

The background features several large, irregular blue shapes that resemble torn paper or abstract architectural forms. These shapes are scattered across the white background, creating a dynamic and layered visual effect. The top-left corner is dominated by a large blue shape that contains the main title and author information. Other smaller blue shapes are positioned in the middle and bottom sections of the page.

**My essential reads:
Storytelling language and
resistance**

by Emily Zobel Marshall

CENTRE FOR
CULTURAL VALUE

Background

My **essential reads** focus on how storytelling can be used not only as cultural expression but also as a form of resistance to oppression and as a method of catharsis in the face of trauma. My own research on the folklore of the African Diaspora has shown me that storytelling can be implemented as a cultural weapon and as a way of processing and overcoming psychological issues.

Although the importance of language is interpreted and explained differently across the world, language is undoubtedly at the root of our cultural identity, with the western world being no exception. It is through language that our sense of community and self is maintained. When a language is taken away from its people and replaced by a new tongue, the sense of identity (personal and collective) is deeply under threat.

The readings below will introduce practitioners to the importance of language in preserving or reclaiming culture. They are essential for any practitioners working in today's multicultural Britain, but may be particularly thought-provoking for those who speak English as a first language and have no direct family history of migration.

Storytelling is central to the survival of a language, developing personal and cultural identity and challenging power structures. Postcolonial researchers like me focus on how people from the formerly colonised world have shaped and created new, hybrid languages, for example Caribbean Creole, to define themselves and their cultures. We also examine how oral storytelling keeps language alive and preserves the past.

Postcolonial literature and poetry, although scribal, often draws deeply from the oral traditions into which they were born. These essential reads will introduce you to these key decolonial debates which you can incorporate into your own practice, by thinking whose stories are told and how you might provide space for marginalised stories. They will demonstrate the centrality of language and storytelling in the fight for decolonisation, the importance of storytelling in the celebration of non-scribal cultures and how storytelling can be used as a resource for cultural survival and resistance.

My Essential Reads

1. [What Decolonizing the Mind Means Today](#) by [Mukoma Wa Ngugi](#), March 23, (2018)

This essay introduces the ideas of the radical Kenyan writer and political activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (for fuller reading see *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers)) but also brings the debate up-to-date and shows us how contemporary African writers and thinkers have responded to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call for the rejection of European languages in African literature.

Thiong'o believes that a return to a mother tongue restores an ethnic or national identity. He explains that culture is carried specifically by language:

'Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from language' (Ngugi, 1986, p.15).

He argues that while colonisation was a process of physically acquiring new territories, one of its most lasting legacies has been its impact on the psyche. Without 'decolonising the mind' through a return to speaking and writing in indigenous African languages, rather than an 'imposed' language, African people will never be free from the remnants of cultural colonialism.

Thiongo's arguments are important to any practitioner working in the diverse cultures of Britain today because it asks us to scrutinise our own positionality and 'decolonise' our own minds as well as highlighting the centrality of language as a carrier of culture.

2. [Irene Visser \(2015\) Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects. Humanities 4, pp. 250–265](#)

Trauma theory is rooted in psychoanalysis and examines the impact of trauma on the psyche. It has been increasingly employed as a theoretical framework for literary practice, but its use by postcolonial critics is relatively new. This article offers an overview of the trajectory of decolonizing trauma theory and demonstrates how storytelling offers a way to come to terms with trauma and 'wounding' repression and open routes to recovery. Visser argues that:

'Openness to non-Western belief systems and their rituals and ceremonies in the engagement with trauma is needed in order to achieve the remaining major objectives of the long-standing project of decolonizing trauma theory.' (p.250)

But Visser highlights that there are serious problems regarding the Eurocentric roots of trauma theory that need to be addressed before its application to postcolonial contexts. Indeed, since the 1990s, trauma therapists, mental health professionals and aid workers in non-Western contexts have voiced concerns about using western-based trauma models in their work due to their ethnocentric foundations in Holocaust research and Freudian theory. Traditional models of trauma theory do not consider alternative knowledge systems, coping mechanisms and methods of healing found in non-European cultures, for example oral storytelling. Visser argues that trauma theory needs to be revised to offer keener insights into global legacies of historical violence.

For practitioners working in arts and health, this article will help you think about how you ensure your approaches are pitted against acts of historical violence and responsive to non-western histories and knowledge systems.

3. [‘When the Revolution Becomes the State it Becomes my Enemy Again’: An Interview with James C. Scott](#) by Professors Benjamin Ferron and Claire Oger and their students. *The Conversation*, June 20, 2018

‘How to resist the State when you feel powerless? How to make your voice heard when you have none? Is anarchism a vain utopia as it is often described by its opponents?’ This interview will introduce you to the key ideas of Political Theorist and Anarchist James C. Scott.

For James Scott, stories, in particular trickster tales, told by slaves of African descent are a display of veiled cultural resistance to oppression. He claims they are ‘hidden transcripts’; voices of resistance disguised by the oppressed and then spoken in the public sphere, at times even in the company of the oppressors.

Scott uses drama and theatre metaphors to articulate a theory of performativity. He describes how subordinate peoples perform a role of subservience when in the presence of their masters. This concept can be applied, for example, to the role-playing of Jamaican plantation slaves where slaves performed a particular role ‘onstage’ in front of their masters, as Scott puts it, and another ‘offstage’, when they were not being surveyed by plantation bosses. This was also particularly evident in the subversive oral storytelling traditions of the enslaved. In our contemporary world, the ‘off-stage’ is the site of rumours, gossip and hearsay – the unofficial, often hidden narratives of a people.

This interview demonstrates Scott’s relevance to the contemporary global politics and show us how his work can help us in our understanding of subordination, resistance, folk culture, revolution and revolt as well as demonstrating how storytelling, drama and performance can be used subversively.

4. [‘Michel de Certeau: The Unity of an Itinerary’](#) by Benoit Vermander, 12 October 2015

In this article Nathalie Zemon Davis examines the intellectual focus in the work of French Cultural Theorist Michel De Certeau. It outlines some of the key ideas in Certeau’s important text *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) (Berkeley: University of California Press) which explores the tactics that are used to regain autonomy by people in everyday life.

Certeau argues that opportunities for the subversion of socio-political systems are continually seized in the everyday lives of people (through, for example, walking, talking and storytelling) operating within any system of domination. He discusses the connections between storytelling (theory) and action (practice) and explains that the art of storytelling is a form of rehearsal for a particular mode of resistive thinking.

Anyone exploring how culture, language and creativity can be positioned as acts of resistance will undoubtedly want to explore Certeau’s theories in their own practice.

5. [An ESSAY + INTERVIEW: Edward Kamau Brathwaite](#) by Neo-Griot

This essay and interview by New Orleans writer, filmmaker and educator Kalamu ya Salaam will introduce you to the work of Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite. Brathwaite famously advocated the creation the new term, 'Nation Language' to replace the descriptions of African and Caribbean languages as 'Creoles' 'Dialects' or 'Patois,' which he saw as having negative connotations (Brathwaite in Ashcroft, 1995, pp.309-318). Brathwaite writes passionately about the originality of the new 'Nation Language' which has evolved from a mixture of African and European languages in the Caribbean:

'Nation language is the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model...English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English' (Brathwaite in Ashcroft, 1995, p.311).

Brathwaite explains that his concept of 'Nation Language' draws from the oral tradition, and its history does not exist in written texts, but in the spoken word; 'It is based on sound as much as it is on song' (Brathwaite in Ashcroft, 1995, p.311). In poetry, Brathwaite's 'Nation Language' often incorporates call-and-response traditions, draws on the participation of the audience or reader and also uses the Caribbean 'calypso' rhyming form.

The interview with Brathwaite will offer further insights not only into the importance of language in cultural identity but also how we can respond to language politics through poetry. This work will be of interest to any practitioner working with people from diverse backgrounds who use vernaculars and Creole languages as a form of expression.

Summary

These sources demonstrate how rebuilding identity and culture in the wake of colonial control is a task that formally colonised populations across the globe have struggled to overcome in a variety of ways.

The issue of language is one of the fundamental struggles in the area of postcolonial discourses and underpins the call to 'decolonise the mind'. The colonial process itself can be said to have begun with language, as the oppression of other languages formed a means of cultural and psychological control over the colonised that affected the psyche.

These sources show us how these legacies have been resisted through numerous cultural forms, in particular through storytelling and in the persistence and celebration of oral cultures and hybrid languages. They also show us that culture can be used as a political weapon in the fight for autonomy and pride.

Biography

My research is informed by Postcolonial theory and spans a broad range of concerns, including examinations of constructions of identity (in particular hybrid and liminal identities), race and racial politics and Caribbean carnival cultures. I am particularly interested in forms of cultural resistance and cross-cultural fertilisation in the face of colonialism. My work also often focuses on the ways in which hybrid identities, languages and literatures challenge and modify existing social and cultural structures.

I host and curate literary and cultural events and have organised international conferences on the literature and cultures of the African diaspora. I am a regular contributor to BBC radio discussions on racial politics and Caribbean culture. I am also active in consulting organisations and institutions on issues of diversity and inclusion.

My books focus on the role of the trickster in Caribbean and African American cultures; my first book, *Anansi's Journey: A Story of Jamaican Cultural Resistance* (2012) was published by the University of the West Indies Press and my second book, *American Trickster: Trauma Tradition and Brer Rabbit*, was published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2019.

I develop my creative work alongside my academic writing. I have had poems published in the *Peepal Tree Press Inscribe Anthology* (2019), *Magma* ('The Loss', Issue 75, 2019), *Smoke Magazine* (Issue 67, 2020) and *The Caribbean Writer* (Vol 32, 2020 & Vol 35, 2021).

I am Vice Chair of the [David Oluwale Memorial Association](#), a charity committed to fighting racism and homelessness, and a Creative Associate of the art-based youth charity [The Geraldine Connor Foundation](#).

For more info, visit [Emily's profile page at Leeds Beckett University](#), view her [academic Writing](#) and take a look at the [Caribbean Carnival Cultures Website](#).

Contact Emily on Twitter [@EmilyZMarshall](#) and [@CarnivalCultr17](#). You can also view her Instagram poetry at [dremilyzmarshall](#)



Call to action...

What's the most useful reading you've done in this topic area? What did you learn? If you'd like to share your reflections and learning with us get in touch at ccv@leeds.ac.uk and we'll feed this into a future resource. Or let us know if you'd like to submit a case study or contribute to a podcast or webinar on this theme.



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