



International Women's Day



Natalie Duncan walks along Frederick Street in her baby doll costume after participating in the NCC's traditional Carnival characters showcase at Queen's Park Savannah, Port of Spain on February 20. **PHOTO BY SUREASH CHOLAI**

PAULA LINDO

Though she grew up in Leeds, in the north of England, Dr Emily Zobel Marshall has written books about the classic Caribbean/African/American folklore character, Anansi and Brer Rabbit – two tricksters who have much in common with traditional Carnival characters.

So it's little wonder that Carnival is the current focus of her research.

Marshall's family has strong connections with the Caribbean and with Carnival.

Her mother was Martinican, and Leeds, she said, hosted the first ever Carnival in the UK, beginning in 1967. Her grandfather was author Joseph Zobel, known for his novel *Rue Cases Negres* (Black Shack Alley).

"I grew up with that Caribbean link to Martinique and thinking about African connections and retentions." Because her work has been about folklore, including Anansi and Brer Rabbit, "I came to Carnival looking at the figure of the trickster and looking at resistance – so how do certain

cultural forms form resistive practices to oppressive forces in the Caribbean? And I think that Carnival cultures like the trickster are using a cultural form, using it in a subversive way to try and create a rupture in the status quo. Carnival as resistance is a complex form."

Marshall is a reader in post-colonial literatures at Leeds Beckett University. Now she's working on a project on women in Carnival with Dr Cathy Thomas of the University of California Santa Barbara.

It aims to connect diasporic women working in Carnival, create a dialogue between academics studying Carnival and its performers, and study the spread of the various aspects of Caribbean Carnival to the world.

The two women come by their interest in Carnival through their families.

Marshall has been to TT before and has played mas with the Mystery Raiders midnight robber band. She also plays with the Mama Dread masquerade band in Leeds Carnival.

"As I continued to play mas, I became



Dr Emily Zobel-Marshall, right, reader in post-colonial literatures at Leeds Beckett University and Dr Cathy Thomas, assistant professor in English and creative writing at University of California Santa Barbara speak to *Newsday* about their Carnival project at the Radisson hotel, Port of Spain. **PHOTO BY ROGER JACOB**

Marshall, Thomas study Carnival women

Mama, this is mas

more interested in the role of women in Carnival and how in this very patriarchal social sphere, women began using Carnival in a radical way to carve themselves a space."

Thomas's parents are from Guyana, and she grew up in New York. She has been to carnivals such as Caribana in Toronto, Notting Hill, Leeds, and the West Indian Day Parade in Brooklyn.

"I'm interested in the ways that the body is taking up space and moving in these diasporic spaces and the way that Caribbean culture produces popular culture. I want to explore what is the cohesive force around the Caribbean body that sorts of translates and spreads outside of the region?"

The project consists of four parts, the visit to Trinidad being the first.

During their visit – they were here for what there was of Carnival 2022 – Marshall and Thomas interviewed Carnival practitioners Eintou Pearl Springer, Amanda McIntyre, Renella Alfred, and Adanna Jones, each of whom explores Carnival in a different way, as well as meeting other practitioners and stakeholders.

In May there will be a workshop in California involving Thomas's students in her class in California, where she is an assistant professor.

"The class is called Reading the Caribbean through Carnival, so we're going to read Earl Lovelace, Edwidge Danticat, Oonya Kempadoo, Eintou Springer – so Anglophone (writing) on Carnival. Then my students are going to create a road march,

working with a geographer and a DJ, and create Carnival artifacts that we'll curate, and have a pop-up exhibition in the space."

Marshall will have masqueraders and academics come to her classes in Leeds to talk to her students about the experience of Carnival.

"We'll have Carnival artist Rhian Kempadoo-Miller, my PhD student Kafilat Dabiri and academic analysis of Carnival, representing Luton, Leeds, and smaller carnivals around the UK, etc.

They will look at how elements of TT Carnival and other carnivals in the Caribbean get to the UK, and how they change.

"For example, in Leeds you play J'Ouvert in pyjamas, but dirty mas hasn't translated."

She said the main focus is women and how they are perceived and not perceived in Carnival.

"They're seen in pretty mas, but a lot of the labour of women is unseen, in building the costumes and putting Carnival on the road. Women are also using Carnival to call for women's rights – (baby doll) Amanda McIntyre, (playwright) Eintou Springer, (dancer) Makeda Thomas – asking us to look through Carnival at rights of queer people, issues of domestic violence, teen pregnancy. They're making the mas very provocative, trying to shape people's consciousness of how women are being treated in society and some of the things that are happening around the world.

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Renella Alfred is the first woman to portray a jab jab in the family band the Original Jab Jab out of Couva.

PHOTO/LINCOLN HOLDER

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We're looking at how women are carving space in the traditionally male-dominated Carnival, as the voices of Carnival tend to be men, so women are reclaiming their territory and Carnival can be a mouthpiece to facilitate that."

Thomas said while the project is focused on the women making mas at this time, women who participate in Carnival as spectators are also being considered.

"Adanna Kai Jones is interested in the spectators, the dancers, the regular people of the street who are wining.

"I feel all this attention around women's bodies, the precariousness of our safety, our honour, the way our sexuality is being redeployed on us, the way that the policing of Carnival is the policing of our bodies, should be considered. I think there is a measure of care people are taking of themselves, not necessarily being careful, but being up in your face because they're caring about those who came before them and those who came after, and saying, 'We're protecting this space and this body with this language.'"

The project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under a network grant. Marshall said out of the network, a website will be created which profiles the participants in the

Women reclaim space in Carnival



Woman in Carnival participants, from left, Renella Alfred, Eintou Springer, Dr Emily Zobel Marshal, Dr Cathy Thomas and Adanna Jones have a conversation during a workshop at the Lloyd Best Institute, Tunapuna on Friday.

PHOTO BY AYANNA KINSALE

various workshops which will allow knowledge-sharing among Carnival practitioners.

"What Cathy and I are trying to do is form a diasporic network of women in Carnival. We want to bring the academic response

to Carnival in dialogue with the artistic practice and performance of Carnival, as often these things can happen apart from one another. There's also a suspicion (between) the performance and artistic world of academics, and also academics

don't properly experience Carnival."

Thomas said while the link to academic institutions cannot be ignored, the pair want to disrupt the patriarchy in the way their information is shared.

"We want to be mindful of how

the website is created and can be accessed, how people are portrayed, and we will share the results with our participants, the transcripts, the interviews, etc. We realise we don't know all the female practitioners, so the website will be a place where people can self-report on themselves, because we can't do it all."

Marshall said they also wanted the website to be a space where ongoing practice and research could be shared.

"We will be writing conference papers and research papers out of this. But the main thing is the dialogue, because women's craft and artwork are often overlooked, and we're creating a platform for women to celebrate their work and get in conversation with each other, because we're stronger together, much stronger when we name-drop each other, and lift each other up, rather than feeling that we're in competition with one another, that there's only space for one of us. So the idea is to lift one other up in sisterhood."

More about the project can be found at <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/school-of-cultural-studies-and-humanities/2021/09/exploring-women-in-caribbean-carnival/>