

Emily Zobel Marshall

Emily Zobel Marshall is of British and Martiniquean origin and a Senior Lecturer in Cultural Studies at Leeds Metropolitan University. Her PhD thesis is entitled 'The Journey of Anansi: An Exploration of Jamaican Cultural Resistance'. The main emphasis of her research has been an exploration of the ways in which the Anansi tales, as cultural forms, inspired modes of resistance and survival in Jamaica. In 2005 she undertook a three-month research trip to Jamaica and conducted interviews to examine Anansi's role in contemporary Jamaican society. She has had articles on Anansi published in *World Literatures Written in English* (Vol. 39:1) *Caribbean Beat* (Nov-Dec. Issue 88), *Jamaica Journal* (Aug. Vol. 31, Nos.1-2) and *Caribbean Quarterly* (Oct-Nov. Vol. 53, No. 3).

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Performing Anansi in Plantation Jamaica: Matthew Lewis's Record of Trickery

Emily Zobel Marshall

Mathew Lewis, author of gothic novel *The Monk* (1796), kept a journal during his stay on his Jamaican plantations. In 1816 he wrote: 'the Negroes are...very fond of what they call Nancy stories, part of which is related, part sung' (Lewis, 1999, p. 253). In this analysis of Mathew Lewis' diaries, I will be drawing from the ideas of contemporary theorist James Scott. For Scott (1990) trickster tales told by slaves of African descent are 'hidden transcripts', displays of veiled resistance to oppression which take place 'offstage', away from the eyes and ears of the dominant group. However, they can also function 'onstage' and be told in the presence of the powerful, as their true significance is so well concealed.

Using Anansi as a central metaphor for the falsity, trickery and deception inherent in slaves' behaviour in the presence of whites, this paper applies Scott's theory to an analysis of the diaries of Matthew Lewis, written between 1815 and 1818. Lewis closely documents the daily forms of resistance and trickery (disguised in performances of servility and respect) carried out by his slaves. While Lewis's attitude towards his slaves is extremely ambivalent,

his journals are filled with evidence of his slaves' 'Anansi tactics'; covert acts of defiance implemented by the weak under domination through role-playing, trickery, duplicity and deceit.

Scott examines the relationship between dominant and subordinate groups and analyses the methods through which power is subverted and resisted by the powerless through performance and deception. By exploring the performance of each group he unpicks the methods by which they maintain the impression of dominance or servility. He argues that the performance of the subordinate group complies with what the dominant group expect to see and hear, and *vice versa*. Both are trapped in an artificial routine continually performed for the preservation of their safety; it is necessary for their survival. It is in the interest of both groups to play their parts well as this leaves more room for 'the hidden transcript'. The term the 'hidden transcript' describes a complete record of verbal communication and other forms of non-verbal communication such as the expressions and gestures which took place in the verbal performance (Scott, 1990, p. 2). It is a useful term in an analysis of oral cultures as it refers to a combination of oral transaction and physical performance, rather than to a written record or script.

Scott's work is infused with theatre metaphors; the space in which the hidden transcript takes place is 'off stage'; a social space with only the group's own members as an audience, while 'the public transcript', the official version of a group's behaviour, takes place 'onstage' (Scott, 1990, pp. 1-10). The hidden transcripts of the enslaved operated in their religious and cultural practices, in their ceremonies, songs, jokes, riddles, proverbs and folktales.

I find the idea of the hidden transcript highly relevant and applicable to the role of the Anansi tales in plantation Jamaica. These tales would be told 'offstage', in the slave quarters, but were also told 'onstage' in the presence of whites; plantation overseer Thomas Thistlewood¹ and Mathew Lewis both record Anansi tales in their journals. The public transcript in this case cleverly masked the hidden and plantation whites had little understanding of the defiant messages embedded in the tales.

Thomas Thistlewood, a yeoman Farmer's son from Lincolnshire, kept several journals when working as a plantation overseer in Jamaica from 1750 to 1786.

The Jamaican Anansi tales tell of how Anansi, the small spider, gets the better of powerful animals such as Tiger and Alligator or powerful white humans like Massa (master), the King, Buckra² and Preacher using the only means available to him: his intelligence and his cunning. We see Anansi escaping the whip, tricking Buckra, stealing Massa's sheep or daughters, ambushing armies, killing the preacher, playing drums and working on his provision ground. For example, in 'Nansi Steals Backra Sheep' the animals represent poor black Jamaicans while the human characters are white and prosperous. Anansi takes the position of headman on Backra's property and starts killing his sheep. When his son questions his actions he replies, "Bwoy, shet up ye mout. Look pon Backra sheep how dem nough [enough] nough nough. Ebery minute sheep a bawm [born]. Ebery minute sheep a bawm" (Tanna, 2000, p. 101).

Here Anansi points out that Buckra has too many sheep – every minute a sheep is born – which justifies him killing some for himself. Anansi is the poor black man stealing from the rich white boss to ensure his survival. However, there is more than simply the drive to survive in Anansi's actions: there is revenge in his behaviour and anger in his words – 'Bwoy, shet up ye mout' he tells his son irately when he questions his actions; look around you, open your eyes – Whiteman has 'nough nough nough', or more than enough, sheep.

Oral history and the journals of plantation whites clearly indicate that Anansi storytelling was a prominent part of Jamaican plantation life. The trickster folk hero became a medium through which the greed and discrimination at the heart of plantation society were criticised and acts of defiance and law-breaking against Backra were legitimised. Anansi's predominant character traits are those of cunning, greed, lewdness, promiscuousness, slothfulness and deceit as he came to symbolise the slaves' aspirations for physical contact, a break from relentless labour and plentiful meals. These tales were an outlet for the frustration and anger experienced by slaves but they also nurtured a defiant attitude. The cunning intelligence Anansi implements to outmanoeuvre the powerful, inspired a form of psychological resistance to plantation oppression, which could lead to physical acts of resistance.

² 'Buckra', also spelt 'Backra', meaning white master or boss, is derived from African Ibo word *mbakáre*, meaning 'white man who governs' (Cassidy and Le Page, 2002, p. 18).

Using ‘Anansi tactics’ on the plantation could hit Massa in his pocket book – ‘where it hurt’. These tactics included stealing, cheating, working slowly, self-mutilation, wilfully misunderstanding instructions, breaking tools and machinery and setting fire to the fields before harvest time (Burton, 1997, pp. 48- 49; Sherlock, 1998, p. 128). Anansi tactics are also verbal; Anansi is armed with an astuteness which translates itself into a mastery of expression and through words he can worm his way out of any tight fix. He can influence and bully others using flattery, boasts, humour, threats, sharp argumentation, persuasion and charm. Anansi is a master sophist and misleads and deceives using the tools which bring him into being: language and storytelling. The pretence of dim-wittedness, flattery, lying, gossip and rumour were also verbal tools used by slaves to gain an advantage over their masters.

Scott explains that performance is used by both dominant and subordinate groups. Through the public performances of the subordinate group, the dominant group are led to believe that the subordinate accept their servile positions (Scott, 1990). In turn, the dominant group wears a mask in the presence of the subordinate in an effort to preserve their ideology of natural superiority. The image they create is often one they find flattering; if they have liberal tendencies the role they choose to perform may be one of the kind, paternalistic master – a shepherd tending to his unruly flock – perfectly illustrated by Mathew Lewis, as the following discussion will demonstrate. This image was also reflected in Lewis’ choice of what to record and how to record it; in an analysis of the journal it is vital to read between the lines, to examine the gaps and slippages in Lewis’ narrative. However, it is clear that if at first Lewis was proud of his role as ‘paternalistic master’, his slaves soon made a mockery of his public transcript, as he became an unwilling participant in a never-ending game of Anansi tactics of trickery, duplicity and deceit.

Mathew Lewis’ Record of Trickery

Even before his visit to Jamaica, Mathew Lewis, a young man new to the plantation environment, was apparently filled with doubts regarding the ethics of slavery and sympathetic to parliamentary initiatives in Britain concerned with its abolition (Terry in Lewis, 1999, p. xv). He made his first journey to Jamaica in 1812 to the two Jamaican plantations he inherited after his father’s death, namely the Cornwall plantation in the far

West of the island and Hordley in the Far East (Terry in Lewis, 1999, p. xiv). Lewis' journal, kept between 1815 and 1818, was written during a period which lay between two of the most momentous events in the history of slavery under the British, namely the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and slavery as an institution in 1833. Through a series of events recorded in Lewis' diary we see how his slaves put on the type of performance Scott identifies as a falsified public transcript in which a hidden transcript operates – and at times emerges to the fore in a clever disguise (Scott, 1990).

On his arrival to Jamaica, Lewis was welcomed with overwhelming warmth and enthusiasm by his slaves, who rejoiced loudly for several days and nights. His slaves had cunningly spread the rumour that Lewis was going to set them free; he writes that his slaves believed that 'Good King George and good Mr. Wilberforce have given me a paper to set the negroes free...but that the white people of Jamaica will not suffer me to show the paper' (Burton, 1997, p. 55).

Lewis became keen to live up to the image of the generous and kind liberator that his slaves had created for him. The slaves responded with a performance of gratitude and eagerness, not only because they thought that Lewis held the key to the improvement of their situation, but also because they wanted to take revenge on the cruel plantation managers who had mistreated them in his absence. By acting naively and pretending that Lewis was something akin to a demigod they could create more scope for forms of resistance and non-cooperation, thus improving their lot on the plantation.

Although Lewis infantilised his slaves, he appeared to have secretly admired their rebellious spirit. He was in awe of Adam, a Creole former Chief Slave Driver (a position of considerable power) of the Cornwall plantation who has the longest slave narrative in the Lewis' journal. Adam was accused of poisoning 12 slaves and had 'been long and strongly suspected of having connections with Obeah men'. Lewis describes him as 'a most dangerous fellow, and a terror to all his companions', but a man 'unfortunately, clever and plausible' (Lewis, 1999, p. 92). Lewis does not get rid of Adam, who is nicknamed 'Bonaparte', but when he returns on his second visit to the island he finds Adam causing chaos. Adam has been fighting and attempting to murder and poison other slaves whilst claiming that Lewis was a soft touch and would give him his old job back as Chief Governor (Chief Black Slave Driver) (Terry in Lewis, 1999, pp. xxviii-xxxiii).

Adam's behaviour may have been caused by personal disputes, or it could be interpreted as an attempt to create an atmosphere of disorder and confusion on the estate, thereby undermining the system whilst displaying his dissatisfaction and anger at his situation. Lewis states that Adam had 'a decided talent for hypocrisy' (Lewis, 1999, p. 223). He possessed the trickster's gift of being able to convincingly perform a role of servility and subservience whilst simultaneously challenging the system, an illustration of which can be found in his distinctly docile manner during Lewis' departure after his first trip to the estate. Lewis writes that he 'begged me to order a little daughter of his to be instructed in needle-work' (Lewis, 1999, p. 145).

During Adam's court hearing we see him pandering to the court officials' morals and sympathies, telling them he has been learning to read with the 'sole purpose of learning the Lord's prayer' (Lewis, 1999, p. 223). After finding several Obeah items in his home (which may have been planted there), he is finally evicted from the plantation. Yet far from displaying any anger towards Adam, Lewis goes out of his way to make sure that he is transported rather than hanged, and ends Adam's narrative thus:

He is a fine-looking man between thirty and forty, squarely built, and of great bodily strength and his countenance equally expresses intelligence and malignity. The sum allowed me for him is one hundred pounds currency, which is scarcely a third of his worth as a labourer, but which is the highest value which a jury is permitted to mention.

(Lewis, 1999, pp. 223-224)

Lewis documents the daily forms of resistance and trickery carried out by his slaves. He mentions how slaves would re-open old wounds and rub dirt in them and continually chatted to passers by to avoid work, how they stole and performed simple tasks ineffectively, after which he would find them 'sauntering along with their hands dangling' (cited in Burton, 1997, p. 56).

The excited celebrations led by the slaves on Lewis' arrival gave them the scope and space needed to perpetrate acts of covert defiance on his plantation. We find out that during the festivities the pen-keeper 'accidentally' let the cattle escape and trample over Lewis' best canes (Burton, 1997, p. 57). Lewis' cattle 'trustees' – his drivers, his watchmen, his

domestics, and even his 'little servant boys' – passed the night 'in play and rioting'. He complains: 'although they were perfectly aware of the detriment which the cattle were doing my interests, not a negro could be prevailed upon to rouse himself and help to drive them out' (Lewis, 1999, p. 127). He reflects bitterly on this incident and writes:

And so much for negro gratitude! However, they still continue their eternal song of 'Now Massa come, we very well off'; but their satisfaction evidently begins and ends with themselves. They rejoice sincerely at being very well off, but think it unnecessary to make the slightest return to Massa for making them so.

(Lewis, 1999, p. 127)

Lewis remains for the most part completely flummoxed regarding what he considers to be strange and confusing behaviour: 'the attempt to make them correct a fault is fruitless; they never can do the same thing a second time in the same manner', he complains. Lewis goes on to explain how his cook, if praised for a dish and asked to cook it again, 'is certain of doing something which makes it quite different' (Lewis, 2005, p. 182). When he asks her to cook salt meat, she cooks nothing but salt meat, and when he complains that there is nothing fresh to eat, she cooks nothing but fresh. She also cooks erratic quantities of food, and when told there is not enough on the table; Lewis writes; 'the next day she slaughters without mercy pigs, sheep, fowls, ducks, turkeys and everything that she can lay her murderous hands upon, till the table absolutely groans under the load of her labours' (Lewis, 2005, p. 182).

His slave Cubina is a master of Anansi tactics. Cats have been getting into Lewis' home, causing chaos. Cubina is asked to shut all the windows. He shuts them tight every night, he assures Lewis, but still the cats cause havoc in the house. Only when he is pressed does Cubina tell him that one of the window panes is broken; Lewis records; 'he had continued to turn the cats out of the door with the greatest care, although he was perfectly conscious that they could always walk in again at the window in [sic] five minutes after' (Lewis, 2005, p. 183).

Another prime instance of Anansi tactics, which Lewis presents as another example of the slaves' 'curious' behaviour, is Cubina's mode of dealing with the pigeon-house. Cubina creeps up on the pigeons and pokes his head through the door; inevitably all the pigeons fly out; Lewis writes; 'he has now no resource but entering the dove-cot, and remaining there

with unwearied patience for the accidental return of the birds', which often doesn't take place 'till too late for dinner and Cubina returns empty-handed' (Lewis, 2005, p. 183). Lewis takes pity at Cubina's 'embarrassment' and fits sliders over the holes to keep the birds in the pigeon house, but Cubina 'fails' to close one side of the sliders, and the pigeons again fly away. After being alerted to his 'mistake' Cubina closes the slider, but does so when the pigeons are out, so that pigeons cannot not re-enter the dove-cot. Cubina sits and waits 'with exemplary patience, but without success' (Lewis, 2005, p. 183). Having effectively ruined Lewis' practical plan, Cubina is able to abandon the sliders and continue his old routine – undoubtedly looking forward to numerous afternoons spent 'waiting' (or resting) in the pigeon house, free from all duties.

Lewis informs us that one of his girl slaves, whose job it is to open the doors in the morning, 'never fails to leave three or four closed' and Nicholas, his carpenter, when ordered to make a box for sweetmeats makes a box 'so small that it would scarcely hold a single jar, and then one so large that it would have held twenty' (Lewis, 2005, p. 184). At last Nicholas makes a normal size box, but nails it closed 'so effectually' (while still empty) 'that on being directed to open it.....he split the cover to pieces'. 'Yet', Lewis concludes woefully, 'among all my negroes, few are equal to Nicholas and Cubina in adroitness and intelligence. Judge then what must the remaining three hundred be!' (Lewis, 2005, p. 184).

Towards the end of his journal we see Lewis becoming more and more aware of the tricks his slaves are playing on him; they have turned him into a liberator figure (a 'soft touch') and news of his leniency has spread to slaves across the island. Slaves begin to come to him from other estates with grievances concerning working conditions and unfair treatment at the hands of their masters, and he is bombarded with visits. Plantation production on his estate falls dramatically as the slaves work less, yet when Lewis broaches the topic he explains that his slaves always have a story for him. A slave will sympathize profusely with his problem and 'having said so much, and said it so strongly, that he, convinced of its having full effect in making the others do their duty – thinks himself quite safe and snug in skulking away from his own [work]' (cited in Burton, 1997, p. 57).

In this analysis of the performativity of domination and subordination, as defined by Scott's 'onstage/public' and 'offstage/hidden' metaphors, it is important not to under-estimate the intelligence of plantation whites regarding the Anansi tactics of their slaves. However, even

when whites became aware of slaves' tactics of defiance, they had limited tools at their disposal to confront them (Craton, 1982, p. 15). Lewis eventually begins to understand that he is being manipulated and even describes his slaves as 'persevering tricksters' towards the end of his journal (Burton, 1997, p. 61). It is apparent, however, that Lewis is to some degree complicit in this trickery and, perhaps unconsciously, he lets himself be tricked. There are signs that he may have partly understood the performances that he and his slaves were playing from the very beginning of his visit, but did nothing to change the situation. This is evidenced in his knowledge and documentation of the slaves' challenging behaviour and his refusal to exact the expected discipline and punishments. While he believes that 'their satisfaction evidently begins and ends with themselves', and is aware of the insincerity of their displays of affection towards him ('so much for negro gratitude!'), he takes no action (Terry in Lewis, 1999, p. 127).

The centrality of Anansi tactics to slave life are excellently illustrated in the saying commonly used by slaves in South Carolina: 'De bukrah (whites) hab scheme, en de nigger hab trick, en ebry time bukrah scheme once, de nigger trick twice' (Scott, 1990, p. 163). Moreover, collector of Anansi tales Martha Warren Beckwith (1924) explains that another name for 'trickster tales told by Negroes' was 'neger [nigger]-tricks'.

This direct link made during slavery by both blacks and whites between the Anansi tales and 'neger tricks' offers an indication of the extent to which the stories reflected the Anansi tactics used by slaves in their daily lives; Scott states the slaves' trickster tales were 'ambiguous and coded' versions of the hidden transcripts of resistance (Scott, 1990, p. 19; Beckwith, 1924, p. xii). As this analysis of the performance of domination and subordination demonstrates, while subordinate cultures are not always in open conflict with dominant cultures, they will, as E. P Thompson explains, 'negotiate the spaces and gaps in it, make inroads into it "warrening it from within"' (Thompson, 1965, pp. 311-362). In plantation Jamaica Anansi tactics, small acts of resistance against the system, were implemented to burrow within the territory of the dominant. Although slaves did not bring about an end to slavery through revolution and revolt, their persistent resistances weakened the structures of domination and speeded up the process of emancipation.

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