

# **Vermont Arts Council**

## **Transcript**

### **Vermont Made, Episode 7**

#### **“Wisdom Through Uncertainty with Essayist Emily Bernard”**

##### **Desmond Peeples (00:04):**

You're listening to Vermont Made, the show where Vermont creatives tell all about one thing they've made. I'm your host, Desmond Peeples, and in this episode, I speak with the fantastic Emily Bernard, a University of Vermont professor and author of a number of books, most recently, the much celebrated essay collection, *Black Is the Body: Stories from my Grandmother's Time, My Mother's Time and Mine*, which just might be one of my very favorite books. Emily spoke with me about life after the success of *Black Is the Body*, what intimacy and the page mean to her, and about her next project, a collection of essays exploring the

lives of several Black women artists in the public eye through history, for which Emily has been awarded a 2020 Andrew Carnegie fellowship. It's sure to be another hit.

**Desmond Peeples (00:56):**

So yeah. Thank you so much for talking with me. When I had first thought of this episode, I thought we might talk about *Black Is the Body* and your personal experiences... some of the personal experiences that you explore in the book, particularly as they relate to race in Vermont... but as we talked, it turns out you are a little tired of talking about all that, understandably. So, today, let's talk about life after *Black Is the Body* and, of course, your new work, *Unfinished Women*. So my first question for you. It's been three years since the publication of *Black Is the Body* and its wild success, so how has this experience changed you?

## **Emily Bernard (01:42):**

That's a great question. I also want to preface by saying, I think when we last talked, I was squarely in the middle of that fatigue and overwhelm and I feel differently now. But it's funny because I gave a talk... I went to Albany, just to say what I've been trying to do. What I learned more than anything else are the demands on the life of a writer in public. It's just something I'd never experienced before. I mean, I have... This is my fifth book, and I love all my children, but this one had just a different... This one was a jock. It was a cheerleading team. The other ones were quiet and studious and more like me and this one had a different public life than I imagined. I mean, I guess in some ways it's a kind of be careful what you wish for experience. But I will say that the book has had just a really interesting life.

## **Emily Bernard (02:40):**

I want to start by talking about my experience at the University of Albany, which is something I agreed to do some months ago as part of their New York Writers series. I've been there before. I was part of a discussion around the television adaptation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The director on that film was... is the first Black woman filmmaker... excuse me... prominent director. And so I was part of a talkback because of my work on the Hurston novel. So it was really different to come back as the showrunner or the principal. I just want to make sure that... I'm going to get her name. Darnell Martin. Actually, the film was written by Suzan Lori Parks. So Darnell Martin was the director on that film, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The film came out in 2005, and she was part of the New York State literary series... I feel I have

to get that right, too. I just want to credit everybody right. The New York State Writers Institute.

**Emily Bernard (04:05):**

So I was there mid February. The New York State Writers Institute. As I said, I was the principal actor and it was a different experience. The students were wonderful. In fact, one of the students... It's always such a pleasure, as you know this very well yourself, to just be around bodies of Black people and all the kinds of people of color. It was organic. I just turned around and there were these lovely young students. One of the students said, "I want to ask you a question and I hope it's not inappropriate." I told her... I said it's the first time in three years... The first time I've... This is the first time I've given a reading and a reader has been able to imagine that there is, in

fact, a boundary and a difference between sharing my life and writing a book about my life. That actually, in order to have that extraliterary information, it requires trust and knowing someone. So I love that she... What she exhibited was she knew she was not entitled to ask me. And so that made me more eager to answer her questions. Of course, the question was totally respectful and benign, but I told her... I said, "I really respect that." Another student had a question and said, "I want to respect the same boundary."

**Emily Bernard (05:21):**

It was just... It was interesting and it's something that I had to learn myself. I think, for me, I don't consider myself a writer of memoir. I consider myself an essayist. I think that there's an important distinction there, largely having to do

with form. I'm very interested in form as opposed to content, really. I love it when I read an essay about something I thought I had no interest in, but because of the way the writer articulates it, suddenly, I'm a fan and I'm intrigued. Of course, that can happen in any genre, but the essay... I think the demand is equal on the writer to exhibit some kind of careful attention to form. The same demands for form as content.

**Emily Bernard (06:13):**

Anyway, so that was a wonderful experience, and it was a tail end of lot of these experiences of being in public as a writer. I've said several times. You write a book and you are taking care with the ways the sentences move and the punctuation and all those exciting things to us and then you look up and there are readers and they have their own needs and their own... and in this world of social

media, that can be very overwhelming. I don't like it. What I learned is I don't like it. I have friends who are very successful writers who really enjoy the social media space. They're good at it. I have several friends who have pithy things to say several times a day on Twitter and I enjoy following them. I am not one of them. I have about maybe one interesting thing to say and it's probably not appropriate, really, for audiences of people who I don't know. So I had to go there to know there, as Zora Neale Hurston put in her words. I wouldn't have known that this would feel so taxing, but I enjoyed it.

**Emily Bernard (07:28):**

Of course, the other side of it though, is that you meet these wonderful readers and that's really fantastic. I mean, I have relationships with people, real relationships, I've never met. There's a



woman I met who wrote me, reached out on Facebook, a Black woman who lives in Connecticut. She comes to my virtual readings and we have a relationship. We've talked about going on a trip together. That's kind of a treat and a way that honestly just opens a door to thinking about living in these times and intimacy, which is something I'm very intrigued with creatively. So it's just been a way to explore that and to think about what that means.

**Emily Bernard (08:11):**

But in general, I think that... I'm a pretty quiet writer. In fact, when this book came out, I remember reading a tweet. Someone had written, "Let's all praise quiet books." It was probably some awards season. I thought, that's what this book is. It's a quiet book. And it turned out not to be as much as I thought it would be. As I said, it's had a

different life than I imagined. I have stumbled upon criticism that calls into question my racial authenticity in very aggressive language. Learned to steer clear of that because... I mean, you can't talk back to that. Also, you can't... Again, I'll quote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. There's this great scene that made sense to me in a different way, where Janie... You might remember the scene. She's leaving her first husband because she's met someone she likes more. In his pain and self loathing, he accuses her of just being... thinking she's too good for him and kind of cutting her down. She reflects, "He's accusing me of my grandmother, my aunt, my cousins. Guilty as charged." So it was interesting because, even in that negative experience, I thought, oh, I understand that part of Hurston's book. It kind of was all worth it. I understand this now! I know what she was talking about.

**Emily Bernard (09:44):**

So you develop that wall really, but at the same time, there are people you do want to let in. I mean, I had those experiences mostly virtually and, in person, I've had readers come up and tell me how the book has really been enabling for them. I've heard from readers in the UK who I couldn't... People whose experiences in life could not be more different than mine, but they found something in the book that was useful for them. Particularly the adoption pieces. I heard that those really seem to have an application that seems to be pretty wide reaching. I've heard from people with really different adoption stories than mine. So that's very humbling. Feeling that you did something and you shared something and that it has become part of someone else's life.

## **Emily Bernard (10:39):**

I learned something that I always believed, and I think I must have heard a writer talk about, but when a book is out, it doesn't belong to you anymore. It belongs to the reader. Just like we hear a song, a song that sort of describes your life, and no one can tell you otherwise. Even the performer. Even Adele can't tell you, well, that song is actually not about you. Thank you, Adele. No, actually it's about me. And so we have to be... Understand that about the art we produce too. That people are going to use our work for whatever purpose and we have nothing to do with that. As you know, the teachings of Zen Buddhism, to water down, what other people think of me is none of my business. I have no control over that. And so it's been an exercise of really putting that wisdom to work. It is a process. There are a lot of people I know who've told me I couldn't write

personally because I'm afraid of being judged. I think that's just not a way I can live.

**Emily Bernard (11:42):**

Actually, when I was talking to Wendy, we had the same... I've never heard somebody else say this, but she was saying, "Do I wish I could write safer things? Sure, but it would just come out weird." I just laughed. I burst out laughing. I said, "I feel the same." I've said I could write about rocks, but it would... I'm sure I'd write about them in a way that would make people uncomfortable. I can't play it straight! It doesn't come to me. And so just having the courage of one's convictions I think... These tests are important. Who are you? What do you believe? Are you willing to be vulnerable and perfect? Are you invested in facades?

## **Emily Bernard (12:20):**

I think, for me, the book was an expression of an increasing conviction that it is through ambivalence, it is through uncertainty, that we actually gain any wisdom and make any real connections and come to know ourselves. I always feel allergic to people who are overly certain about things. It's my least favorite human trait. People who just think that their experience is somehow a template for other people's experiences. I really want to be known in my particularity and that's how I want to know other people. I don't want to know you and say, oh, Desmond Peeples, X, Y, Z. You check these boxes so you are in fact like this, I want to know who you are and I want to know all the choices you're making in your life and I want to... I'm interested in the nuances. That's... I really treasure that.

## **Emily Bernard (13:27):**

And the book is an expression of that need and desire to... as Ntozake Shange said in her famous play, *For Colored Girls*... She said, "I still crave intimacy and close talk." It's a line from one of... I think it's... Several women are speaking for certain experiences and I... That line hit me when I was in college a good 35 years ago. "I still crave intimacy and close talk." And this is a character who'd just gone through some kind of betrayal. I loved it just for the substance of it. You still want love. We still have to make ourselves open to love even if we've been hurt. It's the only way we grow. And so this book was about walking the walk and not just talking the talk and in a way of also trying to invite the same kind of intimacy, the same kind of letting down of one's guard. And so it still feels important to do that. I think, if anything, the book has only deepened that hunger as opposed to quieted it. I

only feel that deeper hunger to know people and to be known and to explore ideas and intimacies.

**Emily Bernard (14:55):**

So it's been an interesting process, but I think it's true for all of us that we move on. The book is done. Your kids move out and you find a new purpose for the room. It doesn't mean that you don't love them and don't want them to come back home, but we gotta move on. I can't keep I can't keep an archive to your room. To your identity. That was your childhood identity. Things change. So I feel the same way. That I need to move on to other projects and have needed to move on to other projects. As I said, I have some friends who are really focused on wringing the life out of a certain book and just really making sure it hits everything and keeping its public life... to extend it for as long as possible. But for me, I just had to



stop at some point. Because you just can't generate new work if you're really in the old work.

**Emily Bernard (16:08):**

So it's been an interesting... It's had an interesting life and I'm excited to... I had to learn to say no. It was the hardest thing I had to do, actually, over the course of the three years since the book came out. I was so excited at first just to get to talk about it at all. And it's still a huge... I still really feel very honored when people want to talk about it, but learning to say no, learning to figure out when you're trying to please someone else, when you're trying to please yourself, and what do we owe our readers and thinking about what I wanted from... what I want from writers, and trying to be the person who gives that reader what they need. I would hate to come... You don't want any reader to come away from an experience with you

thinking, ugh. You want to somehow give them a little bit... But there have been occasions... I think because the book is very personal, people believe they know me in a way that is really discomfiting and I'm still learning how to deal with that. How to respond to a reading who really thinks... Did you ever see The King of... I think it's called The King of Comedy. Robert De Niro and Sandra Bernhard?

**Desmond Peeples (17:28):**

No.

**Emily Bernard (17:29):**

Okay. He's a comedian, I think, in New York and she's a rabid fan who... She thinks you belong to me. She ends up kind of kidnapping him. The intensity of people's responses can be unsettling

because you're trying to get the story down right.  
So it's been an interesting journey.

**Desmond Peeples (17:51):**

Have people crossed your boundaries in... Yeah.

**Emily Bernard (17:56):**

Yeah, people really have.

**Desmond Peeples (17:58):**

Any vague example you want to share or no?

**Emily Bernard (18:02):**

I will share an example. It was a learning experience. I was invited to speak at a school in Vermont and the person who invited me very early on was invoking my children and my husband and

my dog and saying, "Maybe you can bring them with you." And I thought, she really doesn't understand. This was a book. These are stories. I'm not part of a traveling entourage, just sharing our stories. The learning was that I should have run in the other direction because you cannot satisfy that kind of need. People want to know you. What I have learned, and I've said now, I can be very personal, but I'm not trusting. I don't have to trust every... I can tell these stories, but there's a lot and I think sometimes people don't... But you say to yourself, well, the book was effective because the person thought that I was really right there on the page and that's what you want. Like an actor who you have feelings about, you feel a way about, because of some performance they gave. It's hard to disconnect sometimes the actor from the performance. I think there's something about that. But I will just say, to sum this up... I hope there's some substance in there.

## **Desmond Peeples (19:32):**

Oh yeah.

## **Emily Bernard (19:34):**

But this next book is not about me per se and that is a huge relief. Although it's very much about me in every way, but... I had a friend who once said we are always writing our autobiographies. I thought that was great. It's true for every book I've done. I mean, it's an expression of my passion and my curiosity and fears and hopes and beliefs. This next book is no different, but I am relieved not to have every story begin and end with the "I" and be able to do my favorite thing, which is snoop around in other people's lives. So that is what I'm excited to do for the next book.

### **Desmond Peeples (20:23):**

You mentioned a word several times. Intimacy. Before we... I want to dive into Unfinished Women next, but before we do that, I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit more about how you think of intimacy or at least what you're trying to do with the idea of intimacy, how you try to work with it as a writer. In this new time of incredible distance, you've been doing a lot of remote work and I've read that you've appreciated how that's opened new audiences up to you in a way. So I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit more about that element in your life.

### **Emily Bernard (21:12):**

I'm somebody who, to my dying day, will believe in the primacy of interpersonal connections. I think my interest in human beings is bottomless as opposed to... My husband is sort of... He's oriented

toward fuse. Excuse me. My husband is interested in food, music, sports, politics. That's how he's oriented, but I'm really... To me, human beings are... I just can't get enough of them. I think there's something about me that's just always feeling outside at the same time. The hunger comes from feeling a little out of step with people a lot of the time. I'm very interested in why people do things the way they do.

**Emily Bernard (22:05):**

There's a part of me that stubbornly believes that, when it comes to race and racism and even some of these geopolitical issues, that honesty, vulnerability, accountability, and empathy could go a long way towards solving those issues. I mean, I don't know that will ever happen. I used to think that... My fantasy used to be that what if Donald Trump just had a complete breakdown and a

straight up come to Jesus? The world would be different. And got on the stage and said, "I was blind but now I see." We would have a different world if he could tell the truth and if he could show remorse and if he could... We would have a different world. So that faith has been tested over this period. I used to think that most people were good and now I don't know that anymore. I'm so shocked, like many people, by the lack of compassion for other human beings that Americans have exhibited. The callous disregard of the needs of other people has severely shaken my faith, but I do still believe in the idea... Maybe like God. It's the idea, it's the promise, of something maybe. That's what it really is. I think I just need to keep believing in order to keep living. How do you keep believing that and keep your eyes open too?



### **Emily Bernard (23:52):**

Maybe like you I've, over this period, been very disappointed in some white people in my life that I didn't think would disappoint me in the way they did. Who, as it turned out, were really thinking of me as their Black friend and I hadn't realized. I mean, I understood myself to be a Black woman in a friendship with a person who was not Black, but I did not realize the degree to which they had me in a separate sphere when they considered who I was and how much of their feelings about me were immersed in some kind of guilt and fear. That's been disappointing, but like everybody, I'm glad to be alive to have experienced it. Sometimes the truth hurts. And it has given me some new wisdom to share with my children, who are my priority. To help them navigate the world.

### **Emily Bernard (24:52):**

So how to balance a sense of possibility and enthusiasm with wisdom that we've all gained from this period or how to make room for all of the disappointments we've had and the fear, the lack of trust, the suspicion we all are feeling about each other, I think, but we have to try. We have to try to connect. We must connect. We must try. Not everybody is worthy of your vulnerability. I was talking to a Black woman who I, although she is close to my age, have literary maternal feelings for, I guess. I was telling her not everybody deserves your tears. Not everybody deserves your faith, your trust, and that is something we all know. But I still believe in faith and trust and vulnerability, although this period has been hard. I've forgotten your question, but... Yeah.

**Desmond Peeples (26:05):**

Something about intimacy.

**Emily Bernard (26:07):**

Oh, intimacy. Yes.

**Desmond Peeples (26:07):**

I think you've been answering it well. Yeah.

**Emily Bernard (26:13):**

I think also, may I say, that it really is a driving force. And I would say that that is true for all of my work. As you know I've done... I've edited a collection of essays about interracial friendship. I've written about the Harlem Renaissance. The theme or the thread that connects all this is about wanting to know others and wanting to know how we know others has been something that is very interesting to me. What does it take to know someone? I can tell you that I feel I know Carl Van

Vechten very well. He died in 1960. Yes. He died seven years before I was born. He was born in 1880. I feel I know Zora Neale Hurston very well. She was born in 1891. There is no way we could have ever had any kind of connection at all, but I think about them a lot. I have read their personal papers and I know them better than I know some people in my life that I call friends. I feel closer to them than some people in my life I call friends. I think that's really fascinating and it's something else I'm glad to have been alive to experience.

### **Emily Bernard (27:34):**

I always encourage anybody, but certainly my students, go to an archive. See what people leave behind. What are they trying to teach you? What are they trying to tell you? What was unsettled in their lives? What can we learn? Something that's kind of frustrating... I think I talked about this kind

of contemporary discourse around everything is this, I think, underlying belief that these problems we're facing are new, and they're not new.

Nothing. Not even what's happening in Ukraine.

Not what's happening in this country. All of these problems were established. The damage was done decades, generations ago and now we're facing the effects of that. Facing the consequences of that damage. But there have been many people who came and lived before us who wrestled with these problems and we should listen to them and we should understand them.

### **Emily Bernard (28:36):**

So I think, for me, intimacy is crucial. I think that drives a lot of art and that art speaks to me the most. When I hear that writer's voice saying, "Do you hear me? Do you understand me? Am I alone?" That's the voice that speaks to me the

most deeply. A writer who's very invested in the hard work of being known and in a way that's very connected to wanting to know others. I think that's one of the pleasures and duties of this life. To find a way to connect with people. People who are very different from us. People we might dismiss out of hand. Not just people who talk like us and think like us, but people who might challenge us. Of course, we have to find that line for ourselves. What is a kind of connection we don't want and is unbearable and unproductive which is one where we can be stretched and challenged in important ways?

**Emily Bernard (29:42):**

So it really is something I think about. I think about it in every aspect. My personal and creative life. Even thinking about my daughters and family. I was saying to my husband , I said recently isn't it

amazing? We made a family out of a promise. Not blood, not genes, but a promise that we would take care of and look after these kids. Look what it has... It's amazing to me still what it has produced. It's humbling though because you think, can I make good on this promise for the rest of my life? Like any kind of commitment. So I'm really driven by it. I'm really, really driven by the need to know and the need to be known.

**Desmond Peeples (30:23):**

It's interesting because there... I think you said it well. So much of art depends on intimacy and is all about it and yet, particularly with writing, creating that connection to the idea at all, communing with anything, requires such solitude. There as something you said during the pre interview about, after having been out in the world too much lately, you realized that there's nothing for the writer but

you and the page and yet that creates so much. That creates so much connection to the world, to ideas, to history. So I would love if you could just talk about the page a little bit. What it is for you and what it does for you? You and the page.

**Emily Bernard (31:19):**

Well, let me talk about intimacy. That is the encounter with the unknown. It's where we confront our fears, our fantasies, our inner lives, where time stops. Getting closest to the bone. And it's scary. Going into that place can be very scary. I don't know about you, but even when it's going well, I get scared. It's like going on a roller coaster. I know I'm going to survive, most likely, but it's going to be a rough ride. I mean, I prefer it that way, but it can be hard.



## **Emily Bernard (32:08):**

I'll tell you something right now that's happening is that I have arthritis in my thumbs. I wear these thumb splints now and typing is fine, but writing by hand, it really is painful. When I'm writing by hand, and I will sometimes force myself to do it just to feel the words and slow down our brains, there's real pain. I have to think more carefully about what I'm putting down and what I'm erasing. In a way, it helps because I'm focusing on getting done with it, as opposed to the voice in your ear, saying, "What are you doing here?" I'm getting to the end of the page slow and steady. But yeah. I think, for me, it is a place I come to become most myself. Lay down all the burdens and prepare to leap into the the abyss. And that can be really scary, so I have to break that down to make myself able to summon the courage to do that. Because it really does come down to that. I

wrote a piece recently for our mutual friend Shanta Lee Gander, who has a... as you know, has a... It's Gander, right?

**Desmond Peeples (33:40):**

Gander, yes.

**Emily Bernard (33:41):**

Yeah, okay. So I wrote a piece recently for our mutual friend, Shanta Lee Gander. She has a show up at the Flynn right now. Excuse me. She has a show up at the Fleming Museum.

**Desmond Peeples (33:50):**

The Fleming, right.

**Emily Bernard (33:51):**

Yes. And I...

**Desmond Peeples (33:52):**

Dark Goddess.

**Emily Bernard (33:54):**

Right! I wanted to write the piece. I was terrified to write the piece. I pulled up to the page one day and thought I have to write something beautiful for this woman who I adore. And I did. And it was scary. [crosstalk 00:34:11] What I'll say is that I wrote something true and something scary. It was a moment where I really didn't know if I had it in me. I really didn't know if I had in me, but it was my love for her that brought me over the edge and my admiration for her and my desire to support her and... Very selfish desire...

## **Desmond Peeples (34:34):**

Intimacy.

## **Emily Bernard (34:35):**

Right. I wanted to be part of the show. I gave myself that choice. You don't have to write this or anything ever again. Sometimes I will have that bargain with myself. How does that feel? That feels terrible. That feels like an existence without a mouth or something. And I felt, okay, I'm alive. My limbs work and I'm still alive is what I felt, but it's always intimidating. Now, the older you get, you realize, okay, I've been through this a hundred times before. Unless something really dramatic, an asteroid crashing into my office, chances are I'm going to finish this and it's going to have the same... I'll get to somewhere that works for me. Even if it's maybe not what I dreamed of producing. But it still... It's daunting. It's daunting.

I think all writers have our tricks to get to that page and to stay in the chair and to get that work done. These days, I'm having to work in small increments, partly because of my thumbs and also just because it's just... I'm climbing up out of that... onto shore after having been in the swamp of so many things happening. But yeah.

**Emily Bernard (35:53):**

I mean, it's really where I'm my best self, I think. Not always my nicest, not always my most forgiving, but my most authentic self happens on the page. Not often in real life. I've been told in the past that I'm a very good listener, but as I get older, I think it's just because I really often don't know what to say, so I just keep asking questions. I don't know what to say. So how are you? So what's really going on? I just don't know what to say. But on the page, I get to a place where I

know what to say and I am always in intimate communion with a reader who I think will get it. The writing is that promise to somebody. I feel like the page promises there's somebody out there who's ready to read what you're writing and that really helped me get through this book. And also some other pieces I've written. But I think that when you're first starting, it's so private and it's so personal and it's so contained. You and whatever writing instrument and getting the words out. And then as your work continues, then there are other people involved who are making decisions. But that's the precious moment. When you're there and really anything could happen. You just have to open that faucet and just have faith, but it can be very, very daunting.

**Emily Bernard (37:25):**

I don't think it gets easier. I was talking to Vivian Gornick in New York and she's all of 85 and said, oh no... She told me it never gets easier. It never gets easier. But she also said to me that she's really hopeful about the future. She said there's a long tradition of people in very old age who produce their... And for her, she still feels... She says, "I want to produce something of lasting value." And I said, "You've done that so many times over." But she's still trying to get it down. Trying to get down exactly what she means. I think that's what drives us all in the end.

Everything else... We deal with all the other things because we just are driven to try to get at the heart of the truth of our experience or the things that obsess us, the things we care about, and that's a lifelong quest. But it starts right there with the page and clearing your throat and then opening your mouth and just trying. Seeing what comes out.

**Desmond Peeples (38:24):**

Let's talk about Unfinished Women. So this is your new project for which you won a very prestigious 2020 Andrew Carnegie fellowship, correct?

**Emily Bernard (38:34):**

That's right.

**Desmond Peeples (38:36):**

Great. I think you described the book in an article for UVM as a meditation on the notion of success itself. The book will explore the experiences of Black women whose lives don't conform to the triumphalism that characterizes typical American success narratives. How did you settle into this subject?



## **Emily Bernard (39:01):**

Well, I've been thinking about this book for a long time. Do you ever have that experience where you think, gosh, I've been actually working on this book for 20 years. For any of your listeners, a mistake that I've made too many times in the past is not clipping that article. Not noting that. Those sites of inspiration can keep you going. But I read a book... For a long time, I've been thinking about this book. There's so many moments reading...

When Anita Hill wrote her autobiography, I read it and was fascinated by the way she told the story and the way that story unfolded and what it meant for her to stand up. I mean, I'll say the book isn't personal, but all the stories have these personal portals. I remember being shocked by the amount of disbelief around her claims that I heard from family members and my parents' colleagues and all

the... Just the casual sexism. It was really surprising. Black professional people I grew up with really just didn't believe her. In the book, she talked about having received, I think, thousands of letters from women who had experienced something similar and never got any justice and she knew she couldn't stop because she would be letting so many people down. They kept her fortified. And I thought that's so interesting.

**Emily Bernard (40:45):**

And so in the wake of Me Too, I started thinking about, well, what about all the women who did everything right? They filed the reports. They filed the claims. They maybe even got legal representation, but they never got any justice. Maybe they were ostracized by their communities. Maybe they were disbelieved by people they loved. I want to know about those stories. We're hearing

a lot of stories now... Not to minimize any of the stories, because there's a lot of pain that leads to even a modicum of justice. But I'm interested in these women who didn't find success in the ways or find justice in the ways that we celebrate. There's no verdict in their favor so they had to continue. How do you do that? How do you continue knowing that nobody believed you? So I have a fantasy of just sort of giving that woman a platform. Again, I've met so many women over the course of my years in archives whose lives. I want people to know about. Like Fredi Washington is somebody I'm writing about. And she was...

**Desmond Peeples (41:54):**

Yes.

**Emily Bernard (41:54):**

Yeah, right? Say no more.

**Desmond Peeples (41:57):**

I read an excerpt of the piece about Fredi Washington in the American Scholar. For me, Fredi Washington's story really resonated with me as a very light skinned black person working in media. Do you mind if I read just a few lines from that?

**Emily Bernard (42:15):**

Of course, yeah.

**Desmond Peeples (42:16):**

Let's see. "It was my mother, born four years after Imitation of Life was released in theaters, who introduced me to the complex and fascinating public reaction to Washington's performance,

particularly among Black people. Washington was ultimately compelled to launch a massive campaign to refute rumors that she was as dissatisfied with her blackness as the character she played. Too white looking to play Black and too Black to snag the leading roles for which she was obviously suited, Washington ultimately retired from the stage and screen to become a Hollywood watchdog with a weekly column devoted to the problem of racial representation in the performing arts." That, I think, describes the story, the kind of person you want to platform so well. I'm just wondering if you could talk about the thread that that essay follows a little bit. You also mentioned that it was your mother that introduced you to this story. Could you elaborate a little bit?

**Emily Bernard (43:20):**

Yes, I will. My mother... I remember her telling me about Fredi Washington... Or telling me about Imitation of Life. She was someone who loved classic films so we watched it together. She told me about the public outrage around the character of Peola, who... Fredi Washington plays Peola, who's a light skinned Black girl who wants to pass for White, is constantly thwarted by her mother, Louise Beavers, who plays the kind of classic iconic kind of mammy role in this film that she did in other films. She learns too late that she's... this moral sin of race passing... and ends up kind of properly chastened, let's say, at the end of the movie.

**Emily Bernard (44:22):**

I was so interested and intrigued in this because one thing my mother was so interested in was how people could not distinguish between Fredi and

Pecola... Excuse me. Peola. Pecola Breedlove is Morrison's character in *Bluest Eye*. My mother was herself flabbergasted and kind of amused that she remembered that. All of the public uproar about Fredi Washington. People really thought, well, this... It was all in the Black newspapers. People felt that she must be this character and she had to kind of defend herself and say literally in article after article, "I am Black and I enjoy being Black. Thanks very much." I thought it was an interesting thing to have to assert. At the same time, she wasn't able to get roles. She wasn't able to really be an artist in a way that could pay the bills. She didn't get roles that were really worthy of her talent because she was light skinned. I mean, she performed with Paul Robeson, I think, in the movie *Body and Soul* and they darkened her skin in order to make the pairing look acceptable to Southern theaters because she was so light.

### **Emily Bernard (45:42):**

I was so intrigued by that. My question that I'm still pursuing... One, I love thinking about her because she was so magnetic on the screen. What do you do if you were truly an actor, but there is no stage for you or the only roles that you're offered are beneath you? So she ends up being kind of a watchdog, a Hollywood watchdog, and she keeps a column and writes about the lack of roles for Black people in theater and Hollywood. And so she had a really important role that she kind of created for herself. She stayed connected to the arts, but she wasn't able to pursue that career.

### **Emily Bernard (46:31):**



So she's exactly the kind of woman I'm interested in. To look at these choices and to think about what it meant for her, but also not just Fredi Washington, but each woman that I'm writing about opens her story. I think about the book as a story first as opposed to the individual lives. So it's not a collection of encyclopedia entries, you know what I mean, but really about the issues that their lives bring up about work and the body, about the experience of having a body that's unintelligible and not being able to live that complexity. For Washington, who I think was not someone who was ever going to get married and look for a husband to support her life, what she did... She made work for herself. She made a career. She carved out a place for herself and I'm really interested.

**Emily Bernard (47:50):**

Similarly, I'm interested in *Imitation of Life* and the story that that film and the movie tells. The film... excuse me... and the book tell similar but very different stories about work and women. Really what it's about. I recently went to see the Lynn Nottage opera in New York, *Intimate Apparel*. It's really a lot of the same issues. About women in work and freedom for a woman and what does it take to be free and what role money plays. That's what the movie really is about in some way. Because the Peola character, she wants to work. She wants to work. When her mother finds her as an adult, she's working. She's not Clare Kendry in *Passing*, wanting to be taken care of by a rich man. She wants to be one of the working girls and, but she can't have the kind of job she wants to have as a Black woman. So the book, I think, enables an investigation into a lot of different kinds of issues.

## **Emily Bernard (48:58):**

I'm also interested in Zora Neale Hurston in the same way. Hurston is maybe the most famous person in the book at this point and I'm not going to rehash the kind of very well known stories of the life of Zora Neale Hurston, although more people should know about her. I'm interested in what it took for Hurston to maintain a career. The same kind of question. Because she, you probably know, encountered a lot of professional difficulties, personal difficulties, in her life. I want to know what happens when you've got a woman who is such a brilliant artist, and the first Black woman Guggenheim Fellow, worked with Franz Boas, was doing all this incredible work... How does she end up penniless, working as a domestic in Florida? Also, the estate of Zora Neale Hurston or the myth of Zora Neale Hurston has... It's almost like it's

two different entities. There's Hurston the ideal, I guess, and Hurston, the person who disappointed us sometimes. Some of her political positions were curious.

### **Emily Bernard (50:20):**

So I'm interested in that question of legacy. How we remember people and why they get remembered. That's really tied to that question of success. Who gets celebrated and why? What are the typical American narratives of success? I'm working with a woman who... I wanted to write a story about an ordinary person too. Someone who was not a film star or anything and a woman actually who I adore. A woman who lives in Vermont and she's 80 years old. We had this conversation, I think, when the pandemic first hit and I was checking with all my elders. I was saying I've never felt more content with my life in

Vermont. Early on. Our numbers were so low and it was just... This is clearly a good place for quarantine. She said, "Do you really feel that way?" I said yeah. She goes, "I don't think I'll ever be content here." That was so interesting that, at 80, she could still feel that way.

### **Emily Bernard (51:18):**

And so I wanted to tell that story and to think about... I mean, for her... I wanted to tell the story of a kind of ordinary person. Paule Marshall did a piece many years ago called Reena. You can find it the collection Reena and Other Stories. She was a fiction writer and it's a piece... It was supposed to be a kind of a journalistic piece about women immigrants from the Barbados. Paule Marshall, I think she was from the Barbados and New York so it was like kind of a sociological study. But she decided to do something of a composite.

Something that kind of stood on the line between fiction and fact. She actually didn't like the piece because she didn't like... At the end of her life, said, "I didn't like that. It didn't like blurring those generic boundaries." But I really liked it. It's always stayed with me.

### **Emily Bernard (52:11):**

So I wanted to tell a story also about a woman who... She lived her life, but... To ask that larger question, whose life is worthy of being remembered, and to kind of push that. After talking to my friend... Really, it's something that's been extraordinary. Her life is her marriage, which has been like 60 years. She married a White dude, she moved up to Vermont, and that was it. I mean, at the beginning of the story, they have a wonderful marriage. You can see it. Even when we've done our Zoom calls, it's clear how much he

supports her, how much he adores her. He's sitting off screen all the time, handing her pictures when she needs them, and I thought this is lovely. It's so wonderful and unique and rare. And so I'm interested in that. And also the experience of sort of being an expatriate in this country. She grew up in St. Louis and now this place. And I've recently decided I'm very interested in Mrs. Cosby as an unfinished woman. If you've seen the new documentary by Kamau Bell...

**Desmond Peeples (53:23):**

No.

**Emily Bernard (53:23):**

It's really good. Oh yeah. We've got to talk about...

**Desmond Peeples (53:26):**

Okay, I'll write that one down.

**Emily Bernard (53:26):**

I really want to talk to you about if you've seen it, but I thought we really have to talk about Camille. The documentary is *We've Got to Talk About Cosby* or *We Have to Talk About Cosby*. I think about Camille and then the thread again, the question of marriage. What does it mean in a woman's life and a Black woman's life? I think about that plastic smile she always wears. I'm interested in that as someone who started out... and she had the... the essays, they kind of connect. But she was a kind of DuBoisian ideal. When you look at her, she was exactly the kind of young woman, child, baby, that would've been on the cover of the *Crisis* magazine. She was this lovely product of the Black bourgeoisie. Cosby was really kind of beneath her in station and her father didn't want the marriage.



And so she married the guy and he became rich. Again, to some people, that's a success story.

**Emily Bernard (54:29):**

I'm interested in what it means for her and what we want from Camille. We piled on Huma Abedin. We piled on Hillary Clinton. For standing by their men. The good wife. But what about Camille? It's been very interesting. A lot of silence around her and I wonder... I'm going into that essay not knowing what I even want from Camille or what to say, but certainly, if we think about a cultural shift, then we have to think about everybody who's complicit and supporting these kinds of men. So I'm hoping to get in some trouble. But I really think we have to talk about Camille. And so...

**Desmond Peeples (55:13):**

Are you securing an interview?

**Emily Bernard (55:16):**

Oh, I'm sure I won't. She doesn't talk to the press at all. They're very defensive. Apparently even with the Kamau Bell documentary. He came out condemning everything. If anything, I just have to make sure legally that we won't be sued for what I'm going to be interested in. But again, again, it's not.... I think the question for that essay is... The larger question is how do you write about somebody who's so utterly unknowable? How do you write about that person? Can she be known? Does she stand for anything in our culture of this moment? And so I want to get into it there and to think more broadly about those issues.

**Desmond Peeples (56:07):**

Do most of these essays or your essays in general have a kind of central guiding question like that?

**Emily Bernard (56:13):**

Yes. Yeah, I want them all to because I think... just to avoid producing a book that's sort of dutiful biographical portraits, but I want them to really do more than that. I want them to... These are lives that ask questions that I find compelling or help introduce ideas that I find really interesting. I want to know. I want to know what it's like. And so as close as you can get to that. I'm writing about Camille possibly and I'm writing about Fredi Washington, who I also can't interview. So I'm interested in that. How we get to know people and can we know someone who doesn't tell the whole story? Can we still write anything interesting about them?

## **Emily Bernard (57:03):**

This book is a lot of... already been a lot of trial and error. Trying to figure out... And a lot of mourning. Very early on, I had to kind of give up the idea.... I mean, there's only so many women I can... I mean, I can't write about every single person. The list keeps changing. I'm happy because I really thought that Audre Lorde would be part of this book and then I realized that she didn't really fit, but then very happily I am going to be writing... I don't know if you read, it was in the Times some months ago, Skip Gates is doing a series of short biographies and I'm going to be doing one on Audre Lorde, which I'm happy about. I had to have a little... Hold my own hand and say, "I'm sorry, Emily, but Audre does not fit into this book." So I get to write about Audre, but after this book is done. I've got a few years of work mapped out between this book and the Audre Lorde book.

I'm interested in just... I'm learning a lot on the journey.

**Desmond Peeples (57:58):**

And you are going to New York on Monday to the archives to research for this Unfinished Women, is that it?

**Emily Bernard (58:07):**

Yes, I am. I'm going to go, yes, snoop around the Schomburg and look at materials. I'm excited because a lot of archives have been able to digitize. It's expensive and time consuming so not every... It takes a long time, but the Schomburg does have... They are admitting visitors so I'm excited to literally sit close to these documents. I'll be reading things in microfilm, but I'm really

looking forward to getting deep in the weeds of this.

**Desmond Peeples (58:39):**

Well, I don't know. I think we've done a great job.

**Emily Bernard (58:42):**

Okay, great. Thank you, Desmond. I've enjoyed this.

**Desmond Peeples (58:44):**

Yeah, me too. Thank you very much, Emily.

**Desmond Peeples (58:50):**

That is our show, folks. You can learn more about Emily Bernard and her work in the show notes at [vermontartscouncil.org/podcast](http://vermontartscouncil.org/podcast). And you'll be glad

you did. Vermont Made is a production of the Vermont Arts Council, the primary provider of funding, advocacy, and info for the arts here in Vermont, which is and has always been Abenaki land. Thank you for listening.