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# Editorial Preface

Carol Bailey and Stephanie McKenzie

It has been a great honour for us to have compiled this special issue on Pamela Mordecai's writing. Our first honour was to edit her collection *A Fierce Green Place: New and Selected Poems*. The second allowed us to read and reread Mordecai's poetic oeuvre and trace the development of her verse. It was an enjoyable task. This issue has been another pleasure to compile. Here, we meet varied and diverse approaches to Mordecai's work. The issue is a miscellany of voices and outlooks, and it aptly mirrors the many different genres in which Mordecai has written, as well as the many styles that distinguish her verse. For us—and, we believe, for many others—this special issue is a kind of “turn t’anks” to Mordecai for the multiple ways in which she has contributed to the advancement of Caribbean literature during her multidecade career.

Indeed, Mordecai was one of the first writers to anthologize poems by Jamaican women in *Jamaica Woman* (1980), co-edited with Mervyn Morris. Among several other accomplishments, *Jamaica Woman* is one of the first texts to mark the important shift that happened in Caribbean writing around 1980, when the female voice was steadily becoming noticeable in print. As Mordecai and Morris observe in their preface, “After a while it seemed that many of the new Jamaican poems we had seen and liked were by women” (xi). Mordecai and Morris also note that the poets in *Jamaica Woman* “had not yet had a separate volume of their poems published” (xi). We begin with this mention of one of Mordecai's often-forgotten landmark contributions to Caribbean literature to underscore the depth and far-reaching impact of her work, particularly the way she has opened space for other writers.

Part of what makes Mordecai such an important voice and force of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is her eclecticism, not only as a creative writer but also as a scholar, teacher, broadcaster, textbook author, and publisher—to name just a few of her roles. One could add “entrepreneur” to this list, as Mordecai and her husband, Martin Mordecai, set up Sandberry Press in the 1980s. The history of the press is described in Michael Bucknor's interview with Mordecai in this issue. While this issue does not pretend to capture anything approaching the full, diverse spectrum of Mordecai's wide-ranging and intersecting professional identities, the mix of genres included here reflects our attempt to represent an accomplished author whose work is uniquely marked by its multifaceted orientations.

It also is very important to note that Mordecai, a spiritual/religious poet, has produced works that engage with biblical history and focus on women's roles in the history of

Christianity. The strong women encountered in *de Man*, *de book of Mary*, and *de book of Joseph*, for example, speak of women's strength and their right to be given undivided attention in traditionally patriarchal realms.

Many, if not all, of the pieces included here also draw attention to the oral traditions that have stimulated Mordecai's creative imagination and have nourished her creative output over the course of her long career. This engagement with such a central, organic component of Mordecai's corpus is well warranted. Mordecai was among the leading poets, following the pioneering work of her predecessor Louise Bennett and others, such as Claude McKay, who took the nation language and vernacular culture of Caribbean people seriously and transferred its already artful usage in the oral tradition to the printed page. In a context in which he addresses the debt that contemporary writers owe to earlier ones who, because of their pioneering boldness, have created multiple Caribbean literary languages, Robert Antoni argues that Caribbean "vernacular" is now the pervading "literary" mode (Antoni). Mordecai, who from the outset unabashedly embraced Jamaican Creole and its accompanying performative modes, as early as the 1970s, is among the writers who have cleared a kind of linguistic pathway for a Creole-inspired literary language and a poetics of performance. Consistently, many of Mordecai's poems exemplify what Morris refers to as "printing the performance" (45).

This issue begins with Elaine Savory, perhaps the pre-eminent critic of Mordecai's writing. Savory begins by noting that "four key concepts in [Mordecai's] work begin very early—*green*, *place*, *fierce* and *woman*." A focus on the first item—green—leads the reader into a consideration of the environment, though Savory takes significant time to explain how Mordecai avoids simply romanticizing nature; as Savory claims, "nature is not always positive and supportive, nor is it in Mordecai's work." In fact, and in tandem with recognizing the many different ways that Mordecai approaches nature, Savory suggests that Mordecai does not essentialize genders either. Savory's discussion of Mordecai's technical capabilities as a poet further challenges the reader not to place Mordecai into fixed categories. This essay provides an excellent introduction to a special issue focused on a writer who challenges, through talent and multidimensional ways of seeing the world, absolutes. The existence, in this issue, of so many different takes on Mordecai's writing bolsters and supports what Savory says here and what she has been saying so often in her critical work.

Curmiah Lisette's "green and wild: poetry and play," which Lisette describes in her abstract as a "creative, poetic response," engages with Mordecai's voice and elucidates her own development as a person and artist.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Lisette provides an analysis that matches, in some ways, Savory's critical reflections. As Savory notes, "[Mordecai's] work has always seen wholeness in fragmentation or damage, how to make the turn to survival and the possibility of healing." "Green and wild" is as much a critical article as it is a poetic response. The first line of Lisette's piece reads, "Pamela Mordecai's first poetry collection, *Journey Poem*, was published in 1989, the year of my arrival on earth." This is not self-indulgent, for Lisette soon claims that "the true telling of poets is how visible

they make you to yourself.” The very existence of “green and wild” is not only a homage to Mordecai but also an indication of how one author’s work has grown that of another. “Green and wild” is a mixture of essay, poetry, and drama. Like Mordecai’s work, “green and wild” embraces both Creole and standard English, and it is in this mix that Lisette mirrors what she strongly appreciates: as she says, “[Mordecai] has mastered the English language and written it creolized, understanding form, too, and shaping her own way.” Savory has spent significant time writing about Mordecai’s use of Creole and the manner in which the amount of Creole has grown in Mordecai’s work since the publication of *Journey Poem* to constitute the bulk of her later poetry. The basis for one other important comparison between Savory’s and Lisette’s contributions is what Savory discusses at length in her essay—Mordecai’s dependence on nature and its imagery: “Not only is Mordecai earthy in her inclusion of all the physicality of the human,” writes Savory, “but her poetry also *grounds* feeling and thought in literal references to plants, trees, flowers, and fruits in making connection between human and non-human” (emphasis added). For Lisette, Mordecai’s communion with the natural world has the power to evoke change:

While earth’s power players and leaders continue to evade what seems the imminent death of the Caribbean as we know it due to the climate crisis, I lean more towards the belief that the voices and experiences of those unheard hold power to steer change. If Mordecai’s work were studied and celebrated alongside her literary contemporaries, it would reveal many diagnoses of ailments in Caribbean culture over time.

Opal Palmer Adisa’s “A Poem Is a Power” almost uncannily becomes a companion piece to “green and wild,” and it is interesting to note that both of these writers speak of the manner in which Mordecai’s poetry has led them to be self-reflexive, an act that both Adisa and Lisette see as inextricable from the ability to write their own poetry. “Although I cannot pretend to know Mordecai’s motive,” Adisa says, “I can speak to where the poems lead me.” Adisa places her first encounters with Mordecai in the 1970s, and, in a discussion of *A Fierce Green Place*, connects this time period with her claim that “Mordecai’s understanding of the trials and tribulations of her black Jamaican sisters and brothers should not be taken for granted.” Adisa addresses a *mélange* of Mordecai’s themes and also underscores the lineage between women: “Lest we think all women are victims, Mordecai presents other poems in which women achieve—even surpass—their goals and triumph.” Perhaps what is so compelling about this piece is that which is compelling about Lisette’s, too, as well as other contributions to this issue. There is no apology for the creative nature in which these women write about and respond to Mordecai’s writing. It feels as natural as the spoken voice, which has consistently characterized Mordecai’s writing. As Adisa mentions, “There is a specific way those of us in the academy have been trained to write about literature, to critique and analyse what we think poets are saying in their creative production, but this is not what I am doing.”

Despite significant similarities between certain pieces in this issue, there are also great differences. Lissa Paul's contribution, "Refashioning the Empire's Remains: Pamela Mordecai's Poetry for Children," places us within a different body of work that deserves much more attention: Mordecai's literature for children. Speaking of what she calls Mordecai's "double vision/double voice," Paul claims the following: "In her poetry for children, Pam accomplishes the daunting task of being audible to the youngest of child listeners while speaking with full adult" knowledge of the horrible legacies of colonial exploitation. Drawing a comparison between Mordecai and her predecessor Bennett, Paul notes that Mordecai accesses the same ethos of Miss Lou's comic verse/serious subject in the achievement of "the double adult/child address." Paul's claims lead to compelling readings of some of Mordecai's poems for children and further reflections: "In reaching back through African-diasporic languages, traditions, and survival strategies, Pam creates a poetic idiom supple enough to address both children and adults." Paul's piece underscores, however, one aspect of material production that begs much more attention: "Evidence for the glaring omission of her work for children . . . begins with the fact that her publications for children are notoriously hard to track down." In combination with this awareness, it should be noted that a significant amount of Mordecai's poetry is out of print.<sup>2</sup> Paul's comment is a call to academics and publishers to ensure that Mordecai's writing is available to be read. It is a great loss if it is not. The child, for Mordecai, is extremely important, and perhaps it is not only critical readings of Mordecai's children's literature that should grow but also a consideration of the role of the child in her oeuvre overall. Tellingly, Jeffrey Yang of New Directions Publishing, who oversaw the editing of *A Fierce Green Place*, makes the following claim in his "A Note on Pamela Mordecai," which attends Mordecai's recent publication of poems in *The Georgia Review* (summer 2022): "The child is the one who dwells in the heart of Mordecai's poetry like a living flame" (399).

Simone A. James Alexander's essay, "Feminist Interventions and Discursive and Poetic Practices in Pamela Mordecai's Poems," grounds Mordecai's feminist poetics in both a specifically Caribbean womanist-feminist tradition and a Black-diasporic genealogy of female resistance. Connecting Mordecai's work to that of groups such as the Sistren Theatre Collective (though Alexander notes no direct affiliation), Alexander's piece highlights the synergistic relationship between Mordecai's work and that of contemporary feminist-womanist workers: creative, intellectual, and grass roots. This essay also turns to the work of important womanist-feminist theorists, such as Patricia Hill Collins and Barbara Christian, to underscore the inclusive and wide-ranging female-centred and activist concerns that are emblematic of Mordecai's collection *de Man*. Focusing primarily on *de Man*, Alexander shows how Mordecai's reworking and, in many ways, Caribbeanizing of this mostly familiar Bible story—Christ's crucifixion—originally told in an old patriarchal cultural context, privileges multiple aspects of the feminine. These include the strength and prominence of the female voice; women's capacity for storytelling and (re)shaping dominant narratives; and the reclaiming, honouring, and centring of women as the indispensable figures they are in the historical and contemporary societies that the collection spans.

This issue also includes three reviews of *A Fierce Green Place* by Vladimir Lucien, Arturo Desimone, and Steven Beattie. The reviews are as varied as the poems included in *A Fierce Green Place*. Lucien praises the way that Mordecai writes from what she knows and feels: “The ‘fierce green place’ I see in this collection is Mordecai’s positioning of herself in relation to everything.” Lucien pinpoints what, for him, is Mordecai’s “gentle refusal to allow one’s engagement to the world to venture too far from one’s lived experience.” The unique tenor of Mordecai’s verse, as well as her commitment over the years, leads Lucien to speak of “the deep debt owed” to Mordecai.

Desimone’s review is politically, theoretically, and artistically engaged. It reads somewhat like a long poem. Desimone begins by praising the musicality of Mordecai’s verse: “many of the poems in this new compilation of selected works by Jamaican Canadian poet Pamela Mordecai . . . have a lyrical form that screams and shouts, ‘Turn me into a song!’ as if the poem had decided—with a will of its own, animated withchutzpah—to barge into the studio of a Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry.” Desimone speaks of Mordecai “bridging the ‘elite’ vanguard of poetic language with popular and vernacular culture.” He rightfully acknowledges that Mordecai has not slowed down since the early poems that precede *Journey Poem*: “This song-lust that fuels the battery and sparks the dynamo of her verse does not allow any impression of having faded with age or diminished in energy over her six decades of writing.” He notes how Mordecai addresses down-pressed women and children, how she attacks violence, how she has kept fierce.

Steven W. Beattie, an inveterate Canadian literary reviewer, addresses the urgent need for critics to engage more with Mordecai’s work, for Mordecai to receive the attention she deserves. His review, first posted on his blog, *That Shakespearean Rag*, was too important not to include in this issue. His reputation for and output of reviews is wide reaching, and the audience he is writing for is a varied and large readership not necessarily associated with Caribbean studies. Beattie’s opening comment brings the reader back to Savory, who notes that “fierce” constitutes a key concept in Mordecai’s verse over the years: “There is one word in the title of Jamaican Canadian poet Pamela Mordecai’s single volume of new and selected poems . . . that sums up her approach and aesthetic effect. That word is *fierce*” (Beattie). This claim meets his comments about Mordecai’s “provocative subject matter,” the way that Mordecai has “rendered [love] in all its effluence and human messiness,” her “musicality [that] counterpoints her often horrific subject matter,” and her “poetic range, both in style and substance.” Inevitably, Beattie’s review underscores the importance of paying more attention to Mordecai, of “taking her seriously,” as Morris once said of Miss Lou (1967). “Why, then, is Mordecai not more well known among readers or more appreciated by the critical establishment?” Beattie questions. “It would be salutary to see critics inside and outside of the academy pick up this book and engage with it thoroughly and thoughtfully, as a first step in bringing the poet a measure of the acclaim she has so far been denied.”

This special issue on Mordecai’s work would be incomplete without an inclusion of Mordecai’s “live and direct” voice: Michael A. Bucknor’s deep-dive interview with Mordecai. Bucknor accurately and evocatively refers to this interview as a “ten-’tory-inna-one” conversation, a term that very accurately describes the depth and breadth of what is covered in this dialogue. Bucknor’s questions offer us a fuller understanding of a number of the areas of Mordecai’s work that we list or briefly address in this preface. For example, we move beyond knowledge of Pamela and Martin Mordecai’s roles as editors and publishers to hear about the “ups and downs” of that aspect of their work and, in turn, to appreciate more the sacrifices—economic, personal, professional, and so forth—that pioneers such as Mordecai have necessarily made to offer the kind of service they have given to Caribbean literature. As we get this more “upfront-and-close” access to Mordecai’s life through Bucknor’s remarkable interviewing skills—particularly his follow-up questions and his insistence on fleshing out some key areas of this rich and varied life—we also gain insights into broader Caribbean concerns and experiences. These include the challenges posed by immigration; what it means to be a parent and a public servant; being an itinerant, diasporic subject with a rootedness in home; and an openness to new and different kinds of home-based and global challenges and opportunities. Among the most remarkable areas of Mordecai’s life that this interview challenges us to consider and hopefully emulate is the importance and necessity of collaboration across genders, generations, and disciplinary boundaries to advance the latent talents of a young and growing nation.

Teri-Ann McDonald’s contribution offers another set of insights. McDonald describes the multistep writing-publication process by reflecting on her job of copy-editing *A Fierce Green Place* and performing other essential tasks necessary to produce this book. The special relationship between author and editor that McDonald brings to the conversation reminds us of the editor’s mediatory role; as McDonald describes it, “Above all, the poetry editor strives to ensure that the reader is engaged and that the author is heard.” One particularly important insight that McDonald’s contribution offers is a rare insider description of the unique challenges and opportunities that editing a collection of poetry presents. Her explanation of the way poetry often operates outside of the boundaries of style guidelines also reminds us of the importance of the visual in how poetry conveys meaning and, relatedly, how editors must navigate the particularities of different genres to preserve the integrity of the work. And so McDonald’s attention to what she terms “the inner logic of [the] collection” provides a window into the editor’s role as another kind of critic, a role that extends far beyond being a guardian of the mechanics of writing. Our inclusion of McDonald’s piece highlights the often overlooked and fundamental collaborative element of the publication process, and reminds us of the multiplicity of skills, expertise, and personnel that work together to give us access to the finished work of writers such as Mordecai.

Jordan Trice’s creative piece, “The Strength of Pamela Mordecai’s Poetry,” captures the enthusiasm of a reader encountering Mordecai’s poetry for the first time. Trice situates his meeting of this poetry in terms of his physical location: “I was sitting outside the

first time I read a Pamela Mordecai poem. It was late summer, early evening, and the air smelled of rain. . . . I was drawn to the rawness, the honesty, and the surprise of Mordecai's poetry." Trice's response shares characteristics that also guide Adisa's and Lisette's contributions: his creative tone and the rawness of his voice pay homage to a writer who makes one self-reflect and prompts the creative in others. Trice's enthusiasm about Mordecai's poetry affirms this writer's broad reach across time and, as Trice's response demonstrates, across multiple generations.

An essay by Rachel L. Mordecai, Pamela Mordecai's daughter, completes this special issue, an ending that we hope will conjure the respect Pamela Mordecai pays to her own mother in a number of her poems, but most memorably in those poems that nearly bookend each other in *A Fierce Green Place*: her early poem "Walker" (10; originally published in *Journey Poem*) and her recent poem "Stalking Ma" (192–95). It is impossible to capture the richness of Rachel Mordecai's piece in such a preface, but what does stand out is her comment that her mother has "profoundly shaped who [she is] as a teacher." Perhaps Pamela Mordecai has done that for many, though not in a way comparable to the ties that bind mother and daughter. Yet each contribution in this issue inevitably indicates how Pamela Mordecai has taught, and continues to teach, her readers. Rachel Mordecai's observation that Pamela Mordecai's poetry "never obscure[s] its ethical force" helps us to understand not only why Pamela Mordecai's poetic voice has enjoyed the longevity it has, but also why this bold, iconoclastic, and richly textured voice continues to resonate among contemporary creative writers and way beyond that community.

We close the issue with Keja Valens' review of Alison Donnell's recent publication, *Creolized Sexualities: Undoing Heteronormativity in the Literary Imagination of the Anglo-Caribbean*, and we offer our thanks to Trinidadian artist Bianca Peake for sharing her gorgeous 2022 painting, *WackerWoman*, with us for the issue's cover.

Each contribution to this issue gives thanks. Each contribution enables readers to approach Mordecai's writing in a rich way. And each contribution welcomes what Mordecai has given us, and that is a lot.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a short visual/performance of “Fanm Diviné,” one of Lisette’s poems, which is included in Lisette’s contribution to this issue and which was featured in the Film & Folklore Festival in Trinidad, see “Fanm Diviné Women.” The film was screened on 2 April 2023 at Movie Towne in Port of Spain.
- <sup>2</sup> The following works by Mordecai are out of print: *Journey Poem*; *de Man: a performance poem*; *The True Blue of Islands*; *Pink Icing and Other Stories*; *Story-poems: A First Collection*; *Ezra’s Goldfish and Other Storypoems*; *Don’t Ever Wake a Snake: Poems and Stories for Children*; *Rohan Goes to Big School*; and *The Costume Party*.

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