[00:00:00]

**Sarah Copland:** I didn't move, and neither did he. I could see the indecision in his eyes, weighing up the options, which one would benefit him the most? If I moved, I would make up his mind for him and he would raise the alarm. Seconds passed. The smoke and smell and shouts of the bidding faded into the background. I didn't plead with my eyes, because he would feel manipulated and resist. If I looked afraid, he would despise me. So I just looked blank, which is all I ever looked. Then I saw a thought take shape in his mind. I knew him so well. To let me go would be a way to get back at his father. We both knew that I had read him. He smiled quietly and nodded at me, gesturing with his head for me to be on my way.

**Jim Phelan:** This is Jim Phelan, Director of Project Narrative at The Ohio State University, [00:01:00] and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative Podcast. In a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me or another host. Today I'll be talking with Sarah Copland, who has selected a short story by Bernardine Evaristo entitled, *ohtakemehomelord.com*, which was first published in The Guardian in 2005.

Sarah Copland is Associate Professor of English at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Canada and a former Visiting Scholar at Project Narrative. Sarah works on literary modernism and on narrative theory, with particular attention to rhetorical narratology. Sarah has published important essays on modernist prefaces, on the form of the short story, on politics and form, and on narrative ethics.

I know from experience that Sarah is also a wonderful collaborator, since I had the good fortune to work with her on an essay revising the rhetorical model of audiences. This essay [00:02:00] began with Sarah's astute observation that rhetorical theory needed to distinguish between actual and ideal narratives.

That essay, published in Poetics Today in 2022, is called "The Ideal Narratee and the Rhetorical Model of Audiences". So, Sarah, is there anything you'd like our listeners to pay special attention to as you read Evaristo's story?

**Sarah Copland:** Well, first: Jim, thanks so much for inviting me. I'm really delighted to be here and talk to you about this story. I think if readers keep in mind the following question as I'm reading, they'll know what we're going to talk about afterwards. So, how does the story destabilize and defamiliarize the history and legacy of the transatlantic slave trade? What purposes can you infer on Evaristo's part and what effects are created for you as a reader? And just before I begin reading, I'll just offer the note that halfway through the story, I'll be replacing a racial slur with the word "blank".

**Jim Phelan:** Okay, great. Now, here's Sarah Copland [00:03:00] reading Bernardine Evaristo's *ohtakemehomelord.com.*

**Sarah Copland:** It is night. It is sweltering. The coconut palms which line the avenues are festooned with streaks of silver tinsel mixed with red satin streamers, and dangling from their luxuriant green fronds are flickering oil lamps made from brightly painted cassava gourds.

The avenues have been swept smooth of yesterday's sandstorm, and the hawkers selling takeaways - grilled corn on the cob, roasted chestnuts, fried plantain and little packets of fufu wrapped in leaves - have been sent packing. Crickets and frogs can be heard providing a delightful night-time chorus, and if you look skywards you will catch the occasional air train passing overhead, headlights flashing, and lasers shooting colorful beams which light up the night sky.

Camel-drawn carriages driven by men in kente-cloth livery deliver stush party guests to [00:04:00] our neighboring compounds. The men wear flamboyant caftans and their glamorously fat women try to outdo each other in extravagant head wraps made of peacock or leopard prints which are tied up into massive bows.

All the houses are freshly whitewashed, with stained-glass windows depicting the gods: Oshun, Shango, Yemanja. Stone sphinxes guard porches and torch lamps standing on tall plinths are stationed by doorways, their vigorous blue flames licking up the night-time air. From the upper rooms of the houses can be heard the hectic electronic juju beats of the young, and from downstairs the rapid crescendo of traditional drums against the outline of older swaying bodies, or the softer background tinkling of the marimba amid the ripples of the free and easy laughter and jovial bantering of people who have every reason to celebrate this season of goodwill, because they are free men and free women in the heart of the most [00:05:00] expensive piece of real estate in the known world: Mayfair.

It's all right for some, isn't it.

I used to hope that the celebration of Voodoomass would be the one day off in the year for us slaves. But oh no, it's business as usual, and while my boss, Bwana, and his family are out clinking rum and coke glasses and shaking their wobbly backsides to festive beats at some other loaded compound down the road, I had been assigned duties in his office to sort out his personal computer files. Oh yes, Bwana trusts me alright. But it's the kind of trust that an autocrat who comes from a long line of autocrats has for slaves whom he considers to belong to a subspecies of the human race; slaves who appear to be as faithful as dogs. Of course we are, because if we aren't, we'll end up losing a tongue, a foot or, yes, even a head.

The Bwana in question is Chief Abimbola Abayomi Akobundu Akinlabi Ajibade III, [00:06:00] whose company is in the top 10 of the Fortune 500 list. He made his money in the import-export game, the notorious transatlantic slave trade, before settling down to life in polite society as an absentee sugar baron, part-time husband, freelance father, shift-working slave-raper, overworked racial supremacist, retired decent human being and, it goes without saying, sacked soul.

Internet banking makes revenge more sophisticated, you know. I had just logged on to Tate Bank PLC using Bwana's password, STUD, and was busy working out how much money to siphon from one of his numerous accounts into mine without drawing attention to the amount, thinking the nice round sum of a thousand cowrie-pounds wouldn't go amiss, when news reached me that the Underground Railroad was operating again after service had been suspended due to derailment. It was typical of the Slave Escape Transport System (SETS), which we in the know cynically [00:07:00] nicknamed The Set-Back Service. It was always breaking down because of increased demand from escaping slaves wanting to catch a ride out of the city to begin the long journey back to the motherland of our dreams - to Europa. Sure, it was a pipe dream for most of us, but it was one which offered an impossible hope that somewhere out there was a place to which we could return, a home.

Now my number had just been called and after twelve painfully long years on the waiting list I was being given the chance to escape. The message had come via my secret email account, Please!@ohtakemehomelord.Com, a free server set up by the not-for-profit Abolitionists’ Co-op and protected by AntiMasterGuard (AMG). I prayed I could trust it, but nothing was infallible. Where once the Abolitionists' Co-op had been infiltrated by sleepers who eventually went operational to betray and bomb whole rebel cells, now there were [00:08:00] pro-slavery viruses circulating in cyberspace, hunting us out, entering our hardware and corrupting our databases, or, more insidiously, hackers eavesdropping on our private conversations.

I wanted to print out the email and rush around showing it to everyone. But no, I had to control myself or I wouldn't be going anywhere except the gallows or the electric chair. No leniency was shown to those who tried to escape. It was seen as a direct challenge to the authority of the status quo and that, by all means, had to be upheld. The slave traders were never going to give up their cash cow, you know. It was, after all, one of the most lucrative multinational businesses ever, involving the large-scale transport of humanoid cargo (yes, we poor suffering whytes as usual - who else?), cruelly shipped from the continent of Europa, which lies in the South Atlantic Ocean, all the way to the West Japan Islands, which lie in the Caribbean Sea, so [00:09:00] named because in 1492 the “great explorer and mariner” (I don’t think so) Chinua Chikwuemeka, on an expedition to open up trade routes to Asia and discover new riches for himself and his queen, mistook those distant islands for the legendary isles of Japan (as you do), and the name stuck.

So, in between Europa and the plantations of West Japan is this country in the tropics, the world's greatest imperial power, the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa & the Canary Islands (UK of GA for short). It's part of the continent of the mainland of Aphrika, which lies just over the Ambossan Channel to our right, which we also know as the Sunny Continent, of course, on account of it being so bloody hot here.

Look, it's really a very little island dumped in the North Atlantic Ocean with a big ego which feels the need to assert itself and so stretches its greedy little fingers all over the globe, stealing countries and stealing people. [00:10:00] Me included. I was one of Stolen Children.

That's why I'm here.

The message gave me only one hour to get to the disused Paddinto Station and directions on how to find the manhole hidden behind some bushes through which I could slip down into the subway. There I would be met by a member of the resistance who would lead me through its dank subterranean tunnels. The city's tube trains had stopped burrowing over 60 years ago, when the Assembly of Masters realized that air trains were a far more suitable mode of transport because a limitless sky meant unrestricted traffic flow, and with the invention of radar-controlled pathways fatalities had become a thing of the past. What did I care? We slaves had to walk everywhere or use bicycles anyway. Sod them.

But here's the thing: at some point a bright spark in the Co-op had a brainwave, and the disused subway was put to use, enabling thousands to make their way out of the city, to escape underneath the guarded [00:11:00] forests which ringed the city's perimeters and out into the Green Belt, where safe houses awaited them. They were given compasses, maps, and contacts to assist them on their long, dangerous journey down south to Portsmote, and thereafter they began the hazardous trip back to Europa, in the hold of a Co-op ship with a false bottom, posing as a slave ship.

Too many images flashed through my mind as I deleted the email and switched off the computer. For the first time since I was taken away I could seriously consider that I might be returning home. Was it possible? I had been taken from Europa when I was eight years old, yet I still had such vivid memories of my parents, our little flint cottage on the farm and my adorable cocker spaniel, Rory. They were probably dead now, if they had survived the raids by warriors from the neighboring tribe of New Castle Land, who had been my first captors.

The Ambossans called Europa the Dark Continent, on account of the skies always being [00:12:00] overcast. But how I longed for those grey skies, the constant drizzle, the harsh wind slapping my ears.

How I longed for my warm winter woolies and wellington boots. How I longed for Mum's cheese-and-pickle sandwiches and hot minestrone broth. How I longed for a house of my own. How I longed for Sunder Land, the far northern district whence I was taken. Sunder Land, where my tribe were quiet farming people. Sunder Land, in Europa. Home.

But we can't always have what we want, can we. In fact some of us never get what we want, ever. And nostalgia would not get me to the station on time. I flew out of Bwana's office and rushed across the compound, across the green lawn studded with huge cacti which looked like men with their arms raised to the sky. I went down by the side of the open-air swimming pool, mosquitoes buzzing over its still surface, and rushed beyond that to the adventure playground, past the football [00:13:00] pitched the camel paddocks, the coconut, mango, and star apple orchards, vegetable garden, and behind all that, finally, to the secreted slave quarters, which had been considerably built next to the sewage tank, compost heap, and pig pens. I entered the hut, which I shared with four of my female colleagues, knowing that they would be busy elsewhere in the house. We never stopped. Even when it seemed that every job had been completed, Madama Comfort, Bwana’s imperious No. 1 wife, demanded that we all get down on our hands and knees and scrub her cherished marble floor with soap and a nail brush. To get deep into the groove, she explained, as we hid our venom behind impassive faces. The woman did not have an inner strength which made her powerful, I had long ago realized; rather, she had been given power over us. There was a huge difference.

I gathered up my bundle of clothing. I didn't have much. Well, we didn't wear much because of the [00:14:00] heat, which I never did get used to. Nor did I get used to the fashions of the UK - the bold print, wraparound lappas, which restricted my movements - or having to go barefoot, which felt so oppressive, especially when I had such fond memories of wearing shoes, which protected my feet so nicely. And having to go topless is no joke when you've had five children (all sold on) and your breasts swing like butternut squash. Don't get me started on the hairstyle Madama Comfort insisted I adopt. My long straight blonde hair was twisted with black cotton thread into lots of little pointy things that stuck up at right angles all over my head and were a nightmare to sleep with.

She said I had to look respectable when I opened the door to her refined guests and not like some uncouth savage from Europa. She was right, of course, although I wanted to protest that we whytes don't have the bone structure to carry off such a hairstyle. Listen, I may have looked thoroughly [00:15:00] civilized, but I held on to the savage inside me, the Europan. It was what I was. Every morning I'd repeat this positive, self empowering mantra in the mirror: " I may be fair and flaxen. I may have small nostrils and slender lips. I may have greasy hair and a flat bottom. I may blush easily and have blue eyes. Yes, I am as whyte as whyte can be. But I am whyte and I am beautiful. I am whyte, and I am beautiful.

Oh, all these thoughts were whirring around in my brain as I manically raked under the ground beneath my sleeping pallet (our floor was made of sand) and brought up a cloth pouch filled with a few hundred cowrie-pounds. I had managed to pilfer a shell here and there during nearly two decades of shopping for Bwana and his family. I always hoped I would need them one day. For bribes, for food, as a relocation allowance when, if, I mean when I reached Europa. I quietly shut the door and looked around. [00:16:00] I needed to take some food for the journey, but I couldn't risk going back to the main house. I crept up the garden and snuck through a spot in the bushes that led to a back alley. It was how we slaves engaged in many a romantic tryst, myself included, although I was currently single, which thankfully meant I had no one to leave behind. I still held on to the concept of monogamy, even though the Ambossans ridiculed it as uneconomical and selfish when women outnumbered men in this society.

Frank had been my one true beau for many years. He was such a gentle soul, but his mistress, Madama Subria, while having one of her sweaty menopausal turns, accused him of feeling her up and reported him to her husband in hysterics. He sold Frank on to West Japan, but not before he had endured 30 lashes of the cat-o’-nine-tails on a public podium at Cumgbela Gate. Every slave in the neighborhood was forced to attend. [00:17:00] Can you imagine how I felt watching that? Poor Frank shredded back; how he cried out, because if you don't they will continue until you do. The irony was that Madama Subria was always trying to seduce him, rolling her ample Ambossan bottom whenever she passed him in the corridor. He ignored her advances until one day she asked him to repair the wardrobe in the master bedroom, suddenly stripped off her clothes and stood there naked, cupping her enormous breasts which runneth over her hands. He about-turned and walked out without saying a word. He was a gentleman, Frank. He was fit, he was toned, he had a six-pack. He had thick, wavy fair hair and compassionate brown eyes. She was livid. She took her revenge.

We slaves don't end relationships. Other people do it for us. In fact, most times we don't start them either, other people do it for us. We're encouraged to breed merely to [00:18:00] increase the workforce and, like I said, my five were sold on. Frank was the father of the last three. As I gave birth to each child, it was immediately taken out of my arms and into the hands of a wet nurse. I didn't discover their sex and I never saw them again.

Funny that.

The back alley was deserted. Good. I had to exit onto our avenue before crossing down a side street and heading towards Edgwa District and into Paddinto. I put my head around the entrance. Carriages were still arriving for the parties, but it was otherwise deserted. No slaves were allowed out unaccompanied at night, although there were some freed slaves in the city,

I would have to walk with the slow confidence of a free whyte. It was night, but the whole damn place was so illuminated, if a neighbor saw me the alarm would be raised. Freedom was within my grasp but I felt my bones begin to crumble, my legs were suddenly buckling under. Immobilized, I [00:19:00] realized how easy it would be to slip back inside the compound, to return to what was safe, even as I hated it. I wouldn't have to race through the streets and risk capture, torture, and death. Bwana and Madama Comfort would be outraged. I didn't want to lose their approval, at least not until I was far enough away to curse them, their ancestors, and their offspring forever. Look, I was used to those two, to the other wives in the compound, and all their countless spoiled brats who took up so much of our working hours. Still, they were the known. Here I was venturing into the dangerous unknown. I had been someone special, you realize. I had been headhunted to run this household because I was articulate and bright, but not too clever, or so they thought. Indeed, I was the perfect house blank, ever ready to oblige with a smile. I was the godmother of Uncle Tom. I was Jezebel's good sister. I was their smiling Aunt Jemima. [00:20:00] I was their skinny Mammy. I was their iced bun; whyte on the outside, dark inside, or so I led them to believe. Every penny I'd siphoned out of his account eventually made its way anonymously to the Co-op. I was quite brilliant.

I stood there, paralyzed, peering down the avenue. I knew I was being such a wuss, but I couldn't help it. Another carriage rattled past with a laughing couple inside. I recognized the woman. It was that evil Madama Subria, she who got my Frank sent away. I had watched her with tears pouring over my heart, as she had watched him strung up to a tree and whipped. She was blinking back tears. At first I thought she was sorry for Frank, then it dawned on me that she was brimming with self-pity. I read these people so well. I watch them all the time. You see, we were generally invisible to the Ambossans - something we cultivated, to blend into our surroundings, lessening the chance of being [00:21:00] singled out. I can see how they have hardened their hearts to our humanity. They convince themselves that we do not feel as they do, so that they, of course, do not have to feel for us. It's very convenient and lucrative for them, isn't it? I wish my heart would ice over like that.

Madama Subria, I realized, had lost the hope of something sweet and sexy to keep her entertained, that was all. Her husband must have forced her to attend the whipping, because these Ambossan women never got their fingers dirty. He stood next to her, looking so smug, as if he knew the whole truth, as if the whole whipping spectacle was to punish his wife for her promiscuous ways. As soon as they were further down the alley, sand kicking up in their wake, I darted out. I had to get away from these awful people.

 I would be careful, but the Good Lord Above would decide if I made it. Yes, I still held on to my heathen beliefs, even though they ridiculed us as pagans and fantasists. [00:22:00] Sure, I'd gone to Voodoo Sunday class. I went to their Voodoo ceremonies and prayed to their pantheon of gods. Did I have a choice? I even worshipped my ancestors in spite of the fact that I hated my miserable grandparents who lived long enough for me to remember them. It was all a front. They may have enslaved my body, but oh boy, did I try to hold onto my mind and Jesus Christ Our Lord, Who Died On The Cross For Me. Amen.

I began walking and prayed no carriages would stop. None did. I felt safer when I entered Edgwa District. It was an assault on my senses, humming with crowds and booming with Aphro-beats. I disappeared into the throng. Edgwa was famous for its market, which ran for several miles on a dirty, sandy thoroughfare down to prosperous Maidaru Vale, another rich enclave of chiefs and their sprawling compounds.

Many of the market men were immigrants from North Aphrika, traders of fabric and food. [00:23:00] Some were middlemen in the slave trade, the Business. The rest were just the regular poor people of the city, the working classes who wore rags and found work when they could - families who wandered the streets on feast days because they had little reason to celebrate, nothing much to eat, and needed no excuse to escape from their cardboard shacks in the shantytown of Harlesdene.They saved up all year for their kids to go on a giraffe or an elephant ride or a merry-go-round. They wouldn't bother me. Sometimes they even helped us escape. Occasionally, some of them shot daggers at us whytes or called out insults, clearly resentful at us for taking their jobs.

I had to laugh, you know.

The thoroughfare was littered with nutshells, tobacco butts, camel droppings, and the debris of city life. I tried to walk quickly without appearing to hurry. I tried to walk straight-backed. I was tall anyway, which gave me a natural majesty when I worked it. I avoided eye [00:24:00] contact. I had 20 minutes left to get to Paddinto Station. It was going well until I came upon a group of raggedy whyte men, free, who were playing dominoes on a mat. They all looked up and studied me a bit too closely. Registering that I was a new face and out late. Silently asking who I was. More than that, was I available? I tried hard not to panic.

The free whytes all stuck together: they needed to in a city where chain gangs roamed and would happily tear up a Freedom Certificate and cart them off to a waiting slave ship at West Japan Quays. I prayed they wouldn't follow me. As a single whyte female, I was desired by my own men, who loved my size 10 figure and long blonde hair. On the other hand, the Ambossans found me ugly, thank God. They liked their women large and juicy; a fat woman was a well fed one. Bwana had always left me alone. And if his chosen girl or woman was anything less than a perfect size [00:25:00] 20, she was sent to the fattening farm out in Onga to be beefed up for him. She'd sit there all day doing nothing but eat yam, boiled banana, chips, rice, sorghum, full-fat cream, peanuts, bagels, chocolate cake, pork fat, avocados, and whole chickens with their skins on. Oh, what did I care? I had a train to catch.

I walked on through the market, then turned off into Paddinto District, where the crowds thinned out. In a few minutes, I would be at the station. The sun had gone down hours ago, but it was as if I could feel its hot tongue on my neck. I was drenched and not feeling very brave. I came upon the coffeehouses for which Paddinto was famous, many of which had auction blocks. My heart rattled. I thought they'd be closed today, but to the traders, I guess, wealth was more important than worship. Several were doing business on this most sacred day of the year. Then again, why not? Food, fabric, people, what's the difference? [00:26:00] All commodities.

I held my breath as I walked past Demerara's coffee shop. These men could sniff out a slave a mile away. Some were agents for West Japanese planters, there to buy new stock. Others were owners of the slave ships, there to sell off newly arrived stock.

I have always tried to console myself with the fact that, such was the demand for sugar, the price for a sweet tooth was a toothless smile. Such was the demand for sickly sweet coffee that they ended up with an irregular heartbeat, osteoporosis, and withdrawal headaches. Such was the demand for rum, extracted from sugar cane, that they ended up with chronic liver disease, alcoholism, and permanent memory loss. Such was the demand for tobacco that they ended up with cancer and emphysema. Such was the demand for other essentials without which they cannot live, such as ginger and indigo, that my people have to toil on plantations from birth to death, dawn [00:27:00] to dusk, Monday to Sunday, often with no more than a short break for elevenses and with absolutely no pay, and all at the whim of the overseer's whip, for hundreds of years and counting.

Oh Lord! I'd gone and blown it. I was such a stupid cow. Was I trying to sabotage my escape? I had stopped directly outside Damerara's as my mind took off on another sprint of its own. I guess it was years of suppressed rage bubbling inside of me, rising to the surface because freedom was so close. I had done the very thing I shouldn't. I had looked inside. I found myself staring at a male on the auction block. The door was open, and the air was thick with pipe smoke and pungent with steaming coffee beans. A group of men were making bids for him. He was about fifteen, a prize buck then. He had his back to me, but his face was turned towards the door, away from the men, flushed with adolescent shame rather than a [00:28:00] bridled fury. He was completely naked and his whyte skin was bloody and purple with welts striped across his back and buttocks. They were fresh. He probably got them that very day - maybe he'd tried to run away, or spoken his native language, whatever it was. Inglish? French? Spanish? Flemish?

My eyes roamed over the crowd and locked with a man who was staring straight at me with a surprise that was rapidly working itself up to a realization. Oh, shit! He knew me so well. It was Bamwoze, Bwana's oldest son, the whyte sheep of the family. I had w-t nursed the little bastard. I had wiped his dirty ass and rocked him to sleep. I had breastfed him when my first newborn had been taken away and I was still heavy with milk. I wasn't hired to be a nanny, but he took to me like a leech and wouldn't let go. Then he grew up and was sent off to the forest to be initiated into manhood. When he returned, I ceased to [00:29:00] exist. Invisible, see?

Sometime afterwards, Bwana discovered Bamwoze had got a local slave girl pregnant and had tried to elope with her to Europa. It was unheard of. Not getting the girl pregnant, which was a rite of passage, of course, but wanting to cohabit with her, which was a crime against the gods, even though she was a lait au café and very pretty by all accounts. Having a little bit of coffee in one's milk often meant privileges. Many of the mulattos who swanned around the big compounds doing "light duties" were actually related to their masters (ha ha). We had a few at our compound, but in our case dear Madama Comfort made them pay for their birthright. I was the real thing. Not a drop of Aphrikan blood in me.

Bwana disinherited Bamwoze and kicked him out of the house. I don't know what happened to the girl - dead or in West Japan, probably. We were all filled with a newfound respect for Bamwoze when we discovered he had forfeited his inheritance for a mulatto. [00:30:00] Later we heard he'd become a slave trader, in order to continue living in the lifestyle in which he had grown up.

Funny that, isn't it?

Here he was after all these years, staring at me, knowing full well I was where I shouldn't be and there could only be one reason why. He'd been a big lad, was a big man now, typical of the Ambossans with their long, strong limbs and fierce, powerful bone structure. Just for a moment I saw that self-pitying look of the child I had once been forced to cradle. The spoiled boy who got everything he wanted - more crocodile burgers, more coconut sweets, new computer, new baby camels to take him riding around the compound, more stories which I had to retell for the umpteenth time from memory. He'd never been denied anything as a child, ever, and so as is the way, nothing was ever enough. And I could see he still felt sorry for himself.

I didn't move, and neither did he. I could see the [00:31:00] indecision in his eyes, weighing up the options, which one would benefit him the most? If I moved, I would make up his mind for him and he would raise the alarm. Seconds passed. The smoke and smell and shouts of the bidding faded into the background. I didn't plead with my eyes, because he would feel manipulated and resist. If I looked afraid, he would despise me. So I just looked blank, which is all I ever looked. Then I saw a thought take shape in his mind. I knew him so well. To let me go would be a way to get back at his father. We both knew that I had read him. He smiled quietly and nodded at me, gesturing with his head for me to be on my way.

A split second later I was running. I didn't care anymore. I had no time left. If someone stopped me, so be it. I ran to the station, which had stood boarded up and derelict for so long. I followed the bushes with little effort, not looking to see if I'd be noticed or followed, and [00:32:00] used all my strength to open the manhole. I levered myself down and felt strong hands catch my hips. Would they be a safe pair? An elderly Ambossan man was holding a torch and smiling.

"Greetings, Omorenomwara, from Sets. We are glad you made it."

Omorenomwara was the name my first mistress gave me. It means, “This child will not suffer”, which was a bit of a joke, wasn’t it. I paused. I would say my name out loud for the first time since I had left Europa. I trembled. “Please, call me Doris. I am Doris. My name is Doris.”

He smiled. “Doris, we must be quick. I will lead you to the Bakalo Line, where your train awaits you.”

**Jim Phelan:** Thank you, Sarah. I'm not sure, there's so much going on in this story. There's so much to talk about. But why don't we start with the kind of big [00:33:00] picture things and your initial question to the audience about Evaristo's interest in defamiliarizing the slave trade. And, you know, again, thinking about big picture things, two prominent ways she does that involve what we'd traditionally call her handling of the setting, the time and place of the action. And so, when does this action take place and where? We just start there and then we can build out.

**Sarah Copland:** Sure. So this is a time of oil lamps and carriages, we learn, but it's also a time of air trains and flashing laser beams in the night sky, a time of email and cyber hacking and electronic banking. Um, it's a time of gallows, but also the electric chair.

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Sarah Copland:** So, we can see that there's significant anachronism or a temporal misplacement here. This is sort of a mash up of not just the past, but the past across several centuries. And then, also the present and possibly even an imagined future, depending on how you read those air trains. [00:34:00]

**Jim Phelan:** Right. So, like a present and a possible future in which so many things from the past continue, right? I mean, if we wanted to -

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah.

**Jim Phelan:** Sort of, you know, naturalize it a little bit, right, we could say that.

**Sarah Copland:** Yes.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, okay. and we can also think about, well, you know, why do that, right? Why?- what's being communicated, in terms of defamiliarizing the slave trade, with that kind of, you know, mash up of temporal, uh, difference.

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah, I think both time and place, which we could talk about as well, are...

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, if you want to go to place to bring it in now, that's fine.

**Sarah Copland:** Sure, yeah. Let's do that, because I think they really are the two ways in which the text most clearly references our world -

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Sarah Copland:** - and signals its similarities to it, but also its significant difference from our world. So in terms of place, there's, again, a sort of significant geographical misplacement or anachorism. If you look at the opening, we start with flora, clothing, weather, landscape, food, decor, music, deities that are making us think of our West Africa. [00:35:00]

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Sarah Copland:** But then, the city Mayfair has dropped in.

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Sarah Copland:** And throughout the story, there are references to other places from our real world London, like Edgewood District, Paddington Station. And the geography of the story is, is somewhat complex, but to sort of spell it out: these places, these places that have our London based names are in a city on the island of the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa and the Canary Islands, which itself is located off the coast of the continent of Africa, right in the North Atlantic Ocean, and that is actually north of the continent of Europa. yeah. And to add to the sort of anachorism, we also have reference to an Underground Railroad here, which harkens the American context.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, yeah, yeah. And then, the one other important place in the slave trade is, uh, West Japan, right? Which... where is that located, in relationship to Europa and our little island here?

**Sarah Copland:** Right, yeah. So, on our [00:36:00] map, that would be the Caribbean islands or the so called West Indies in our imagined map of this.

**Jim Phelan:** Okay, yeah.

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah. We have this defamiliarization and destabilization of time and place.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right. So, maybe just for, you know, some of the listeners who might not be as familiar with some of the terms. So, anachronism, I think people get pretty straightforward, uh, you know, just sort of a breaking of traditional chronology and things like that. But, how about anachorism? What - how would you just gloss that as a term?

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah, so I would describe it as sort of like: anachronisms, temporal misplacement with anachorism, we have a geographical misplacement. In this story, there is this basic premise of inversion, um, but I do think it's inversion with a wobble, um, because as I've described all of these London based city names being in this, this city on the island of Ambossa off the coast of Africa, so too the place that Doris comes from [00:37:00] in Europa, has place names that we associate with contemporary Britain, like Sunderland, Newcastle, and so on. So, it isn't just a straight one to one inversion in the anachorism or the geographical, destabilization, I think it's... it's an inversion with a wobble.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, right. So, do you think that the wobble, the, the lack of a straight one to one sort of, helps with the defamiliarization? Or, I mean, you know, you could say, well, you know, why not just make it inverted, right? That would, that would defamiliarize, right? Black and white, you know, that kind of thing. But, um, you know, why, why wobble?

**Sarah Copland:** I think, the wobble makes the invention more clear for me.

**Jim Phelan:** Okay.

**Sarah Copland:** And I think the story is, obviously, and we will talk about this, is a story that features a high degree of fictionality.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Sarah Copland:** And so, through the inversion and the wobble, it's reminding us constantly: this is invented and it's purposeful, right?

Um, and so I think that the wobble really, really, highlights the invention and [00:38:00] asks us then to think about, well, why, right? Why this invention and why the wobble?

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, there's a way in which maybe it's also asking us to do a little more, you know, cognitive labor, right? To sort of say, well, how do I map this exactly, you know, and, and what, what fits and what doesn't and, you know, and then, and then to the extent that we do that, I mean, maybe it's a little risky because we'd say, well, this is too complicated, but, to the extent that we do it, I think it does kind of add to our, you know, investment.

And, and there is a way in which, of course, for the character narrator, for Doris, right, this is all familiar and second nature, and part of what we need to do is, you know, make it familiar to us. So, that, that kind of, invitation to do that kind of work, I think, is extended there.

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah, I think, I mean, obviously, this is the story of Doris's escape attempt, but it's also very much a story about the history and legacy of the slave [00:39:00] trade.

And so, the inversion and the wobble and keeping our focus on that constantly and asking us to do cognitive work constantly instead of establishing a one to one correspondence right up front and then never making us work with it again. I do think, though, that cognitive effort is, is one of the things that keeps our focus on the slave trade, the broader structural ethic and historical and cultural scope.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, right, and the way in which... yeah, in which the slave trade was this international, thing, right, and so we have to find the locations and we're always being reminded of, is, you know... sometimes, I think in the U. S. anyway, we think about, you know, slavery and that as this thing located in the south, you know, um, southern United States and of course it was a huge thing and it makes, you know, a lot of sense to think about how it, you know, what the consequences were for enslaved people and the history of the country and all kinds of things.

But, it also maybe [00:40:00] means that we lose sight of this kind of the trade itself and the international dimensions of that.

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah, she keeps our focus on the triangular nature of it, and I came to this story for a course that I teach in contemporary British literature, and my theme that I picked was changing conceptions of Britain and Britishness.

And I think that because of the focus on Africa and Europa in this story, there's actually a lot less attention to what we would consider the United States.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Sarah Copland:** The story really is focused on, that initial piece of the triangle, Europe and Africa and then the so called West Japanese islands.

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Sarah Copland:** The American context, other than the Underground Railroad, is really not here at all.

So I think it's, again, like, it's the slave trade's history and legacy with another wobble.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah no, I think that's really good. Yeah, so maybe we could, you know, we've already started talking about Doris as a character narrator, um, so maybe we could talk some more about the narration. And, [00:41:00] you know, for one, it's kind of notable that we don't learn her name, her, you know, given name, uh, which, she got at birth in Europa until the very end of the story.

But, that's also, like, a kind of, pattern that, uh, it seems that Evaristo engages in, is kind of delayed disclosures of key, elements. So, you know, what- what are some of the other ones that stand out for you, and, and, you know, what do you think Evaristo is trying to do with that pattern?

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah, I agree. There's this gradual accretion of detail about the character narrator. We know from the opening sentences that she, uh, or the character narrator is somehow lodged in this story world because she uses the pronoun our, um, to refer to our neighboring compounds. We also know that there is a kind of implied distance from and judgment of the affluent in the way that she refers to the party goers, but we don't get a solid identification of her as a speaker [00:42:00] until a few paragraphs in, when she says that she," I used to hope that Vodoomass would be the one day off in the year for us slaves." So, we learn she's a slave, we learned shortly thereafter that she's a Europan, and then the final pieces that come into play are, we learned that she's a white European specifically, and that, I think we, we gather that she's female when we, she returns to her hut, that is housing her four female colleagues, as the word suggests. And the last piece, I guess, is the, um, as you say, the name comes to us in the last sentences. We get her British English right from the beginning, with references to stush parties and takeaways and catching a ride and so on. But yeah, there is this gradual accretion of detail that, again, I think keeps us cognitively engaged and working to -

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Sarah Copland:** Figure out who she is.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right. And what about the sequence there? Do you think there's, you know, anything special about the way in which we go from, [00:43:00] Okay, she's part of the community to, she's a slave to, she's white to, she's female.

**Sarah Copland:** I think there's... the disclosure comes with some surprises, right?

Um, again, like as part of the inversion, that, you know, well, she's a slave, but she's Europan and white, right? This is all part of the world building.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Sarah Copland:** Um, I do think that the slave narrative genre, especially in its initial, you know, iterations was quite dominated by male slaves writing their accounts of enslavement and escape and survival. And of course, with some more contemporary, fictional, you know, retellings of that story, we see female character narrators.

**Jim Phelan:** Mm-Hmm.

**Sarah Copland:** But, I think there's a, a slight wobble again, having a female slave recount this, um, in at least in relation to the dominant trends of the slave genre.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, okay. Alright, great. What about, you know, when she's telling the, sort of, the occasion of the narration and, and the narratee? Do you have thoughts about that? So, Presumably the narratee is [00:44:00] not in Boston, we get, you know, a lot of that idea that, okay, she's addressing somebody who is, would also be looking with some critical distance on them, but what else might we be able to pin down, if anything, about the narratee?

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah, yeah. Coming into my initial conversation with you about this story, I was aware of just how much you and I have been thinking about narratees recently and very much hoping we would come to the same conclusion about about this one. And I agree, I think it's clear that there is a conversational element to this telling and there is the presupposition of a sympathetic ear, but this narratee is not characterized in any way. I think it would be impossible to construct a mimetically plausible narratee who knows absolutely nothing about this world that the narratee and the narrator live in together, right? This person knows nothing about the slave trade, how it emerged from Ambossa and the Aphrikan continent and, and took Europans to that [00:45:00] continent and to the West Japanese islands. The narratee doesn't even know anything about the discovery of the West Japanese islands, so, there's so little that the narratee knows, or, if they did know, would put up with this extremity of redundancy, right?

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Sarah Copland:** That I don't think that Evaristo is, you know, to use your terminology, um, I don't think she's using the resource of the narratee and the narrator narratee relationship as a significant contributing factor to this particular telling.

I think it's...

**Jim Phelan:** There's a way in which the narratee and the actual audience are, or at least the, let's say the authorial audience are, are close, right? And so, they're not trying to make distinct, big distinctions between their knowledge or with shared understandings, things like that. Yeah.

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah. Evaristo needs us in the authorial audience to learn all of these details, and so she has the character narrator relaying them to the narratee, but not in any way that I think invites us to pay a lot of attention to that relationship or to consider its [00:46:00] mimetic plausibility because it isn't.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Okay, alright. And what about the, the when of the telling, or the occasion, you know?

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah. You know, we talked a bit before the recording about the historical present at the beginning of the story, and it only lasts for a couple of paragraphs. I think the shift is, um, you know, when she gets the note - the email, rather, saying that she has been picked to escape. And for me, the historical present does create a sense of immediacy and urgency to the story and, like, come into this world with me. It's an invitation, it's very fresh, very vivid. The amount of detail that's recollected does suggest that the gap between the time of the action and the time of the telling is not huge, it's not decades. But again, as with the narratee, I don't think that the time of the telling, vis-à-vis the time of the action, is a resource that Evaristo is particularly interested in, because we don't have a clear occasion for this telling, we don't know who she's talking to [00:47:00] and where and when.

So, I'd say it's a small gap, but not one that we could readily define.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, yeah, and I think that's interesting too. It's sort of in, in, as we think about, you know, kind of the options for character narration, right, so that one option can be to sort of root the telling in a particular occasion to a particular person and, and so on.

And the other option is, you know, not to, uh, just to have the telling, right, without supplying a particular motive or a particular relationship with a, with a listener and Evaristo seems to be on that end of the, of the scale. Which is, again, I think connected to what you were saying about, you know, what she wants to do with the inversions and get the authorial audience focused on these aspects of the slave trade and, sort of the... there's broader kind of thematic issues that the story addresses again and again.

**Sarah Copland:** Yes, definitely.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, that makes sense. Yeah, okay.[00:48:00] Maybe we could go to talk about time in a different way, right? So, the two scenes in which we have sort of what, you know, to use Gennett’s terms, the duration is kind of extended, right? So the first one is about when she recollects what happens with Frank, um, and then the second one is when she pauses, um, in Demerara's cafe and locks eyes with, uh, Bamwoze. So, you know, do you see some kind of parallel things going there, or what kind of, you know, I mean, those two things stand out for that, and when we juxtapose them, what kind of follows?

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah, I think, the duration in the story is very interesting because, you know, the time of the action is an hour, and there's a huge sense of urgency, and yet, in the telling, it's inter spliced and cut with all of this exposition about past events, as you say, what happened to Frank is a past, is a past event, um, all the exposition about, the world building [00:49:00] that Evaristo needs to do on our part. So, it is quite noticeable when the telling slows to give an extended account of the interaction between Frank and Madama Subria and then the the time of the action interaction between Doris Bamwoze. And I do think they're quite significantly paralleled. In the first with Frank and Madama Subria, we have the sort of voluntary nudity of the person in power in that dynamic, um, where Madama Subria disrobes. Frank makes a very interesting decision, which is that he makes a decision, and that's the one thing he's not allowed to do as a slave -

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Sarah Copland:** Is, is have any agency at all, and his decision is to turn on his heel and walk away, right?

**Jim Phelan:** Right. So, it's the decision and the action, right? It's both.

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah.

**Jim Phelan:** It's, it's not just, oh, I wish I could, it's just I've decided this is what I'm gonna do and I do it. Yeah, yeah.

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah. And Doris knows that about what happened to him and what has happened over... we learned that she's been 12 years on the waiting list to escape and 20 years [00:50:00] in Bwana's service, so she has seen this happen to, you know, the man that she loved deeply, but also to many other people.

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Sarah Copland:** And so, when she is, locking eyes with Bamwoze in the coffee shop, uh, or through the window of the coffee shop, you know, it's very parallel situation. There is the involuntary disrobing of the young man on the auction block, and I think it's important that, first of all, that it be Bamwoze who recognizes Doris and not some other member of the family, um, or some, you know, member of the, the slave household, because Bamwoze is the one that she nursed. I think that Evaristo can really highlight the inhumanity of, of Bamwoze, that he makes his decision with such incredible nonchalance and self interest in the decisions about Doris's life, right?

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

**Sarah Copland:** But I also think that because, as we've said, the story is about the slave trade through the figure of Doris, the fact that this gaze is happening almost through the body of a young man on the auction block or around the body of a young man.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, [00:51:00] right. I mean, that's very much part of the whole scene. Yeah, yeah.

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah, this story is about the slave trade and about what will happen to Doris if she's captured, and, you know, it, I think that the thematic aspect of this scene and the sort of parallel and juxtaposition with the Frank and Madama Subria scene are all in play there.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah. No, I think that's good. And I think, you know, the way in which that, that in a way, it's the climax, right? You know, the time of the action, you know, instability, complication is alright, can she escape, right? And so, this becomes like the last moment and the key moment, right? And her hand- her fate is really out of her hands, right?

The best she can do is, as you say, you know, not act, right? Um, and so it's up to him and, and we see it, he makes his decision on the basis [00:52:00] of what's, as you said, his, his self interest and she's just reduced to a kind of token, in whatever he's going to do.

**Sarah Copland:** Yes, absolutely, Jim. I think that Doris's decision not to act and to recognize the power differential, which Frank, you know, his fatal mistake was to exercise agency. I think in this scene, by remaining blank, Doris at least creates conditions for Bamwoze to make a decision based on his own self interest, but one that will save her life.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right. Yeah, and I think that scene raises another issue, which is like the, you know, the psychological logic or the mimetic plausibility of Doris actually stopping and, you know, not hurrying along to, you know, her goal, right? You know, why should, why would it make sense at this point when she's, you know, gone this far and she's not that far away, that she [00:53:00] would pause and start scanning the crowd in the cafe. You know, she does, we do have that moment when she thinks about, well, maybe I should just go back and, you know, and that I think actually makes sense, like, all right, this is what I know and, you know, and she, she reflects on that too, you know, the known versus the unknown and so on.

But this one, you know, it, it seems hard, harder for me to kind of say, all right, well, this makes a lot of psychological sense. What, what's your take on it?

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah, I agree. I don't think it's that implausible that she's... that she looks into the coffee shop or the coffee house, I guess, we keep calling it a coffee shop, it's really a coffee house. Um, just because, you know, she's been 12 years on the waiting list for this escape and 20 years in Bwana's service, and this is a radical change to her life trajectory that she's being offered. So, of course, she wouldn't behave normally. Um, I think that the sort of standing there, though, and scanning the crowd, [00:54:00] that to me seems less psychologically plausible. And so, in that sense, I think Evaristo kind of misplaces the exclamation like, Oh Lord, I'd gone and blown it, I'd looked into the coffee house. To me, that part doesn't seem that unusual. She could have relocated the, Oh Lord, I've gone and blown it a few lines later to the moment where she's scanning the crowd. But as we kind of discussed in a sense already, Evaristo needs this exchange, this gaze between Doris and Bamwoze to achieve the thematic, you know, purposes that she has about the focus on the slave trade and the way these decisions are made and what the potential outcome could have been for Doris and about power. So, she needs it to happen with Bamwoze, I think, through the body of someone on an auction block. Um, so for me, the, the mimetic implausibility, I agree that it's very much there, but it fades a little bit into the background for me when I think of the [00:55:00] power of the thematic work that she achieves through it.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's a, you know, possibly another version of what, you know, Aristotle would call a probable impossibility. I mean, you know, in the sense that the probability is, is sort of, you know, the pattern of the thematic progression, right, sort of requires or at least, you know, moves us toward this, whereas the, you know, the pattern of the psychological doesn't, right? But then, here, we might say that the, you know, the thematic probability kind of overrides the mimetic plausibility kind of thing.

**Sarah Copland:** Yes, yes. And with the dominant rhetoric being fictionality in the text, right?

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

**Sarah Copland:** There is a lot less investment in mimesis than there might be in, like, a Jane Austen novel.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah, and given that she's already, right, signaling the, the fictionality in all these other ways with the inversions and, and so on. Yeah, the investment in [00:56:00] that isn't as, isn't as strong as it might be. I think then this is also, you know, provides a good segue to think about the ending, right? So, you know, we end really with the, final, the resolution of, well, will she, will she make it to the Underground Railroad?

That gets resolved, yes, but we just have this exchange. We do have the reclaiming of her name, right, and that, that obviously signifying going back to the title. You know, her original, her given name, and take me home, you know. I'm on my way home, I can, I can call my name again, right? So, it's, it's, bringing things to closure in some strong ways.

But yet, it's also like, well, wait, you know, isn't there more? What happens next? What's, what's it like on the railroad? Uh, you know, anyway, what do you, what do you think?

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah, I mean, I think, again, if, if [00:57:00] Evaristo had made more use of the resource of the narrator narratee relationship, then she'd be really up against this huge problem that for a narratee, this is a deeply unsatisfying ending, right?

Where did Doris end up? Well, not only what was the railroad like, but did she make it home to her family? Were they still alive, right?

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Sarah Copland:** You know, so, for the narratee, I think this would be deeply unsatisfying, but because Evaristo doesn't put a lot of stock in that resource, the focus is not actually there, I think the focus is on us as an authorial audience, and I find it a very satisfying ending, because for me, the power of the ending would be significantly weakened if there were a clear narrative occasion of Doris sitting by a fire in her flint cottage, talking to her family, who are still alive and well. right? Um, the power of the ending for me lies in its inconclusiveness and in this, because, I think, the story is such a heavily fictionalized version of our world, so Evaristo is pointing us back to our world with this [00:58:00] inclusive ending. And in our world, we know that the outcome of these kinds of escape attempts for very many people was recapture, you know, recapture, torture, and death, which is what Doris says she fears the most, right?

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

**Sarah Copland:** It's a sobering ending -

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Sarah Copland:** That brings us back to our world through the fictionality. And I think it would be really weakened if the narratee's desires were fulfilled, that would come at the expense of our's.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, good. So, in a way, you would say the, the openness sort of resists maybe our, our desire to say, okay, I can predict what happens from here. She gets, she did get home, it's called oh take me home and she gets her name back and therefore we can, you know, finish the story by saying she does get home. And you're saying, well, no, we don't have enough. And if we think about the relation to the actual world, we shouldn't be filling out the story in that way.

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah, I mean, I think the whole [00:59:00] nature of it being a retrospective telling means that she, we have to accept the fact that she is, uh, you know, alive, and in a situation where she can tell this story, but to not have that fully fleshed out in a sort of cozy, um, surrounding with family that have been untouched by this, um, transatlantic slave trade, I think that the decision not to give a lot of detail about what that occasion is, does keep our focus on our world and on the likely outcomes, and I think we have to surrender our desires for a kind of idyllic outcome, um, in favor of the sort of trenchant satire and critique that's going on in the story.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, okay. Terrific. So, just let me ask you, are there any things that you hoped we'd get to that we haven't managed to?

**Sarah Copland:** There's so much to talk about here, um, and I'm thrilled with how much we've been able to cover, um, and, and I'm sure we could really go on.

I guess just if readers are interested, um, to know that Evaristo wrote a novel based on the [01:00:00] premise, and it was published just three years after this story. It's called *Blonde Roots,* I highly recommend it. It really deepens its engagement with fictionality as a rhetoric, and it also, um, sort of expands its engagement with the transatlantic slave trade, so I would recommend that.

**Jim Phelan:** Okay, all right, yeah, that's a good, that's a good note to end on. More Evaristo, so.

**Sarah Copland:** Yeah.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, more engagement with Doris, yeah. Okay, well, thanks very much, Sarah, this was a lot of fun. I also want to thank our listeners and let you know that we're happy to get your feedback, which you can send to us at the email pprojectnarrative@osu.edu or on our Facebook page or to our Twitter/X account, which is @PNOhioState. I'd also like to remind you that there are more than 20 additional episodes of the Project Narrative Podcast, which you can find at the Project Narrative website [01:01:00] or on Apple Podcasts.