WRITERS MOSAIC

Imaobong Umoren in conversation with Colin Grant

at the Hay Festival

[Music]

Colin Grant (CG): This is *WritersMosaic, in Conversation*, and I'm Colin Grant. At this year's Hay Festival, in front of a lively audience, I spoke with Imaobong Umoren about her latest book, *Empire Without End: A New History of Britain and the Caribbean*.

[Music and applause]

CG: So thanks for coming. You've made a good choice, I think. I'm really delighted to be on stage with Imaobong Umoren. And in fact, if you want to learn more about what I really feel about Imaobong's book, you can wait for the Observer review in about a week and a half's time. [Audience laughs] It's going to be a good one. It's

going to be a good one. So Imaobong is an Associate Professor of International History at the London School of Economics. It's not your first book?

[Music]

Imaobong Umoren (IU): No, it's my second book.

CG: Second book. Absolutely. Second books are usually more difficult. Was this more difficult than the first?

IU: It's definitely more difficult. As you can see with the size, it took me quite a long, long time [laughs].

CG: 500 pages. These little coloured notes, they run out after a third, that's because I ran out of little coloured notes.

IU: You stopped reading?

CG: No, I completed reading the book. It's a fantastic book, congratulations, with a great title, *Empire Without End: A New History of Britain and the Caribbean*. And it was timely, and I imagine very rewarding for you to have won the Hay Eccles Award. How

useful was that in terms of the research and the beginning of the writing of the book?

IU: Yeah, so I received the Eccles Institute's prize in 2020. So when I got it, I was really excited, I wanted to get into the archives, get into the British Library and all the collections. And of course, as many of you know, it was lockdown, and then another lockdown, so I wasn't able to physically go to the library. But what I really took advantage of was the amazing array of online collections and online sources that the British Library had. And I was looking repeatedly at, in particular, sources related to the experience of enslavement. There are so many records, diaries, of life on plantations in the 17th and 18th century, and I really was able to grapple with the complexities of that particular period through the online material that was available to me in 2020 and 2021. And as I continued throughout the book, and as the years went by, I was able to obviously physically go to the British Library, and that, again, just opened me up to a variety of different sources: newspapers, journals, fiction, non-fiction, that integrated itself into some of the primary sources that are the basis of the book.

CG: Can you remember going to the acquisitions meeting? So the acquisitions meeting is when you propose your new book, and around an oval table, sit a lot of

people who are going to say no to you. Was it a difficult sell, a big history, an ambitious history?

IU: No, it wasn't. I mean, given the context of 2020, there were so many debates, in particular, the Black Lives Matter protests that took place around, yeah, this time five years ago. There was so much conversation about the legacies of empire, the ongoing existence of racism, and other types of inequalities. And I think what I wanted to do was talk about these issues but talk about them in a much more complex way, in a way that helped people understand the entanglements of the past and the present. Because in particular for the history that I tell, which is a specific history about the British Empire in a specific location—I think—being the Caribbean, this helped me to make sense of the world in 2020. And I hope, as I've written the book, it helps readers also make sense of the complexity of the enduring legacies of empire and some of the residual impacts that still live with us.

CG: So one of the things I think benefits an audience is if the writer reads a little passage from the book just to give a flavour. Because this is a really well-written book. It's a complete work, and although you're an academic, it's not a boring book.

IU: Oh, thank you.

[Audience laughs]

CG: No, no, no. I remember I had a review once—I read a review once, a big book about Marcus Garvey, and the reviewer said, 'it as eminently readable', like it shouldn't be. [IU laughs] Yours is very readable. I find it very informative, and I learned a lot. So would you just read a little passage?

IU: Sure, I'll read from the introduction. It starts with me telling a story about an enslaved woman in Bermuda called Sally Bassett.

[IU reads from *Empire Without End: A New History of Britain and the Caribbean*]

> 'In June 1730, sixty-eight-year-old Sally Bassett was burned alive. Her burning body hung in Hamilton, the capital of Bermuda. Bassett, an elderly enslaved woman, whose father was a white European and mother a black African, was sentenced to death for her attempt to kill by poison Sarah and Thomas Foster, the white slaveowners of her granddaughter Beck, and Nancy, an enslaved woman she considered more foe than friend. Although Bassett professed her innocence during her trial, the court concluded that she had been 'moved and seduced by [the] instigation of the Devil'. Bassett was found guilty by the all-white male jury. Bassett's attempt at murder was not the first

time she had committed a crime: back in 1712, she had been charged with trying to poison the cattle and damage the property of two white Bermudians. She is best remembered, however, for her gruesome death.

Bassett's identity as a mixed-race enslaved woman was crucial to her life and death. The status of being enslaved passed down through women, meaning that the children of enslaved women were considered enslaved from birth. The society in which Bassett lived was built on distinctions between humans based on skin colour. White elite European men, already accustomed to placing humans in a hierarchy, created a structure that assigned those with more melanin as inferior to those with less. The latter group was fit for freedom; the former branded unfree. As a mixed-race enslaved woman, Bassett's gender shaped what types of labour she would perform, who could have unrestricted access to her body and what forms of resistance she could enact. This society was maintained by extreme levels of racial- and gender-based violence; that Bassett turned to violence herself, therefore, should come as little surprise. The specific form of violence – poison – considered a woman's crime in England and commonly used by enslaved women who drew on West African forms of knowledge – reveals that although Bassett may have never set foot

> either in Britain or on the African continent from which some of her ancestors came, its ideas ricocheted across the Atlantic Ocean. For Bassett and other enslaved women, poison became what social scientist James C. Scott called their 'weapons of the weak', a subtle, silent yet deadly form of resistance that existed alongside louder revolts and uprisings. That Bassett died by burning – a harsh punishment for a severe crime – reflects white elite fraught fears of death by poison.'

CG: Thank you very much. Thank you.

[Applause]

CG: So a brutal death, but a statue was raised in her memory, wasn't it?

IU: Yes, so the Sally Bassett story gathered new life in 2009. This was the year when a statue was erected of Sally Bassett in Bermuda. It was meant to mark the celebrations of Bermuda's founding by the British, and it was meant to be the first statue of an enslaved woman on the island. And it caused a huge amount of controversy because the statue reminded Bermudians of this history of empire, this history of racism, and the ways in which these histories are not stuck in the past,

they're very much live and present. And I started the book with the story of Bassett and then the story of the Bassett statue and the debates that sparked the statue because I really wanted to have readers and audiences aware that the debates that we're having here about statues that reflect histories of empire or reflect histories of slavery in particular aren't just happening in Britain, they're happening in the Caribbean. The debates we have about the legacies of the British Empire in the Caribbean are live and real, and they're complex, and they're also taking place in different ways, inflected with different themes in the Caribbean. And I wanted to make this case, more broadly linked to the argument of the book, that Britain and the Caribbean have been deeply entangled as a result of this history and remain deeply entangled, and that in order to understand present-day racial and also class-based inequalities, we have to understand this history, not only understand it, but we have to reckon with it. We have to realise how that history is very real and present in our moment today. And if we want to think about a different world where these inequalities don't exist, we have to confront this history, even as difficult and violent as that history is.

CG: Yeah, I think David Olusoga was saying this week in the Times about the tendency to have trigger warnings and maybe to pass over some of the more difficult passages of this troubled history. What's your view on that?

IU: Yeah, I mean, it is difficult. Even as a historian, there were moments where I was reading sources, and I would be in tears. I wouldn't be able to really confront these sources. I would need to take time away from looking and reading these sources because it is a really brutal, violent history. I make this case repeatedly in the book that we can't forget, we can't turn away. Now is not the time to turn away. Now is the time to try and really grapple with this violent history, which bears so much on the violent present that we live in. So I try as much as possible to give readers a sense of the complexity of this violence, but I think that it's important to grapple with it, I think it's important to let it sit with you and to hopefully help move people to change opinions that can hopefully help to eradicate some of these hierarchies that still exist.

CG: And to give you a sense of the scope of it, you begin in the 1560s with John Hawkins, don't you?

IU: Yes.

CG: And right through to Black Lives Matter. So a bit of a marathon.

IU: It's a big book. I definitely recommend listening to the audiobook if you don't have time to read the whole thing because it is very long. But the reasons why I

chose to take this really long historical perspective was because I think histories of empire tend to be told in—or simplistic histories of empire tend to be told in quite narrow forms. We focus on the Victorian period, where the history of empire changes; it seemed to be one of industry and trade and commerce, and we forget about the contact with indigenous people in the Caribbean, or we forget about the history of slavery if you start in the 19th century. And so I wanted to take a really longue durée perspective in order to challenge some of the misconceptions and myths of the history of the British Empire in the Caribbean. I think when you do take this long perspective, the commonalities, the similarities, the entanglements, become so much starker, so much more vivid, so much more real. You can think, *oh my gosh, this isn't new what happened in the 1980s, or what's even happening now with discussions about Windrush. This isn't new. This has happened before.* There's a historical continuity that I think I'm repeating throughout the book. And by taking a much longer historical perspective, I think those continuities become so much more stark, so much more vivid.

CG: So the British had many, many colonies in the Caribbean, one of which was Jamaican. My parents are Jamaican. So my big question to you is how to keep the Jamaicans out? Because the Jamaicans take up too much room in the culture, they're too noisy, too big an opinion of themselves.

IU: I wouldn't agree with that. I wouldn't. I try as much as possible in the book, which really focuses on the Anglophone Caribbean—that's the place that the book really centres attention on—and I try and highlight the big colonies, like Jamaica, but I also try and highlight the smaller ones, like Anguilla, which is currently an overseas territory of Britain; it's not an independent country. I try as much as possible to do that because I think it highlights the complexities of empires today. We oftentimes think that decolonisation ended empire, once Jamaica becomes independent, it's on its own. But I try as much as possible in the book to talk about how even after constitutional decolonisation, places like Jamaica are still deeply entangled, both socially, economically, culturally, to Britain. I try and talk about smaller islands, like Bermuda. Starting the book in Bermuda was an important thing for me. I wanted readers to think, *oh, a book about the Caribbean, Bermuda?* I take a really expansive view of the Anglophone Caribbean, and I do try as much as possible to highlight stories from places like Anguilla and Bermuda as much as from places like Barbados or Jamaica.

CG: Yeah, and one of the fascinating things is that although there is this troubled history, there are many people in the Caribbean who pledge allegiance to the crown, who are very proud to be part of the British experiment. When my parents were growing up in Jamaica, if you went to see a film in the Rialto Cinema, before the film began, you would stand up to sing the British national anthem, and the

same happened at the end of the film. And you talk about the importance of this Empire Day. Can you explain to people who don't know what the Empire Day is, what it was and what it meant to people?

IU: Yeah, so Empire Day was a day in May—I think it's the 24th of May, although don't quote me, it's in the book—and it took place all over the British Empire, the British colonies, a celebration of Britain, a celebration of British history, the monarchy. And it was a really important part of the colonial belonging, right, that this vast empire that included so many different people, speaking so many different languages, varied racial ethnic backgrounds, could come together and celebrate being part of the British Empire. And in the book, I recount so many stories of the ways in which, in particular African Caribbean men and women, tried as much as possible to see themselves as equal members in the empire. I try and challenge this idea that pro-colonialists were these rabid racists. Not always. There were many people who really did believe that empire was a space of belonging, of brotherhood, of solidarity, and they wanted inclusion in the empire, they fought for inclusion in the empire. I talk about the experiences of African Caribbean men in both the First and Second World Wars who died for king and empire, who fought, who wanted to contribute as much as possible, but who, in trying to do that, continuously rubbed up against the reality of racism, who were not allowed to fight alongside Europeans, who were denied access, who were denied equality based on their skin colour,

based on the fiction of race. And so I tell this story that I hope makes our understanding of empire a little bit more complex because empire was for so many, particularly middle-class African-Caribbean people, a really important part of their identity and their sense of self. When many of those individuals came up against racism or they migrated to Britain and realised, *oh, actually, I'm not a member of this empire*, or, *I don't feel like I'm a member of this empire if I'm being discriminated against in housing, in policing and education. Wait, what's going on here?* And many of them, as a result of that experience, began to challenge racism, began to play a really important role in the larger anti-racist movements that took place in the 1970s and 1980s.

CG: Yeah, and I think what you also show is the amazing capacity to forgive.

IU: Yes.

CG: There's a story, I think it's a Second World War story, where some Caribbean men enlist to fight for the motherland, and they're shipped off to Canada in tropical clothing, so they freeze to death. Some of them do die, don't they?

IU: Yes.

CG: And that report was buried for a while, but it comes out. But what was the reaction, do you think, back in the Caribbean when that news came out?

IU: It was shock. Many people in the Caribbean didn't realise the reality of racism when it comes to the experience of Caribbean people who had moved to Britain. Very much they had been, I wouldn't say indoctrinated, but they had definitely been schooled into thinking of themselves as equal members alongside white Britons as part of the British Empire. So when they started reading stories about African Caribbean men not being able to serve, they were shocked. There was a sense of, *wait, again, what's happening here? All of my education has told me that I'm a member of the British Empire, that I should be loyal to the empire, but actually, I'm not being treated as I thought I would be.* So it's shock, it's horror, it's disappointment. It's a manifold multitude of emotions, yeah.

CG: So let's think a little bit about this subtitle: *A New History of Britain and the Caribbean*. What's new about it?

IU: I think what's new is the stress that I place on this entanglement between Britain and the Caribbean. I think oftentimes, British history and even histories of the British Empire only mention the Caribbean in relation to the period of slavery; that's the focal point. But what happens after? What happens in the late 19th century?

What happens in the 20th century? What's happening right now, today? I try as much as possible to make complex this history by, as I've said, taking this long longue durée perspective and by highlighting, in particular, the entanglements of British history and how we can't understand British history without thinking about the Caribbean and empire, just as much as we can't understand Caribbean history without thinking about Britain and its empire. So it's about the deeply entangled relationship between the two regions, and that's what I think is new.

CG: It is new. I had to ask the question. That's a good answer. There's a couple of interesting phrases which characterise some of the themes of the book. One of the important phrases, 'a racial caste hierarchy'. That's introduced by the British. Can you unpick that? What do you mean by that?

IU: Yeah, so that's not a term that I've coined myself. It's a term that historians have used, and in particular, historians of the Caribbean. And the racial caste hierarchy is really something that occurs in the making and construction of both race but also the development of transatlantic slavery. And the 'racial caste hierarchy' is a term that historians use to describe the society that existed during the period of slavery. And what I do is I try and tease out how this hierarchy changes and shifts over time and space. So in the book, I make clear that this term isn't similar to other iterations of caste in different parts of the world. Caste, I know, has a very specific meaning in

certain areas, so I try as much as possible to make a real distinction about what is unique about this ‘racial caste hierarchy’. And I make a couple of points about it. I say that this term, ‘racial caste hierarchy’, is basically a pyramid social structure that existed during slavery, where you had in the main, white elites at the top; in the middle you had mixed-race African Caribbean people; and at the bottom, you had the majority of enslaved Africans. This hierarchy, this pyramid, wasn't static at all. There was movement in some cases between the middle and the top tiers, but predominantly, those at the bottom, so enslaved Africans, remained enslaved Africans. But what I try to highlight is that what made this hierarchy so powerful, what made it so—what made it live so long, is that it was undergirded by violence and tension and division, internal tensions and divisions. And the book teases out the ways in which, in different times and different spaces, this hierarchy was challenged but also how this hierarchy was reinforced. And so I try and give specific stories that tell this longer history about the legacies of the ‘racial caste hierarchy’. And I use the term because I really wanted to intervene in debates about racism that talked about racism by itself but didn't talk about racism in relation to the economy or in relation to class or in relation to gender. And so I hope the term allows me, in my usage, to make more complex how racism intersected, overlapped with class divisions, intersected, overlapped with religion or gender. Even, yeah, those are the categories that I highlight in the book. So it's a term that I use that I

hope can help make more complex, again, our understanding of the legacies of the British Empire.

CG: Yeah, some people use the phrase 'pigmentocracy'.

IU: Yes, that's another phrase, yeah.

CG: So basically, the darker you are, the fewer opportunities you have in life, and the better opportunities arise, the more you lose colour and become lighter and lighter and lighter.

IU: Yeah, but also class, right? There's an elite status that you also need to have that gives you a cushion in life, I think. So there's a class, there's a skin colour, there's a gender dimension to it as well.

CG: And you also make the point, I think, that racism came about through slavery rather than the other way around. Can you elaborate on that?

IU: Yes. Yeah, so I really try and stress the ways in which the construction of race undergirds slavery in a way, right? But if we think about how the transatlantic slave trade itself developed, and I specifically focus on this form of slavery, I know there

are lots of other forms of slavery in different parts of the world at different times, but in particular, in the narrative that I tell, I talk about how the 'racial caste hierarchy' and the construction of race, and in particular, key pieces of legislation that introduce race as a construct, help to underpin the violence that makes slavery endure for so long, and that, again, show the complexities of racism and slavery. So it's a part of my attempt to challenge some of the misconceptions about how we connect both racism and slavery.

CG: And how do you answer people who say, 'Well, there's a kind of slavery here in Britain with the very poor people acting in a way and working in a way that wouldn't be dissimilar to what the work practices might have been in the Caribbean?'

IU: So I would respond to that question by talking about nuance, right? In the book, I talk about the term 'racial slavery'. This is what I and many other historians think took place or argue took place in the Caribbean. It's a specific type of slavery that is tied to the construction of race, which did not occur in other places. I really try, again, to stress the specificity of the Caribbean, because as I said, there's so much talk and debate about the British Empire generally, but in writing this book, I really wanted to, again, by focusing on the Caribbean, tell a really specific, clear history that helps to dispel some of these stereotypes and myths that can allow for your question to come about, this comparison which really doesn't bear much when you

look at the primary sources, when you hear the testimonies of both slaveholders and enslaved people themselves, you really do begin to see, *okay, what happened in the Caribbean was different to what happened in West Africa or was different to what happened in other parts of the world when we talk about this language of slavery.*

CG: Well, looking at the audience, I think that unless I'm mistaken and people are passing as white, then there probably are white people in the majority in the audience. And I wonder how many of them are affected by this condition that you highlight in the book called 'post-colonial melancholia'. [Audience laughs] What is that? What that! As we say in Luton.

IU: So I think lots of people are affected by it. Lots of different people are affected by it. But it's this idea of not really being able to reconcile with the reality of what empire was in the present moment and the continuing relevance, significance, and prominence of the empire for today. And I wouldn't say it's mainly confined to one demographic group. I think 'post-colonial melancholia', this naive, oftentimes misinterpretation of the empire or a very simplistic understanding of the British Empire as just good, as just fantastic, really impacts so many people because we don't talk enough about the British Empire. We don't really teach it in schools and its complexity because it's hard. It's a really difficult history. It's one that makes you—it makes you embarrassed, it can make you shameful, it can make you have

lots of pride, but it can also—it's a mixture of emotions. And so I think that it's not a specific demographic that has this 'post-colonial melancholia'. I think politicians use it, use the myths of the British Empire for their own political ends. But I think that the empire and its legacies confer so many emotions, and part of the reason I wanted to write the book was to address that, to say that these emotions are valid, they're important, it's what we do next with those emotions that's more important. If you have shame in the British Empire or you feel ashamed about some of the things that many colonists did in different parts of the world because you know that today the legacies are racism or they are gender-based violence in particular communities, it's what you do next. How do you challenge that in your everyday life, in your political life, in your social or cultural life? These are the things that I think are important. But in the latter stages of the book, I do give a lot of examples about how 'post-colonial melancholia' has shaped state policies, has been influential in debates about migration or immigration, has been important in debates about, again, how we teach history in schools, how we don't teach this history in schools, and how it's impacted the Windrush scandal. I bring the book to end in the contemporary moment, again, as I said, to highlight the entanglements and the commonalities and similarities that I see.

CG: And one of the ways—correct me if I'm wrong—one of the ways I think the British propped up their colonies was by introducing enemies within, putting black

people against Asian people, for instance. And there's the middle ground of people who are going to support the man rather than people that they ought to be aligned with. Would you argue, would you say that the indentureship scheme was an example of that? So for people who don't understand what an indentureship scheme was in the Caribbean, can you explain?

IU: Yes, so indentureship comes after the end of slavery. So after emancipation, many British colonial officials in the Caribbean have a real problem with labour. Many enslaved people, as soon as they had their freedom, want to remove themselves from the plantation. They want to create their own farming communities, cultivate land, produce different crops, earn a living that way. They want to remove themselves from plantations. This then leaves a huge labour dearth. Who's going to be working on these sugar, rice plantations across the Caribbean? And so indentureship, which has been used in different parts of the British Empire at different times, it's not necessarily new in the mid to late 19th century, crops up as an alternative to get more labourers to come. And labourers are brought to the Caribbean from different parts of Asia, so from India and from China in particular, to the Anglophone Caribbean. And they slot into this racial caste hierarchy that I talk about in the book. They enter the middle section, but they're also sometimes at the bottom. It's a really complex history, which I outline in some of these early chapters in the book. And yes, to answer your question, there is a

politics of difference or divide and rule that is implemented by colonial officials to keep indentured labourers and formerly enslaved Africans apart, to see these two groups as enemies rather than as people who are experiencing similar forms of labour discrimination, because that is what these two groups do experience; they experience labour discrimination, racial discrimination as well. So there's an attempt to try and cleave divisions and tensions between these groups in order to prevent them from seeing the similarities between them and possibly challenging colonial officials and the whole edifice of empire. More broadly, empire is founded, continues, as a result of divide and rule, of strategies, of tensions within communities, which is what allows elites to maintain their power for so long. It's a strategy used throughout different types of empires in different parts of the world. It's a really effective one, but it's one that's always undermined. And I give examples in the book of ways in which Africans and Asians form families, they fall in love, they challenge these divisions and tensions in various ways. It's not simply a history of us and them. There's always attempts to try and challenge divisions and tensions because humans, I believe, want to seek out connection over divisions and tensions. And again, I try and give some hope and give some stories of those in the book.

CG: Can you tell us about any particular individuals that really spoke to you, that still resonate with you long after you finished the book?

IU: Yeah, so if I think about the latter stages of the book where I talk about some of the activists in the 1960s and ‘70s who challenged racism in Britain, I think about Claudia Jones, who was born in Trinidad, she then goes to the United States, and then she's later, because of her political views—she's a radical, she's working with communists, she's a communist—she ends up being deported from the US during the McCarthy era, comes to Britain, settles in Brixton, and becomes a really important figure in the Caribbean community. She helps set up what is today the Notting Hill Carnival. She plays this really critical role in not only challenging racism in Britain but also seeking connections with different people. So she works with South Asians, she works with West Africans, she crosses the racial-political divides to try and create a coalition, an anti-racist coalition, to challenge so much of the state-centred racism that crops up again and again in the 1960s and ‘70s in Britain. And she's a real inspiration to me and someone who I wish was taught and known much more widely. I know that she is becoming far more well-known than she used to be, but she is such an important woman when it comes to thinking about histories of anti-racism. And her life, her story, needs to be told over and over again as a reminder of the possibilities of challenging the status quo and challenging hierarchies.

CG: And were there any surprises for you when you went to the archives? Did anything really hit you as an unusual thing you didn't know about.

IU: Not really. Not unusual. I think what surprised me when I got to the archives, and in particular, the sources that I tell that give the voice of people from the Caribbean, because as I write in the book, I really want this to be a history that foregrounds individuals and peoples, and in particular, people from the Caribbean, who are oftentimes overlooked in our histories of empire. I know that may sound strange, but if you read books about empire, the voices of people from the Caribbean are sometimes not even present. So in the stories, in the voices of people from the Caribbean, I think what surprised me was similar to what we said, was how many of them really did believe in the motherland, really invested themselves in this sense of, *I belong here, I should be here, this is my country*, when many of them moved to Britain. *This is my country as much as anybody else's.* That kept cropping up again and again and again. And it just reminded me of how their attempts for inclusion were constantly challenged, were constantly refuted, but how they insisted. And I try again in the book to give stories about this insistence of, *I am here, I belong, and I'm not going anywhere*, to remind ourselves of the entanglement between the Anglophone Caribbean and Britain.

CG: Yeah, the British do a really strong game in propaganda, don't they? When I was growing up in Luton, the capital of Britain, [audience laughs] the only idea I had about slavery was the idea that Britain brought about the end of slavery, and wasn't William Wilberforce fantastic? There was no suggestion that the enslaved themselves had had any influence on that. But you talk about the rebellions that were constant throughout the period, don't you?

IU: Yeah, not only the rebellions, but the acts of individual women, like Sally Bassett, who starts the story. I think it's important to think about, yes, there are all these really big riots and revolts that take place in the Caribbean, but there's also the individual acts of resistance that play a role in trying to challenge this really simplistic understanding of the empire, to try and challenge empire itself, right? And the response, I mean, Sally Bassett was burnt alive. She was considered to be a real enemy of the state, right? So I try as much as possible to highlight the stories of resistance that tell resistance in a much more complex way and that highlight people's stories, like Bassett, who many people may never have heard of before.

CG: And what's your attitude towards the depiction of violence in your book and the depiction of violence in history? Because it can be voyeuristic, can't it? It can be a kind of pornography. So what's your approach?

IU: Yeah, my approach was to always ground the histories or the examples of violence in storytelling, in the sources. I wanted the sources that I looked at in the archives to speak for themselves. And I think as you do read the book, and you will creep up continuously on violence as a theme because I'm talking about empire and empire itself is violent, I want readers to take violence serious. I hope I haven't made it voyeuristic, but I have grounded violence in the stories, in the primary sources that I found in the archives, and that's important as a historian to state what I've seen.

CG: And one of the things you do very well in the book is to highlight the language that people use to disguise what they really believe. And in 1968, there's a man called Enoch Powell, who wrote a speech which became known as the *Rivers of Blood* speech. And in it, he has a phrase where he talks about Britons who become 'strangers in their own country'. 'Strangers in their own country'. Recently, there was a man called Keir Starmer, who introduced the phrase that Britain was becoming an 'island of strangers'. Do you think there's any commonality there?

IU: So Enoch Powell and Keir Starmer, two different people, I really want to stress that.

CG: Okay!

IU: No, I think there's a lot of similarity in the language, but I also want to stress, as I talk about in the book, that oftentimes, the similarities between political parties or individuals when it comes to migration or the debates about immigration, what I want to say is that the parties aren't always as far apart as we might think they are. That if we look at some of the rhetoric of certain politicians on both the left and the right in the 1960s, '70s, '80s, even arguably today, there's some similarity. I don't want to specifically talk about that term that Keir Starmer used, but it's, again, it's a reflection of what I talk about in the book, which is a continuity that is reflected time and time again about how we talk about difference, how we include or exclude people. And I think there's a lot more similarities than differences on the political spectrum.

CG: It's funny how it resonates with more people than others because with me, I was Vexed with a capital V. I was so vexed that I commissioned a poem from Roger Robinson. I run a website, which you know about, called *WritersMosaic*, and Roger has written a poem in response to Keir Starmer's slip, if it was a slip. I'm going to now invite the audience. Thank you very much. I'm going to invite the audience to pose some questions. We've got a few minutes. Well, about 15 or 20 minutes. Oh, several questions. People are normally reluctant to ask questions, so we've got very many strong volunteers. So microphones will appear at your hand very shortly.

Audience member 1: I just wonder, does your book have a chapter on cricket? [Audience laughs] Because I just love watching Garry—probably unpatriotic of me, but I love watching Garry Sobers' team beat England at the Oval in 1972, and it was just a wonderful moment. And there were more West Indians in the audience than—

IU: Anyone else. Yeah. I don't have a chapter on cricket, unfortunately, but I do mention cricketers, so Learie Constantine, who's a really important cricketer from Trinidad, who also becomes a really important political figure in the post-war period. So I don't talk about cricket specifically, but I definitely mention cricketers.

CG: But it's important, isn't it, when you're constructing such a big book, you're going to have to make some serious choices, so you can't include all this social history as well.

IU: Yeah, I wanted to include some of the cultural, social sides, but the book just kept on getting bigger and bigger, and it's big enough, so I had to stop, I had to cut.

CG: There are other books that talk about cricket. There's a book by a man called C. L. R. James called *Beyond a Boundary* you might want to have a look at. Okay, over there. Oh, and in the front as well.

Audience member 2: Hello. Many years ago, I read a book by Jan Morris called *Pax Britannica*, which was a bit of an apologia for the empire and a very romantic account of all the colonies around the world. And her main defence of the empire seemed to be that it wasn't as bad as all the other empires and also that it kept the peace in the world. So would you like to comment on that?

IU: So I, in telling this specific history of the British Empire, I don't compare it to other empires. I think when we do that, we lose the complexity and the nuance of the British Empire. What I really want to do is challenge that idea that the British Empire was this benevolent, lovely, kind entity, because the sources tell me otherwise, and the reality of 21st century life also tells me otherwise. And I really ground the history in sources of the people who experienced empire, people who were the white elites who experienced empire as much as the people who were the enslaved Africans. I try and give as much perspective to different voices, but even with those voices, what I try and stress, and what they also stress, is the violence of empire, that it wasn't this nostalgic, peaceful construct but was really undergirded by violence, and its legacies remain in our violent contemporary world.

Audience member 3: Following emancipation, when they introduced an indenture system, was there a difference in the attitude to the empire between those people who were willing to work under the indenture rules, where they were paid very badly, and those that refused to do so?

IU: Yeah, there was. That's a really good question. There was very different views on empire based on labourers' relationship to the state, based on wages, based on discrimination or violence that they faced. But even as we look at indentured labourers throughout, once they stop being indentured labourers, once the period of indentureship, sorry, the system of indentureship ends, you do again see, let's say, Indo-Trinidadians have a very different view towards empire than Afro-Trinidadians. And that's because the colonial state treats both groups differently, privileging one group sometimes at the expense of the other. And so you continuously see this interplay, this divide and rule, this politics of difference, that shapes the relationships between Indo- and Afro-Trinidadians or Jamaicans and their colonial state and each other. So very different views of empire, again, based on how the colonial state is responding and treating them.

Audience member 4: You talked a little bit about the intersection of gender and racism and slavery. Could you tell us a little bit about the remnants of that today, both in the Caribbean and also black Caribbean British women on your side?

IU: Yes, so the legacies are really stark. I talk in the book in particular about many enslaved women's experiences of sexual violence, of gender-based violence, and then as we move throughout the book into the 20th century and the early 21st century, I try and give, again, some examples of how that's interplayed today. For the contemporary Caribbean, gender-based violence is a real, stark, prominent issue. It's a problem. It's growing. And it's not so much the why it happens that we see the links between empire, it's the response by post-colonial states, which sometimes looks sometimes similar to the colonial state. And that's, again, this real similarity, this real entanglement, between the past and the present, the blame that oftentimes falls on women for the violence that they receive, the laws that still exist in some places in the Caribbean that are drawn upon colonial laws. There's a parallel, there's a continuing, but there's also challenges to that. There really is quite a strong feminist movement in the Caribbean, which I don't get to talk about in the book, but I do in other parts of my research, and which is trying as much as possible to challenge some of the legacies of slavery in particular for contemporary gender-based violence that we see today.

CG: And you can see that legacy in the breaking of families, can't you? So when the enslaved were kept in barracks, they were often kept apart; men in one barracks, women in another. And they were allowed conjugal rights. They were brought together just to mate, to produce more children. And so you can see that pattern of visiting parents continuing throughout, even to the present day, can't you?

IU: Yes, definitely.

Audience member 5: As a kid, growing up in—I'm pretty old—as a kid growing up in the '50s and '60s, I think it's easy to forget that Britain was absolutely endemically racist. It's no good kidding ourselves. It really, really was. But I was very delinquent as a kid, particularly in my teens, and I didn't think adults were doing anything but lying to me about all sorts of things, including what you've confirmed to be the myth of race, an invention, a fiction, which it is. Genetically, scientifically, it's an invention. So my question is, can we un-invent this fiction, and should we un-invent this fiction?

IU: My answer is a resounding yes. Yes, we should un-invent this fiction. It is a moral imperative for all of us to challenge the fiction of race. It has got us nowhere. Racism divides. It is awful. It kills. It is a poison invented by humans, by man, right? And I talk about in the book, in particular at the end, the hope and optimism, this

history that I write, I hope that it's not just a history to entertain, I hope that it mobilises people to think differently, to try and challenge the construction of race, the falsehood of race as a construct. Because as I end the book, I say this racial caste hierarchy can't go on forever. Empires can't go on forever. The struggle to end both of these structures continues, and we all have a role to play in it. How we do that? I'm a historian, so I try to hide with that response. I'm like, 'I deal with the past', but I think it's important for us to think about how we can end that. And in doing that, I talk in the latter chapters in the book about this larger movement towards reparations. Reparations isn't new at all. It's been going on since the beginning of enslavement, and so people were demanding reparations for their treatment. But in recent years, I think the debates about reparations have gained far more momentum. And I think that there's the opportunity in the movement of reparations to redress the past and think about the construction of a different future, where the legacies of this history, these legacies of the 'racial caste hierarchy', no longer bear so much of a presence. And we can challenge the fiction of race. How we do that, that's a collective, global question, but it's one that is worth talking about, discussing, always.

CG: In the 1950s in Jamaica, there was a beauty competition called Ten Types, One People, and there were 10 different shades of black. It started off in Cherry Blossom through to Ebony. And the difficulty that the organisers had was that no one wanted

to identify with the Ebony. They all wanted to pretend that they were Cherry Blossom. So the legacy of enslavement is deep. There's a man called Vivian Durham, who in 1958—he's a Jamaican, black Jamaican—he said—very important Jamaican—he said, it was the ambition of every black Jamaican to be white.' That wasn't so long ago.

Audience member 6: Now, I accept that everything the British did was ultimately for its own self-interest, I accept the British Empire was racist, but speaking of empire generally, would you not also say that many thousands and thousands of Britons laboured out of palm and pine, as we said in our childhood, to build roads, build canals, and actually get these countries working?

CG: Yeah, I think you can answer that, can't you?

IU: Yeah, I would encourage you to read my book. I think, again, as I've said, I really want to foreground the specific events that took place in the Caribbean. Generally, the British Empire did different things in different places, but in the Caribbean specifically, what you have just said about the building of canals and roads does not take away from the reality of the violence of empire and the ways in which we can't understand empire simply as this benevolent good. We have to grapple with the

violence of empire; we have to grapple with the darker histories of empire. And that's what my book is trying to do, in particular, by focusing on the Caribbean.

CG: Yeah, I mean, they may have built some things, but it was a project of plunder, full stop, I'd say.

[Applause]

Audience member 7: First of all, thank you for adding to the growing numbers of historical works that are examining this underrepresented part of our history. But what I wanted to ask you is that the legacy of violence, how do you think that has played out into how the descendants of slaves are treated within criminal justice systems around the world?

IU: That's a very big question, around the world [laughs]. I'll focus maybe just on Britain, shall I say? Yeah, just that small part of the world. Yeah, so that's a really good question. I talk in the book, in particular in the latter stages when I get to the 20th century, about the police response to crime that takes place within African Caribbean communities in particular. And what I highlight there is the continuity of racist tropes about black criminality, which are rooted in histories of enslavement. I give examples of so many of the riots, or not riots, protests, disturbances, police

forms of discrimination that take place in the 1980s, and there are countless examples one can give which highlight, again, this continuity, this narrative, of black criminality that still exists with us today as much as ever, that again, have their roots in the British Empire. And as you mentioned in your question, globally, this has a much more global resonance with descendants of enslaved Africans in numerous parts of the world, whether it's the United States, Latin America. This narrative of black criminality is one that is so infused, so linked, to the fiction of race, the construction of race, the 'racial caste hierarchy', which I talk about in the book.

CG: One of the people you talk about in the book is Marcus Mosiah Garvey, and he's a very strong character. He was a nationalist hero, first nationalist hero of Jamaica. And one of the strands of the book, I think which is its strength, is the idea that, actually, it's not just black people's minds that need decolonising, it's white people's minds as well. Would you agree?

IU: I think we all need to decolonise our minds, our thoughts, our interpretations. And what I mean by that is challenging perceived knowledge, challenging what we have been told to think or believe. Because oftentimes when, again, we read a different perspective or we read a different source, this changes and challenges our mind. But again, continuously trying to challenge the simplistic understandings of empire, I think, is a really important thing for all of us to do. It's so easy to fall into

the trap of, *oh, it's in the past. It's over.* Actually, it isn't. It's still with us in so many ways, not just the evidence of existing colonies, but so many of the imperial colonial tropes, ideas about race, about gender, about who belongs, who doesn't belong, who's equal, who's unequal, these things are so entangled, enwrapped, with the legacies of empire.

CG: Well, I think this is a fantastic book, and I really love it. I wish I'd written it. [Audience laughs] I sometimes do Yoga With Adriene. Do you know Adriene? And she talks about the fact that showing up is the first step. [Music] So I congratulate you all for showing up, for listening to what can be a difficult subject. You've made the first step. The second step is to follow Imaobong to the bookshop and buy this fantastic book. So please put your hands together for Imaobong.

[Music and applause]

IU: Thank you.

[Music]

CG: I was talking with Imaobong Umoren. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk.

[Music]

Imaobong Umoren was in conversation with Colin Grant

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