

Emily Zobel Marshall

in conversation with Colin Grant

COLIN GRANT: Emily Zobel Marshall is a reader in post-colonial literature at the School of Cultural Studies at Leeds Beckett University. She teaches courses on African American, Caribbean, African and Black British literature. Her books include *Anansi's Journey: A Story of Jamaican Cultural Resistance*, in 2012; and *American Trickster: Trauma, Tradition and Brer Rabbit*, in 2019. A quote from that book, from the back of that book, is: 'Drawing on a wealth of research, Zobel Marshall's close, textual reading weaves together an impressive tapestry of ownership and remembrance.' And that quote is by *me*. I thought it was a fantastic book, so well done, Emily. Emily has also published numerous poems and I think it's fair to say she's a carnivalist, establishing a research platform for carnival. She's been spotted in sequins and feathers on the streets of the Leeds West Indian Carnival. I'm going to begin, Emily, by talking about identity, because I think from your biography that identity is something that is important to you. Can I tweak that by asking you, how did you begin to forge a writing identity?

EMILY ZOBEL MARSHALL: Well, that's an interesting question, Colin. I think that I've been an academic for a long time now. So, I started lecturing in my early twenties and my writing identity was very much an academic writing identity, but I always felt that it was a sort of constraining form. And you have to keep telling everybody what you're doing and why you're doing it, and everything has to be so fully referenced. And I always had written

poetry as a child; but it's really in the last four or five years that I've started to write more poetry and part of that was as a result of going to the Inscribe Readers and Writers Group, which is run by Peepal Tree Press, the Caribbean publishers based here in Leeds, and having a mentor in the writer, Jacob Ross, who's been absolutely wonderful in helping me develop my poetic voice.

So, now I have my academic writing *and* my poetry. And I feel that I can sort of express different parts of myself, you know, through those two different modes of writing. And they do filter into one another, but with academic writing, there's a certain distance that you're supposed to have from the writing itself, you know. There needs to be some kind of level of objectivity, and we try not to bring ourselves too much into the work. Whereas in poetry, it's a completely different form. So, I can be present in the work in a way that I can't be in my academic writing.

CG: But I imagine that there will inevitably be leakage. When I think about you on the streets of carnival, I imagine that you could be considered, as anthropologists sometimes describe themselves, as a 'participating observer'. Would that be true?

EZM: Yes. I have always wanted... I'm always a participant observer and when I did my first book on Anansi, I went and lived in Jamaica for three months and collected stories. I went up to interview the Maroons. I interviewed academics, taxi drivers, schoolchildren about the Anansi stories. So, I've always wanted to do research in a way where I am very much a participant. And, as you say, I've been part of a carnival troupe in Leeds for over a decade, and that very much filters into the academic study of carnival. I think that the problem is these barriers between often the performance and the artistry of carnival and the academic study of carnival:

academics don't experience carnival and often carnival performers, practitioners and artists are suspicious of academics. So, a lot of my work is to try and navigate and break down some of those boundaries, which is not easy. And yes, all of that does filter into my poetry; and I've got several poems which are about Anansi, about carnival, about Caribbean trickster figures and folk figures and carnival figures. So, I try and bring all of that alive, you know, on the page in my writing as well. I think to fully understand Caribbean cultural forms, you need to *experience* them. And not only do you need to *experience* them, they need to make you *feel*. So, understanding carnival is about understanding that transformative effect that carnival has on you; not just that moment on the street, but all year round. You need to live and breathe it to fully understand it. And you need to bring that to the table in your academic work as well.

CG: I wondered whether we could return to Anansi and read from that book, *Anansi's Journey: A Story of Jamaican Cultural Resistance*?

EZM: Thanks, Colin. Yes, I will. So, I'm going to read just a little passage here which was about going to visit the Maroon community. And the Maroon community are fascinating because they have Anansi stories that are much closer to the African roots than any other Anansi stories found on the island. And that's because the Maroons [are] as you well know, descendants of escaped slaves who lived in relative autonomy away from many other cultural influences. So, the stories are in a sense a more... not 'authentically' African but are more African, more rooted in their African culture, than other stories that you find in Jamaica.

Slaves imported from the Gold Coast were called Coromantees by Europeans. However, [Frederick G.] Cassidy and [Robert Brook] LePage [also spelt Le Page] explain that, "The umbrella term Coromantee was

not only used to describe Akan slaves but, in Jamaica, those who escaped and joined the Maroons, came to dominate them, and gained a reputation for fierceness.” The term also refers to that what was considered the secret language of the Maroons. There is some evidence to suggest that the secret language of the Maroons based on Twi language structures, is still alive in Jamaica today. And Isaac Bernard from the Maroon community in Moore Town claims to speak it.

As chief abeng player of the Moore Town community, Bernard is, undoubtedly, a man in touch with his Maroon traditions. The abeng is a cow or goat horn used by Maroons to pass information on to one another. And the code for the horn signal is apparently *never* divulged to outsiders. When I asked how he had learned what he called the Coromantee Maroon language, Bernard explained it had been passed on to him by the spirits of his ancestors.

This is from the interview that I took with... I had with Isaac Bernard. So, Isaac Bernard says,

‘It is a gift. A gift. Your ancestors who died and gone, they just pass it over. You are just born in it. A gift and you learn the word by yourself, by the spirit.’ And I said, ‘By the spirit of the ancestors that lived within you?’ Isaac Bernard nods in agreement, ‘Uh-huh, uh-huh. Anything that is far away from you, they bring it to you and tell you.’

So, there’s a longer section in the book of that interview with Isaac Bernard and he was one of the most impressive people that I met in my time in Jamaica. He lived high up in the hills in Moore Town and he was an Anansi character himself. He said when I arrived that he had been watching me and had seen me for a couple of weeks before I had actually arrived at his

doorstep. And I said, 'Are you sure? I don't think we've met before.' And then he went on to describe a journey that I had taken through the rainforest along the old Maroon trail. He knew where I had slept, he knew that I had done the journey with my father. So, he knew all these things about me and I could feel goosebumps rising on my arms. And then, when we left, Isaac said that... he said, 'I'll be watching you on your journey all the way back to Kingston. I will be watching you.' And I really felt his presence, you know, as we sort of charged down out of Moore Town, down into Kingston, I felt Isaac's presence with me; watching over me in a caring way but, yeah, he was a very spiritual man and when he told me he could speak the language of his ancestors and he had been born with this as a gift, the Coromantee language, I believed him.

CG: Well, he's a very affecting character and I sensed him through your reading there. I was intrigued by your reading because, to my mind, it could be a trade book which non-academics would find enthralling. But I was also struck by the notion of the empowerment of the Maroons. So, many people in Jamaica say that they're descended from the Maroons. They can't all be descended but there's some kudos attached to saying that you have Maroon ancestry. One of the things that intrigued me about your reading, and I wonder whether I can interrogate you a little bit about this, is the language; because you have to think very carefully about the language in academia and you used the word 'slave' there in your reading, a word that I've stopped using. I use 'enslaved' rather than 'slave'. And I noticed in your writing today, you capitalise the word Black, rather than in lower-case. Can you just... can I just ask you to elaborate on why you keep on using the word 'slave' rather than 'enslaved'?

EZM: A good question, Colin. And actually, this book was published in 2012, and now I use 'enslaved', and I do capitalise the word Black. So, I have

changed the way that I write and that was when it was made clear to me that the problem with the word 'slave'; that it in a sense tries to put forward, you know, a sort of a whole identity. There's nothing beyond that person's identity than being a 'slave'. So 'enslaved' is a much better term to use and that's the one I use now and it's the one I tell my students to use. And I think, you know, I'm in a constant process of evolving and learning and I'm open to change; and I think, you know, we all need to be, in this field. And also, a lot of the young people, my students, they bring to the table, you know, all sorts of new ways of speaking and thinking about things, and I absorb a lot from them. You know, I think my worst fear is to sort of become stuck in my ways and think that I know a great deal. So, I like to try and remain open and willing to change terminology, ideas, you know, where they no longer fit.

CG: Well, I salute your humility and your determination to be open to new ideas and to change your language, where you see fit. And I've undergone the same process myself. I think if I was to look back to my own writing, even writing about Marcus Garvey, my first book in 2008, I'm sure I used the word 'slave' but, like you, I don't think I'd use it now. And I wondered the degree to which your writing has been informed by your relatives. It often helps – does it, or doesn't it? – to have a relative who's a writer in the family? And in your essays, in your pieces, you've mentioned Joseph Zobel, your grandfather. What was his influence would you say on your writing?

EZM: Well, Joseph had a... has had a huge influence on me. So, you know, we grew up with his books and his poetry and his painting and also the film *La Rue Cases-Nègres* [*Black Shack Alley* or *Sugar Cane Alley*]. And so, people would know of him: 'Oh, you're the granddaughter of Joseph Zobel.' And so, I feel like that whole world that he, especially in the story of his childhood in *Black Shack Alley*, which is a memoir of his childhood growing

up in a sugar cane cutting village in Martinique; I feel that that was very much embedded in my consciousness. But it was only towards the later years of his life that I started to write and really become interested in exploring and researching the Caribbean. But before that, I'd always been obsessed with reggae music; I was obsessed with Bob Marley. My mum brought us up on a diet of reggae. She was a broadcaster at the BBC World Service, and she programmed African and Caribbean music programmes. So, we had a huge number of first edition reggae and African music records arriving in our little house in North Wales. So, she was a huge influence on me, and so was my grandfather.

We've got a really interesting family because there's a lot of mixed marriages in our family. So, often, you know, a White or Black mother, and a White or Black father, and we've got a really kind of kaleidoscopic sort of pigmentation throughout the family. And while my mum is very dark-skinned and my brother is darker-skinned than me, I'm quite light-skinned with blue eyes and blonde hair. So, I've always thought... I think that that has made me scrutinise my identity because I'm in that sort of liminal, you know, borderline space, which I think is an important space to occupy as well, because from that space you can also deconstruct very rigid or monolithic ideas about race. So, if people say, you know, 'White people are like this, Black people are like this...' Well, when you're in that kind of betwixt, in-between space, you can challenge those ideas. For me, as well, that African and Caribbean heritage is like very deeply seated within my heart and my soul. So, I feel its pull, you know, when I'm at carnival, when I listen to drumming, when I'm in the Caribbean, when I'm with Caribbean people, I feel a sense of homecoming. So, it's something that really is deeply embedded in my soul and in my consciousness. So, I just try and channel that through my research and through my poetry.

CG: I want to refer back to this notion of this liminal space which you described. In one of your readings on *WritersMosaic*, you talk about the much-desired light skin of the mixed-race Martinique, the 'peau sauvée', I think your grandmother calls it. And it strikes me that it coincides, as we speak today in November 2021, with a new film that's come out called *Passing*, based on the novel by Nella Larsen, a writer that you've interrogated in the past. And I wondered what you thought of the notion of 'passing' that Nella Larsen, and in this film by Rebecca Hall, what that notion illuminates and whether it has resonance today?

EZM: I've taught that novella, *Passing*, for a long time. It's one of my favourite pieces to teach and, as you've said, yes, I've done a piece on 'passing' about how passing is a trickster's art, because I like to bring everything back to tricksters, as much as possible, but how passing is a trickster's art... and I haven't seen the film yet. I'm really looking forward to seeing the film. The novella *Passing* is about two women: it's 1920s Harlem, they're both light-skinned. One of the women has made the decision to 'pass'. So, she's married a rich White man and has passed into the White world. Her husband is a racist and doesn't realise that she's actually of dual heritage. Her best friend is living in the Black community. She's also light-skinned but she's very much, very central to her community. And time has passed and the two women reconnect through letters and then through seeing each other.

So, the novel grapples with this idea of passing over what was then called 'the colour line'. And the woman who 'passes' is quite a hard character. She's described as having a 'having way about her'. And the woman who hasn't passed feels attracted to her. Now, also repelled by what she's done... but there's a sense that by passing over the colour line in the way that she does, she's flaunting all and breaking down all of the barriers

society has put up. So, she's a kind of exciting figure, because she challenges the barriers, the racial barriers, that have been put in place. And I think that she, in a way, is like the trickster because the trickster is, in my view, symbolic of all the things that we would like to do as human beings but we're unable to do so. So, the trickster is like the wish fulfilment of us, as human beings breaking free from the chains, the barriers that society places upon us. So that's why I think that 'passing' is a trickster's art; but how terrible to have that 'one-drop rule', you know, to force women to have to make those kinds of choices. And, in Martinique, the pigmentocracy reigns supreme; it's still very strong. My grandmother called me 'peau sauvée' when I was born, which means 'saved skin' because I was light-skinned. It's a deeply uncomfortable and disturbing aspect of Caribbean society and unfortunately things change very slowly. My grandfather was very dark-skinned, and he said that when he left Martinique, he felt more comfortable in his Black man's skin in Paris, in a majority White city, than he did in Martinique; because in Martinique, he was considered to be too African. People made comments on the thickness of his lips, on how wide his nose is, on how dark his skin was. So, to be too African is still considered to be, you know, somewhat, somehow primitive, somehow backward, somehow unrefined. Those ideas exist today. Even when I was a teenager and I dated a Martinican guy in Martinique, the other Martinican girls said to me: 'Why are you going out with Filous? He looks too African.' And this is a type of, as we know, it's a type of internalised racism. So, the legacies of enslavement and colonialism still being felt today.

CG: Yes, I was intrigued by both the film and the book because in a way, the book, and the film, they compound your expectation. And the notion of 'passing' is that person feels ashamed and worries about being discovered. But in fact, the main character, or the character who is passing in Nella Larsen's book, she's a rather provocative character who um, doesn't seem

to fear being found out. She's quite determined to push things as far as she can go; and when I thought about her and her stance, it's rather like someone who gets away with lying by telling the truth. Did you get a sense of that from the character?

EZM: Yes, I do. I haven't seen the film but that's very much a case in the book. And so, there was... in America, at the time, in the 1920s, and then right through, you now, until the 80s, there's this what we call 'the tragic mulatto figure'; and Americans were obsessed... White and Black Americans were obsessed with this tragic mulatto figure. So, we find the tragic mulatto figure in books and films and it tends to be the *same* story: a beautiful woman, who's very light-skinned, who thinks she's White and then, lo and behold, they realise that she's mixed. And so, everything that she has, she might have you know, a husband or a lovely life, is taken away from her because you know, shock horror, she's a dual heritage... she's a Black woman! And this always ends in misery, in tragedy. So, it ends in, you know, in her death, her illness, her destruction. And the American public love the tragic mulatto stereotype in films and in books because even though it's kind of titillating and pushes the colour boundaries. Ultimately, she dies because she tried to cross them, and you shouldn't be *allowed* to cross them. But you're absolutely right, Colin. In Nella Larsen's *Passing*, the character crosses them and celebrates crossing them and revels in her flaunting of the rules. I won't give the game away, but you'll have to decide for yourself if you think that, ultimately, it's like a tragic mulatto stereotype, or if it challenges that stereotype at the end of the film and the novel. But that's what I love about her characters: they're not the kind of characters that you would expect to find in books at that time, especially Black women and especially that there's a strong sexual tension between the two female characters as well. So, Black women having gay relationships in, you know,

being written about in the 1920s, was really daring subject matter – especially those that were passing, too.

CG: And I'd like to finish by touching on what is undeniably a tragic story and it's the story of David Oluwale. You are the vice-chair of the David Oluwale Memorial Association. Can you tell us a little bit about David Oluwale and why you've taken this position? And how his life and the treatment of him characterises the nature of our society?

EZM: So, I'm the co-chair of the David Oluwale Memorial Association. And, yes, David Oluwale was a Nigerian migrant, a stowaway who came to Leeds. And in 1969, he was drowned in the River Aire. And it is a tragic story, as you say, Colin. David came over here from Lagos, you know, full of hope trying to make a new life for himself. But over the decades that followed, he was subjected to horrific ill-treatment. He suffered from mental health problems but, the worst of all, he was hounded for *years* by two West Yorkshire police officers, who made it their mission in life to try and destroy him. So, they beat him over the head with truncheons which, we think, then resulted in his incarceration in a mental institute, where he received all sorts of invasive treatments like electric shock treatments. When he was released, he was homeless on the streets of Leeds and the two police officers would come and find him in doorways when he was sleeping rough in Leeds. They would piss on him, they would set him alight, they would take him into the Middleton Woods in the middle of the night to disorientate him. They pursued him because he was a Black man in a vulnerable position. And, we believe, that he... he was found drowned in the River Aire and, we believe that he was pushed in by the police officers, who didn't get a great deal of prison time. So, we feel, as the David Oluwale Memorial Association, that Leeds can learn from this tragic story. So, what we try and do is keep David's story alive. There have been a huge number

of responses to David's story in all manner of cultural forms: through art, literature, short story, poetry, music, song... So, it's really interesting how this tragic story has lived on through the arts. And what we try and do as a charity is use the arts as a platform to call for social justice. So, we keep David's story alive and use it as a way in thinking about how we can tackle homelessness, mental ill health, and racism today in Leeds.

CG: Thanks, Emily. Just a very final question because I know we're running out of time... A very final question. I mean David Oluwale's story has been resurrected, I think, in part, because of the Black Lives Matter moment that we seem to be in. And I think that's great that that's been the case that there's more recognition about what happened to him. But it's also stirred a debate, hasn't it, about the changing nature of our society? And I want to finish by asking your reflections on a TV series actually, called *The Chair*, which throws up questions of how universities are diversifying their workforce. Um, but it's a strange and interesting series on television because it... at its heart it is a new Chair, who is a woman of colour, who must also face the concerns of her White colleagues in maintaining the status quo. And I wonder whether that notion is one which you've seen, or are beginning to see, be played out at the university where you work.

EZM: That's interesting you say that because my friend just watched *The Chair*. She said, 'I was thinking about you the whole way through.' So, she made me watch it; and I watched the whole series in one sitting because it fascinated me. Yeah, a lot of things that happen in that series I see played out here in universities. There's a big push at the moment to decolonise the institution. There's things we've, you know, a lot of us have been talking about ... for a long, long time. And because it's suddenly on the political agenda, everybody's scrabbling around wanting to decolonise this, wanting to decolonise that, wanting to have consultation work on this and change

practices in this way. These are all good things, but I just hope that they stay strongly embedded, you know, in the system so that we can see long-term change. What was really irritating, I thought, about the series, *The Chair*, is that she steps down from her job. Why does she step down from her job? It's as if the series is saying, 'Well, you know, a woman of colour can't take on that role.' And then she's much happier in another position in a less powerful position, which I thought was a disappointing ending because I think this is the time to speak out and to push on, and to really tackle those oppressive forces in academia, you know, in our institutions; and not time to step back.

CG: Well, Emily... Well, thank you for continuing to challenge conformity and to challenge the old status quo as you do in your writing and in your teaching, but, also in your celebration of carnival because, as well as protests, Bob Marley says, 'And we need to have love songs.' Would you agree?

EZM: Yes, we do. We need joy and play and love songs and we also, you know, need to drink rum and dance – with or without sequins. [Laughs] For me, the more sequins, the better. But, yeah, absolutely. And you know, these things also go hand in hand: play and dance... these are forms of resistance to the status quo, too. You know, the system that tries to conform us. So, yeah, let's be joyous in our breaking of the system.

CG: Irie! [Laughs]

EZM: [Laughs]

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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