is "a tendency in certain quarters to undervalue an oral tradition and the sort of criticism it demands of the

Island Hopping:

Over 20 Years of Pamela Mordecai's Poetry Recorded

critic" (in Morris 1982) and anticipates today's need for recordings upon which a study of orature in Caribbean verse can be based.

Jamaica and Newfoundland, of course, share a notable history. For over 150 years, Newfoundland salt fish was exported from Newfoundland to Jamaica in exchange for . . . rum! Even today, salt fish (though it no longer comes from Newfoundland) constitutes one of the main ingredients, of course, in Jamaica's national dish — salt fish and ackee. Perhaps more significantly, in terms of language and poetry, both Newfoundland and Jamaica are bi-dialectical — perhaps bilingual — islands. Newfoundland English, like Jamaican Creole (Patois), is a syncretic language (mixed language), and in a manner similar to how Jamaica operates in both standard English and creole (flipping between languages as need and desire dictates), Newfoundland operates in standard English and Newfoundland English. Perhaps this is one reason why there was such openness to recording Mordecai's work and such an appreciation of her verse, which is heavily dependent on Jamaican creole. Many of Newfoundland's fine literary works have grown to be proudly dependent upon Newfoundland English, though the language, or creole, has often suffered charges of being a "substandard language" or inferior dialect.

This project was made financially possible by a significant gift in kind by DELTS and by funding provided by the Digital Library of the Caribbean; the Ferriss Hodgett Library, Grenfell Campus, Memorial University; Grenfell International, Grenfell Campus, Memorial University; and the Quick Start Fund for Public Engagement at St John's Campus, Memorial University.

Brooke Wooldridge, then programme director of the Digital Library of the

Caribbean, spoke about the project and the manner in which it fosters resources in Caribbean scholarship: "The Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) was honoured to partner with Memorial University to support the creation of a video archive of Pamela Mordecai reading her poetry to ensure this important Jamaican-Canadian poet's work would be accessible as a performance for research and teaching by Caribbean researchers regardless of their geographic location. This project is the first formal collaboration for dLOC with a Canadian institution and we look forward to building new relationships to support access to Caribbean research resources."

Louise McGillis, associate university librarian, Grenfell Campus, Memorial University, underscores the valuable nature of materials, such as these recordings, which are available to all: "The Ferriss Hodgett Library was an enthusiastic partner in the project to tape and digitise the poetry of Pamela Mordecai. This is an open access repository, which means dissemination to researchers around the world free of charge and preservation of unique research material.

Dr Ivan Emke, facilitator for internationalisation, Grenfell Campus, indicates the value that can come out of connecting places that share certain things:

"Grenfell International was pleased to be able to participate in this project, which linked our island communities. The project was able to offer two important contributions. In the first place, the readings and interactions that occurred were able to enrich our students, and expose them to the variety of ways that people give meaning to their lives around the world. It is essential that students get to hear and see the stories of other cultures. But furthermore, in addition to these direct experiences, the fact that this project was able to do video-recordings

of Pamela Mordecai, it was thus able to ensure that the important voice of this celebrated Jamaican-Canadian poet has been preserved for others to appreciate in the future."

"We were honoured to host Dr Mordecai in our production studio and to have the opportunity to capture her work in her spoken voice," said Susan Cleyle, former director of CITL (St John's Campus, Memorial University). "These recordings will allow her voice to transcend generations, allowing Dr Mordecai's dialect, rhythm, and passion to be forever infused in her work."

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(Photo: Courtenay Alcock, CITL, Memorial University)