



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Colin Grant.

Patricia Cumper The Amplify Project. Black writers in their own words. I'm Pat Cumper.

Pauline Walker And I'm Pauline Walker. We created the Amplify Project so we could talk to writers for the stage, page, and screen about their lives, work, and artistic practice.

PC We've really enjoyed these conversations. We hope you enjoy listening to them.

PC Colin Grant once described himself as British by birth and Jamaican by will and inclination. He is the author of five books, including three biographies and a memoir. He was shortlisted for the PEN Ackerley Prize in 2013, was a Sunday Times Book of the Year in 2016, a Daily Telegraph Book of the Year and Book of the Week on Radio 4 in 2019. He is an associate fellow for the Centre for Caribbean studies and teaches creative writing for the Arvon Foundation and Spread the Word. He has worked as producer and director of factual and arts programming for the World Service and Radio 4 and written for a range of newspapers and journals, including the Times Literary Supplement, the London Review of Books, the New York Review of Books, Granta, The Spectator, and The Guardian. Colin, welcome to the Amplify Project.

Colin Grant Thank you for having me.

PC We've always been interested in what makes a writer, their sort of formative experiences. So could you tell us a little bit about your childhood and the relationships to words and stories that you had at that time?

CG I grew up in a place called Luton, about 25 miles north of London, with Jamaican parents. Both my parents came to Britain in 1959, and they both, at different times, worked at Vauxhall Motors. And there weren't many books in the house other than the Bible. But we read the Bible regularly, not just on a Sunday, and were fuelled in our imagination by the Old Testament more than the New Testament, I would say. We do have one member of our family, Viv, Uncle Viv, who was one of

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those adults when I was child who would kneel down and talk to you as a child, as if you were an adult yourself. And Uncle Viv was unusual in our family in that he'd published and written many, many poems. So there was this great allure, great attraction to him because of this strange thing that he did. And I think it was he who first fed my interest in writing. I was given to understand at an early age that I would be a medical student and a doctor. At the age of 10 my father sat me down and said, "You will be a doctor." And so all of my education from 10 up until about 18 was geared towards that, so there was not much room for literature as most reading books that were to do with maths, physics, and other sciences. And it was only when I got to university, even though I was at medical school, that I discovered this great world of literature out there mostly through being introduced to African-American writers like James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. So I was a late starter, but once I started, I never looked back. I was enthralled by all the writing that I did as a 19-year-old, and started to write plays when I was in medical school, primarily because when you're at medical school back in the day, which is in the early 1980s - in my year, there were a hundred students. There were 90 blokes and 10 women, and the competition to get a girlfriend was fierce. You had to have unique selling point. Mostly the rigger buggers were the ones who seemed to be the most attractive to women, and I determined that my unique selling point was to become a writer. So I wrote a play, hoping to attract some attention that way. I auditioned several young attractive women for the first play. But, unfortunately, none of them were very good, so we didn't get very far with that. But, at that point, I became a fully-fledged writer who was determined to write plays thereafter.

PW Just taking you back a little bit to your education. In your memoir, *Bageye at the Wheel*, your mother was determined to get you and your brother into private school. Was that an advantage to you then?

CG Yes, because when I was 10, both my parents, but my mum especially, worked out that I had good brains, and they were feeding me all the fish that they could. But it wasn't going to work because I was destined to go to the failing state school. It was called Rotherham. And so my mother persuaded my father that they would have to scrimp and save to send me to a private school. So I went through a private school in St Albans, which is about 50 miles south of Luton. So Luton is a kind of concrete conurbation. St Albans is rather lovely, leafy commuter town. And I went to a school run by North American monks. It was called St Columba's College, and they were brothers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. And my brother and I - he also went there - Steven is older than me. My brother and I were the only black kids in the school. And I think we benefited from that in that the monks from America - some of them from the southern states of America - I think were rather appalled and embarrassed about the civil rights movement, about the part that some of their white compatriots had played in keeping black people down, sometimes abusing, sometimes even killing and maiming black people. And I think we offered a chance for these American monks to make amends for that past, so they were very kind and considerate towards us, so much so that when the time came to pay the fees, sometimes my mother - because after a few years my father was shown the door, sometimes my mother was either late or couldn't pay the fees. And when the bursar would send a letter with me back home asking for my mum to pay the fees, she would write back immediately, saying to the bursar, "Well, what would Jesus do?" And they decided that they would

have to stick with us. So we managed to get very good education for very little money. Although I did manage to, well, work out a way of paying it back once I became an adult.

PC Yeah, that's brilliant. I mean that's an eclectic childhood.

CG Yes, yes. I mean I should also explain that prior to my mother showing my father the door, my father had been reluctantly on board with the notion of sending me to this private school. But as he would say, and as his - I think I mentioned *Bageye at the Wheel*, the memoir I wrote - as he would say, there was only one wage coming in to feed seven hungry children. So it would be difficult for such a man with only one wage coming in from Vauxhall Motors, where he worked on the production line, to send a child - not just one child, but more than one, two, three children to private schools, which he did. And the way that he did it, and I always mention this very clearly, is that my education, my private school education in the beginning was funded by marijuana. And by that I mean my father was a small-time ganja dealer in Luton. He realised that a lot of his Caribbean friends came to Luton with their love of ganja intact, and so he was providing a social service for them. He didn't think of it as being a criminal activity, and in fact I was his bag man. So we would stash the ganja in my briefcase, this little kind of sachets of ganja, and we would drive around Luton. I would never be allowed into their houses, but we'd drive around and he'd park there outside the house of the recipient of the ganja, and away we went. So we did that for a couple years until - spoiler alert, crime doesn't pay - until the police arrived one Sunday afternoon. Big white van of police arrived looking for some ganja. They dug up the garden back and front. They rifled through the house. They eventually found a big stash and he was taken to the police cells. Luckily for him, he didn't get sent to jail because he was given a chance of either pay this huge fine or go to jail. But I think his Caribbean friends recognised that he'd been taking a chance on their behalf, so they all passed the hat around and Bageye was spared prison.

PC That's a wonderful story.

PW I like the way you say it was a social thing that he was doing.

CG Yeah, it was a social exercise. He was providing a service for his rather relaxed Caribbean friends who wanted to remain in that relaxed state that ganja can sometimes put you in.

PC Yeah, and I think that was probably in the day well before skunk or anything else, where it really just chilled you out, didn't it?

CG Yeah (overlapping conversation) - and I suppose that having come from the Caribbean, where, as you know, Pat - maybe, Pauline, you'll know as well - that people would have marijuana in their tea.

You know, we'd have a herbal mix-up, or you have - you might even use it in your cooking. So it didn't have the same kind of stigma in Jamaica, as far as I understand anyway, that it obviously did in Britain.

PC Yes, my son had ganja when he was a very small child, and I used to wonder why when a lovely lady was looking after him he was always so calm. And it wasn't for many months until I realised that she was boiling a little ganja tea just to ease him chest. And we had to have a little conversation about, you know - I'm sure its medicinal, but perhaps not. So after -

CG Yeah, I agree. And in fact for one of the books I wrote, "I & I: The Natural Mystics", I looked into the fact that in Jamaica, every 10 or so years there would be a survey conducted about the merits of taking ganja. And what was clear was that people presumed that it made them more productive than they actually were. So it gave you the appearance of being productive rather than actually of being productive, which maybe is why people still take it. Who knows?

PC I mean the history of it as I understood it was that it came from India with the Indian immigrant and that actually it was taken because it suppressed appetite. That's not what we found. But the idea was that you had it while you were working in the field so that you'd eat a big breakfast and then you wouldn't come back till late evening, and you would smoke during the day. So -

CG Yeah.

PC That was the myth as I learnt it in Jamaica.

CG Yeah, well, maybe there's some truth behind that. Maybe because it's hard working in a field all day, isn't it? So you either have something to alleviate that suffering or somehow lessen the pain of it in some way, lessen the idea of its unending longevity.

PC Yes. But I'm going to move on a little bit now. That was fascinating.

CG Okay.

PC But I feel as though I'm almost jumping too far forward. And I know you were a radio producer.

CG Right.

PC Both arts and factual programming. You occasionally got me to be on radio now and then, for which I'm very grateful. But then we're talking about you as a writer now. When did you decide to become a full time writer? When did that begin?

CG Well, I struggled as many writers do to find someone who believed in me as a writer. So initially - I was recently successful in my own terms because I started writing as a medical student, writing plays that were put on in pub theatres mostly. And on a couple of occasions, we would take the plays up to the Edinburgh Festival. And I was never really given to be a medical student. Most of my time at medical school was trying to get out of medical school. And I would go AWOL quite a few times. I should have left after four weeks. I spent more than four years at medical school. And then I just went AWOL permanently. So I didn't return. And in the interim, between, say, 1986 and 1989, I was just doing odd jobs, occasionally writing plays, but realised that, actually, there wasn't much money to be made from playwriting back then. And it's very fortunate that I joined the BBC as a trainee, 1990, 1991. And like many people, I sent off short stories for many, many years. I remember one year I sent them off to an agent whom I admired because he'd gone independent. He'd left London and gone up to Scotland to form his own agency. And I remember sending some short stories to him, one of which was a story called "Lino", which subsequently appeared in the book I wrote called, *Bageye at the Wheel*. But I sent the short story to him and, very quickly, he wrote back to say that he was not interested in ethnic writing. And I was a bit alarmed by that because I didn't know that I was writing ethnic writing. I thought I was just writing stories. So he rejected me. Unfortunately for him, he fell down the steps and died three months later. I think there's no correlation between the two. I think my big break came when I met a writer called Misha Glenny, who is a well-known writer, and he introduced me to his agent, a man called Kevin Conroy Scott. And it was through Kevin that I then wrote an essay on this man called Marcus Garvey for a competition. I think it was a Guardian competition. I didn't win the competition - it's a 2000-word essay - but Kevin was entranced by the essay, and we then wrote up a proposal, a 70-page proposal. I was very fortunate in coming across a publisher called Ellah Allfrey, who worked at Jonathan Cape. And in 2006, she took a chance on me. Twelve other publishers had rejected the proposal, arguing that though it was a great proposal, well-written and dramatic story, there were no commercial prospects. In other words, who's going to read a book on Garvey? But Ellah Allfrey took a chance and bought - commissioned the book that became *Negro with a Hat*. And I would say that it was only at that point in 2006 that I really became a writer.

PC The next question now, and this is one that we ask all the writers that we speak to because we're - I'm really interested in the answer. When are you a black writer? Is that a description that you accept or reject? How do you feel around that?

CG I once made a documentary for BBC World Service radio on the Harlem Renaissance. And this is the great period of creativity, artistic creativity, in Harlem in New York in the 1920s. And the same question arose then. A hundred years ago, people like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen would

say that they were writers and that they weren't going to be governed by what was expected of them as black writers, as black artists. I think there's a famous essay called "The Negro and the Racial Mountain", where Langston Hughes talks about that very thing. And I would - I remember when I started writing plays, even addressing that question back in the late 1980s, and I would say, "I'm a writer". "I'm a writer", full stop, who happens to be black. And my sensibility is one that has been informed by my blackness and by the culture in which I find myself. But, ultimately, I'm a writer. And I think that's very important because I think the most important ingredient to being a writer is to be empathetic, to have empathy. And without empathy you can't do anything. And also, I'm living in a world where I'm not living in a cocoon and I don't believe in silos of separation. I interact with all sorts of people. Jewish, Irish, Italians, Indians, Pakistan, Serbian. And I want to be able to write about all these people as well and not just write about the Black people whom I'm supposed to write about.

PC Yeah, it's - we get some really interesting answers for that one because I think people are intensely proud of their heritage, but they don't wish to be caged by it.

CG Yeah, absolutely. I mean I think when I started writing, I was also aware of the fact that the work - to my mind, many black writers available for me to read. And I know, when I grow up in Luton in the '70s, amongst these wonderful West Indian young people. In 1971, we still didn't have a TV in Luton. But our TV were the people around my parents, these Caribbean people. They were so dramatic and they had these wonderful nicknames. Shine was bald. Pumpkin, he had a pumpkin-shaped head. Tiny Boots was very fussy about his footwear. Clock had one arm longer than the other. And my all-time favourite, Summer Wear, always wore light summer suits no matter the weather. And when I asked my mother whatever became of Summer Wear, she said, "Well, within a few months, he caught a cold and died." But I knew that these people were not represented in literature. Later I found some of them in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. And I found other writers like Lamming. But in my initial, early entry into the world of reading and writing, I couldn't come across them. So I was aware that unless there were more George Lamming's, more Sam Selvon's, dare I say, V.S. Naipaul's, Miss Louise Bennett's - unless there were more of them, then these words wouldn't be written. So I recognise that I had a rich source, a rich supply of material in which to explore and demonstrate to the reading public no matter what colour they were. So I was doing everybody a favour by writing about Caribbean people, I felt.

PW That's fantastic, and it really comes through in your memoir, *Bageye at the Wheel*. Can we talk about that a bit because I wanted to know why you wanted to write it, and how long did it take you to write, and... You know, a memoir's a very personal account, but you're also telling the world about your life. So what kind of decisions did you make about what to include and what to leave out?

CG Well, the clue to Bageye at the wheel is in the title. *Bageye at the Wheel*. So Bageye was my father's nickname. Clinton George Grant. His nickname was Bageye because he had permanent bags under his eyes. He had them from the age of 16, and a galley boy on a ship somewhere gave

him that name. In fact it was a condition called subcutaneous edema. But the name stuck. And as with all these Caribbean people that I came across when I was a youth, you had to live up to your name. And I recognise, when I was growing up in Luton, I was growing up in a very unusual circumstances because the estate, the council estate where we lived was really an Irish estate. Most of the other families that we met were Irish and there were only a small number of Caribbean people. And I live in a house terrorised by this man, Bageye. He was a terrorist. He was tyrannical. He had this extraordinarily titanic temper. A very small man, five-foot-four or so, but he was giant and he ruled the house with an iron rod and belt. And I knew that we were living an unusual house. But also I recognised that my mother was this extraordinary, robust, fiery, indomitable spirit who was a good answer to Bageye, and also was this extraordinary storyteller. So I grew up with my mother's stories and my mother's language. And a lot of the writing that I've done subsequently is informed by that. So when I came to think about the seminal forming of myself as a young person, I thought of the pivotal moment at the age of 10 when I was sat down by my father and told I was going to be a doctor, at 10. So that year was a pivotal moment in my life. And so I thought, okay, I'll write about that particular year. So in fact it's just nine months. And in a sense, I think of *Bageye at the Wheel* as a birth story. So the seed is sown at the beginning of the book that I have good brains and I must be sent to a private school, but there's no money to send me to a private school. How are we going to get the money? And then nine months later, that seed is realised in a birth. Am I born into being a private school boy or not? So that's the dilemma. But the added dilemma is in the title *Bageye at the Wheel* because it's a gamble to take a chance on my education. When my father really wants to gamble at the poker table - my father was a gambler. Every Friday he would receive his wages from Vauxhall Motors. And after a little while of ironing his shirt and ironing his suit, he would head down to Mrs. Knight's all-weekend poker game. And my father, as my mother would say, was exploited because he'd be the first to get there and he'd stoke the fire, he'd prepare the rum and cokes, and he'd be the one to lose the most money. And she would say again and again about my father, "If you want jackass for a ride, here comes Bageye."

PC Oh my goodness. Yeah, she had his measure, in other words.

CG She had his measure and she recognised that there needed to be some intervention. So it was my job and my sister's job - Selma - on a Saturday afternoon to go Mrs. Knight's, to stand at the poker table and embarrass our father into giving us some house money. Because if we didn't do that, come Sunday morning, he would emerge from Mrs. Knight's blinking into the sunlight, penniless. So I wanted to write about this jeopardy, about this tension between gambling on my education as opposed to gambling at the poker table. But also the big gamble was for my father to accrue enough money to own a car, to be behind the wheel, to be *Bageye at the Wheel*. That was his big ambition. Because how embarrassing must it be to work all the overtime you can at Vauxhall Motors and not even own a car. So that's the tension in the book. And the book, in a way, is a series of short stories which illuminate the tension in the family, but also illuminate the unusual position that we find ourselves in on this council estate. Because, as I say, it's an estate primarily built for Irish people, Irish families. There are only maybe half a dozen Caribbean families scattered across the estates. There's probably several hundred families, almost a thousand families on the estate. Until one day the council, in their wisdom, decided to move another Caribbean family right next door. The Barkers from Saint Vincent. And I never forget them moving in because my father drew

us to the window, pulled back the curtain, looked at this Caribbean family moving in, and said to us, "Imagine this. I travel 4,000 miles to get away from these people and who do they put next door?"

PC Sorry, that's hilarious.

CG Now we thought it was funny, but also I think there's some element that he was tongue-in-cheek saying that. But not fully tongue-in-cheek because, in a way, in Jamaica - as you will both know, Jamaica is a pigmentocracy. And in Jamaica, my father has dark skin, found himself at the bottom of the pyramid. And in Jamaica, culturally and historically, the lighter skin you had, the better things became for you. As you married out of your colour, you married out of your class and you improved your lot. And I think when Bageye came to England, he thought he had a blank canvass, especially in place like Luton, where nobody understood that there was a pigmentocracy. Caribbean people were just black. All of you were just black. And so I think he could start again. But that notion of starting again was compromised by having too many black people around. So that was the kind of territory that I was investigating, interrogating in *Bageye at the Wheel*. But also I wanted to memorialise this rather wonderful time because sometimes I think we get trapped into writing miserable stories, stories where we see ourselves as the victims. And we never saw ourselves as victims. We saw ourselves as being rather better than the white people around us, who boiled their underpants in the same pot that they boiled their potatoes and were uncouth, so we felt sorry for them. But also there was a lot of humour. There was a lot of chutzpah. There was a lot of strategies which I found amusing, and I wanted to introduce them in to complicate the negative stories that are often told about Caribbean people when I was growing up in Luton and England in the 1970s and '80s. I'll give you one example, one classic example. So eventually Bageye does get a car and we're driving around Luton, and we have in the car things that ought not to be there, including my little briefcase full of ganja and knock-off booze from Lakenheath, the American air force base that was nearby. And quite often we would be stopped by the equivalent of PC Blogs. And I'll never forget my father's approach because I was petrified. My father had a big smile on his face. He would either wind down the window or step out and immediately he would promote PC Blogs. So the PC Blogs became "Detective Inspector, Sir", "Chief Constable, Sir". And this newly promoted Chief Constable would wave us on merrily, laughing his head off. And so that was a very interesting strategy for me. But I tell you one interesting aside, years later, spool forward now 20 years later, I'm working in the BBC and I'm working on a night shift, a shift that reports what the newspapers all say the next morning. And I'm now living in Wapping. I have a very smart car, much better than the car my father ever drove. I have a very nice Ford Capri, peppermint-coloured Ford Capri with a chocolate-coloured roof. And oh my goodness indeed. And at four o'clock in the morning, I would be able to get into my car, empty streets, and drive home. I'd go down toward the embankment on my way to home, but I would inevitably be stopped by the police. It happened once a month or so. So much so that I thought, you know what? I will go the other way. I will circumvent the police. I would drive north up to Holborn over to Clerkenwell, over the Shoreditch and down to Wapping where I lived. Until one day I thought, you know what? One morning, at four o'clock, I thought, I'm just going to risk it. I'm going to go the quickest way home. Got into my car, drove down to the embankment, bang. Spot by two policemen. One of them was black. And they always get the black policeman to do all the bad stuff. So they stopped me and I'm getting a bit shirty and I say, "Well, what is it now, officer?" And the police says, "Well, you know, there are cobwebs on your bumper." And I say,

“You’re stopping me because there are cobwebs on my bumper?” And suddenly I hear a voice in my head. It’s the voice of my father. What would he say? And I say, “Well, Detective Inspector,” and this black policeman says, “Who are you calling Detective Inspector, mate?” And I say, “Who are you calling mate, mate?” And what I have realised up until that point is that when my father said “Detective Inspector”, he said it with a smile. He’s a working-class Caribbean man, no threat. When I say it, I sound sarcastic, and I’m a middle-class twat, so the lesson has not been learned in a way that has been of any use to me. Yeah. And I wanted to explore in *Bageye at the Wheel* how cleverly these people navigated the hostile environment in which they found themselves.

PC Now I’m going to ask you to look at it from the other side now.

CG Yeah.

PC Because what’s the responsibility of the person, the memoirist, to the reader? Whenever we write and perform or whatever, we’re trying to create a conversation with other people. What conversation were you creating with it?

CG I think I was having a conversation when I wrote *Bageye at the Wheel* with my own children. I recognised that they loved bedtime stories. And before V.S. Naipaul turned sour, I would read them the more amusing V.S. Naipaul stories. They had a particular fondness for V.S. Naipaul’s *Miguel Street*. And when I began to compose *Bageye at the Wheel*, I had in mind “Miguel Street”. I had in mind a series of short stories told from the point of view of a 10-year-old boy, like the protagonist of *Miguel Street*, conjuring a world that was in danger of disappearing. And so I recognised that my parents were possibly the last of the so-called West Indians and it was my job to make sure that their stories were memorialised. So I was telling the story for my children, but also I was telling the story for posterity and for my parents’ generation. Like the advertising executive Don in *Mad Men*, I didn’t want just a bit of the cake. I wanted the whole cake. So I think I was writing for everyone. And I thought that I was telling the most enthralling story that would actually excite everyone. And even till today, I still get a kick out of reading *Bageye at the Wheel*. It’s my fondest book. It’s the book I have the most fond memories about.

PW I want to give you my impressions of the book because at times I found it quite a tough read and it reminds me of my own childhood and the challenges of growing up in a family that was struggling to survive on a low income, feeding, clothing, repairs and such. On the back of the book, your father is described as feckless.

CG Hm.

PW The excerpt that we've chosen really shows for me I think the fecklessness and it's both terrifying and darkly comic, and you have mentioned it before, which is *Bageye at the Wheel*. And it's actually the extract from when he starts - he's got a new car and he takes out the family for a drive.

CG Ah, yes.

Reading from *Bageye at the Wheel*.

PW How did that feel for you as a child crammed into the back with your brothers and sisters?

CG Well, it was always exciting to get into a car, but there was not great attention to health and safety. But we weren't aware that - there wasn't any need for things like seatbelts - anyway, we're just so delighted to be in a car. So it was exciting because we didn't own a car up until that point and we were going on a maiden drive. But there was always jeopardy whenever my father did anything. Things never seemed to go to plan. So it wasn't really a surprise when the car broke down. And like a lot of the people that he seemed to associate himself with, it was never his fault. It was always some devil out there who'd done something, and in this case, who put sugar in the engine. I mean I very much doubt whether anyone would go to the extent of putting sugar in the engine. I mean how would they do it anyway? And why would they have a grievance against him that they would do such a thing? But he was determined - I mean maybe he was superstitious and maybe he did have some enemies out there. But it was a traumatic experience, ultimately. But I'm laughing because it was traumatic but it's funny with hindsight. Even though it would've been a bit uncomfortable, it was drama, and you have to have drama in life. And with *Bageye*, you got a lot of drama. So I think that's what I was interested in writing also. I mean I know the blurb on the back of the book suggests there's a lot of hardship and difficulties in the book. But actually you just take things on the chin and you move on, don't you? You pull the collar of your coat up and you move on. And you don't necessarily interrogate the psychological damage that has been done to you because you know no other. And I always want to think that I will write something that I therefore afterwards want to read. And I didn't want to read a miserable book. And I always said that to my students whom I teach, write something that you can finally, fundamentally read to yourself once it's written. There's no point writing something that you feel horrified by what you've written in the end.

PC And also I think pay tribute to the kind of resilience and creativity of the responses of people like that. And I could not imagine washing up in a country, you know, with a suitcase and prayer.

CG Yeah.

PC And, you know, creating a life out of it. But the odd thing is my point of identification is that child standing on the side of the road and knowing people are passing and thinking, "Hm, you see them? They don't afford. They couldn't have a car and they shouldn't -" You know, internalising an internally imaginary disapproval, but that's part of a little bit of the trauma of it, is what you think of the people who are thinking about you.

CG Yeah. That was - I think that was more a case of my father. I mean I was aware I think that the only people whose approval I sought were my parents and possibly the boxing instructor, Billy Brooks. And Billy Brooks to me was like a priest. And in a way, partly because I was brought up a Catholic, I recognise that we're all here to sin until our sins can be absolved. And one of the great feelings I had as a Catholic, because I went - I was an altar boy for seven years and I actually enjoyed going to confession on Saturday morning. One of the great joys of confession is that you could be absolved of your sin. You do your sins during the week - sometimes you have to make them up because you haven't done enough - and you present them to the priest and he says, "Go. Have a few Hail Marys and away you go." And you can go your merry way and sin again until next Saturday. And so although I may have been self-conscious as children are, I didn't really think that it was anybody's business whether we had beaten up old mini that would break down or a Rolls-Royce, in all honesty.

PW I wanted to know what did your parents think of the book when it was published? And did you let them read it before?

CG When the book was nearing publication, my publisher had a sudden epiphany. "Is Bageye still alive?" And I said, "Yeah, he's still alive." And he said, "Oh, well, in that case, we need Bageye to sign off on the book before it's published." Because, as you all know, Jamaican people are the most litigious people on the planet. I hadn't see Bageye for 30 years. So when I was about 13, my mother showed Bageye the door for the very last time and we all shouted "Hurrah, we don't want to spend any more time with this monster," who has his good sides, as Pat alludes, and has to live in this hostile world and draw upon one of his skills over his own resources. But he was a terror to live with, so I was pleased to see the back of him and didn't really search for him in the intervening years. But 30 years later, I had to go and search for him. I should point that my mother was fully supportive of the book and was delighted by the first book I wrote, *Negro with a Hat*, and held in her hands and said, "This is history. Our family's making history, not just writing his -" That our family's making history. And, equally, she was delighted by my tone in *Bageye at the Wheel*, and I showed her the chapters that I was writing then, so she was fully on board, as were my siblings. I showed them as I was writing what I was writing about them. I changed their names because they wanted their names changed, but I wouldn't change Bageye's name. Anyway, I had to go and search for this man, Bageye, and it was very easy to find him. I just rang the local West Indian pub. It's called The Chequers in Luton. And I said to the landlady, to the pub landlady, "Is Clinton George Grant there?" And she said, no, doesn't know anybody by that name. She said, "What them look like?" After I said is, "Well, he's got these permanent bags under -" "Oh, Bageye!" So, yeah, "Bageye! Bageye! Yeah, yeah, yeah. He's here now. Want me to put him on?" I put the phone down. I was so scared to speak to him after 30 years. But I rang back the next day. And in the interim, she had must've told

him and he'd given her his address, and so I got his address and went to see him. And it was quite a difficult meeting. I gave him eventually a copy of the book. It was a manu - in manuscript format, said it's going to be coming out in six months' time or so. He was a poker player, didn't say much. Halfway through lunch and a few drinks, he stood up and announced to the whole pub, "My son has written a book about me." So never underestimate the power of vanity. So he was delighted about the idea that, A, his picture's on the front cover. B, it's called *Bageye at the Wheel*. It's a book about him in his estimation. The problem was that he never read the manuscript until the book came out. He gave approval. But when the book came out, within the first week, I was invited to have an interview with the Luton News, and the headline was "the book that may heal a 32-year-old rift". And they interviewed me about what it's like to be reunited with this man, Bageye. And it was only then that he read the book and then he found things that he didn't like. And I rang him up to say, "Have you read the article?" And he's answered - he was on the street, on his mobile phone, and he said, "No, no. I'm on my way to see my solicitor. How dare you write those things about me?" So I said, "Hold on, mate. Hold on, hold on." And I said, "I'm coming to see you." I got into my car with my mum, actually who lives in Brighton near me, and my sister, who was a lawyer. And we drove that evening to Luton. I insisted that my mum stay in the car because I didn't want there to be any blood on the floor. So I went in and spoke to Bageye with my sister. And my sister is very calm and very stoical and very forthright. And Bageye had a kind of consigliere with him, this Caribbean guy who didn't say hardly anything, was quite a sinister-looking guy. And I think he be whispered to Bageye, "The boy's skank you, you know. Where is your cut?" I think in his mind it's the money. And I think for many people who don't write books, they think you're all J.K. Rowling and there's loads of money to be made. And there was not a load of money to be made. And when my father started to go on about how dare I bring his name into disrepute and talk about him in such - in a non-attractive manner, my sister perked up and she just listed all of the violent things my father had done, especially to my mother, which I did not include in the book. And my sister said to Bageye, "By all means, take Colin to court. Sue him. The judge will ask, 'Well, is anything that Colin saying true or not?' And you, Bageye, will say 'No, no, it's all a pack of lies,' but all of Colin's siblings and his mother will say, 'Not only is it true, it's diluted. You've made this monster into a human being.'" And at that point, Bageye, being the poker player that he is, backed out of the conversation, physically took a few steps back and said, "Oh, I wouldn't want to do anything to damage the book." And so the book was published.

PC That's a wonderful story, Colin. That is amazing.

CG Thank you.

PW We'd like now to turn to talk about *Homecoming: Voices of the Windrush Generation*. And it's a collection of interviews from people who emigrated from the West Indies to Britain between the 1940s and 1960s. And for me, again, with this book, like *Bageye at the Wheel*, so many emotions resonated when I read it because my parents came from Jamaica during that time as well. And I remember my mum telling us stories about why she came. And so it was a real pleasure and joy to read. So I wanted to know why did you write *Homecoming*? And how did you find the elders to interview? And were they reluctant or willing to talk?

CG When I wrote *Bageye at the Wheel* in 2012, I so enjoyed it. I didn't want to finish it. And when I thought about those people who were included in *Bageye at the Wheel*, it's not just about my parents. It's all these Caribbean people who surrounded in the '70s in Luton. I thought to myself, whatever became of them? I couldn't find them in literature. I thought, well, isn't it remarkable that there are all these wonderful stories that are in danger of being lost? And I thought, what better way to tell their story than to find them themselves and talk to them themselves? So I thought of this idea of an oral history of Caribbean migration to Britain to the publisher, the same publisher as *Bageye at the Wheel*, and we called it *Homecoming* because for many of the people of that generation, the so-called Windrush Generation, and I'll know - and I'm sure that you agree that that's a bit kind of a misnomer. There were ships that came before them, the Windrush, like the *Almanzora* and the *Ormonde* and many other ships. But I recognised that that generation came between, say, the late 1940s and '62, when the British government changed the rules, changed the legislation to more or less stop Caribbean people from arriving. I recognise that their stories were dying out, and if we wanted those stories to be told, I'd better find them damn quick. So I went on the road. Initially, I just started by word of mouth. I just started asking my mother and some of my uncles and aunts to give me their friends, and my uncle's in the book. I went to lots of Black churches, Pentacostal churches in Britain. I decided to fan out to cover the whole of the country because there's this tendency to just resort to this metropolitan bias. Everybody's in London. It was intriguing for me to discover where people ended up. So if you're from St Kitts and Nevis, you end up in Leeds. If you're from Saint Vincent, you end up in High Wickham. If from Barbados, you're in Reading. If you're from Jamaica, Sutherland and Brixton or some place like Luton. If you're from Trinidad, Northampton's the place for you. So I find that and I went with my trusted microphone to interview these people. The trick was, though, that they're now all in their 80s and 90s. And as both you, Pauline and Pat, all know, there's a phrase that you will hear up and down the country in any Caribbean or West Indian household, "We don't like people chatting my business."

PW That's so true.

CG So you don't want to share your stories because you fear what may be done with them. So that was a big hurdle to jump over. And my approach was to get into the house in the first instance, and then to disabuse them of the notion that I constituted a threat. And the way that I did that was to pretend to be more stupid than I am, to have this sort of faux bumbling, idiotic person come into their house whom they would feel sorry for. That was one thing. And although I can't speak the speak - yeah, I've had my Caribbean accent educated out of me, unfortunately - I do know the words. I do know the language, so I'm dropping some phrases and I would, you know - I put "k" before "s" in "aks". And I recognise also that the danger was not necessarily with these elderly Caribbean people in their 80s and 90s. The danger was with their adult children, who are all in their 40s and 50s, sometimes even older now, who have more cynical attitude towards writers and journalists, sometimes quite rightly so because some terrible things have been done in the name of so-called journalism. So I had to disabuse them of the fact that I was a journalist. I often came laden with gifts and copies of my other books. And I think I persuaded them that theirs were wonderful stories, that it would be shame for them to be buried in the soil with them. I led them to believe that I was enthralled and wanted to hear their stories. And what was interesting was two things. A -

and I'm sure this is true for many people - the children, adult children, thought they knew the stories. They didn't. They stopped listening. And I'm sure you've come across it yourself. You think you've heard the stories again and again and it's - and even before old granny gets to the punchline, you've had enough. But what was kind of clear when I sat down for two or three hours is that the people listening to the stories hadn't heard them in the details that they were being told now. But, equally, the people telling the stories hadn't had the opportunity or hadn't wanted to tell them in the detail in which they were telling them now. The other useful component to the compilation of *Homecoming* was that more women were still alive to tell their stories, and the women were more generous with their anecdotes. They were more prepared to interrogate the interior of their lives and they were prepared to feed you. So when I went to interview some of these old blokes, I'd be talking and talking, we'd be talking for two or three hours, not a crumb would pass my lips or a sip of water. But the very first thing that happened when I went into a house where I was interviewing an elderly West Indian woman was that they fed me first with ackee and saltfish or yams and cassava until my belly was full. And, actually, there's something about food, about it being a kind of sacrament and a kind of way that allows you to relax and to maybe travel back into the past, to travel back through food to your memories. So I enjoyed the opportunities to eat with people because I found that it loosened them as well. So I must've conducted 70 or 80 interviews and I supplemented the interviews with other archival material from people who'd already done interviews themselves, people like Michael McMillan, the writer and artist who put together this amazing installation called "The West Indian Front Room". He had done several interviews himself. He lent them to me. The BBC has interviews. The British Library had interviews and other smaller local history archives, I was able to tap into. And, eventually, I think I was able to paint a far richer story of Caribbean life than you might find from just a single point of view. Because that was a thing that amazed me. I'm sure you've all heard of the stories, for instance, of the difficulty of finding accommodation that these people found in the '50s and '60s, the notion that there were these signs, little cards in windows of shops and people's houses saying, "No dogs. No Irish. No Blacks." Almost becomes apocryphal. But when you sit down and you listen to people again and again, you realise that this is kind of a universal story. And this one woman I spoke to, Waveney Bushell from British Guiana, who talked about the fact that when she would try to get accommodation, she would see these signs everywhere and she would ring or write to the prospective landlord in advance just to get out of the way the fact that she was black, just that they wouldn't waste each other's time. And Waveney tells me that till today, 50 or 60 years later, she can't walk down the path, climb the steps, and knock on the door if she suspects that door will be opened by white person. So the trauma is deep. It's buried into their bodies. And that was one of the most heart-rending notions that I came across. But, actually, these individual experiences were almost universal. Everybody had them. And I think that what you're doing and what I did in the book was to amplify those stories.

PW So we're going to hear and account from one of the contributors to *Homecoming*. I chose her story because she was born in St. Catherine's, like my mum, and she mentions Linstead Market, and that's where my maternal grandfather used to sell meat. And when I'd finished reading her excerpt, I wondered, you know, have they ever met or passed each other in the market, not knowing that they were both going to end up in England?

Reading from *Homecoming*.

PC There's so much in *Homecoming* that completely resonates. Pauline has a very personal connection to it. For me, coming here, literally with £5,000 and three suitcases and trying to make a life, it's the change of status, and you see it in so many of the stories, that actually you had a really solid status when you were in the Caribbean. And when you come here, you're immediately working class. You're immediately loaded with all the prejudices that everybody has. And you have to almost make huge adjustments within yourself to be able to understand your position within the society. What you were in the Caribbean is completely nullified and you almost start from scratch when you get here.

CG Agree, I agree. And that's very true of Linette, who became I think the first black female bus driver in London, and she's very proud of that fact. And she pulled herself up as so many people did. She came here to better herself, and that was true of so many Caribbean people. And I loved all the references to the past, to her past life in Jamaica, also because when I grew up, I grew up with my mother singing Louise Bennett's "carry mi go Linstead Market not a quattie gwan sell". And I can't sing, as you hear, but I was just so delighted to be able to hear those stories and hear those references again. But also I was just delighted to hear how people saw themselves, not as victims, but as successes because they had weathered all these terrible privations. And as we all know, the hostile environment didn't start in 2012 with Theresa May. It was there right from the very beginning. It was there from the '40s and '50s, and people like Linette had to weather that hostile environment, had to weather those signs saying no colours need bother apply for that particular job.

PC Why we were underestimated I think coming from the Caribbean is because we'd already put together a set of skills. So we didn't come here blank. We were seen as, you know, tabula rasa by the people coming in, but we actually came with skills. And that's what I think I really enjoy about what comes out of *Homecoming*. But I'm going to ask you this, what relation did the writing of *homecoming* have to the Windrush scandal? Did - you'd started before I think. Did that change anything when the Windrush scandal broke?

CG Yes, I got the commission for *Homecoming* in... I think it must've been 2017, before the Windrush scandal broke. And I think the Windrush scandal galvanised me to ensure that I found people who were trapped in the Caribbean, who'd gone back, understanding themselves to be British, who'd lived here for 40, 50 years, and gone back to the Caribbean for a funeral or something, subsequently found that there were irregularities with their passports and couldn't return to the UK. So I included in *Homecoming*, in that final chapter, about where you want to rest eventually. I included some of those people who were wrongly classified as illegal immigrants and sent so-called back home. So I was incensed, as many people were, by that scandal, by the great transgression, by the great sense of disgrace. Because one of the things you do when you leave the Caribbean in the '40s and the '50s is that you leave with this idea that you are going to better yourself. You're going to make a better life for yourself. You are going to provide for a remittance culture, be sending money back home. And when you do eventually work all those decades and return to retire in a place like Jamaica, you're supposed to come back wealthy. And they come back poor, broken, in handcuffs sometimes, is the most disgraceful act that could ever have been meted out towards these pioneering Caribbean people. So I was buoyed in my sense of outrage by the end of the book.

That fuelled the end of the book. But when I went on the road to promote the book, I was on the road with a writer called Amelia Gentleman from The Guardian who had actually broken the story with Patrick Vernon and others about the scandal. And Amelia Gentleman wrote a book called *The Windrush Betrayal*. And we became a kind of double act. We'd go up and down the country talking about Caribbean people in this country. And what was clear was that some of the people, and dare I say, especially the white people, were more interested in this idea of betrayal and the idea of these poor Caribbean victims. And you know what, I said, "Uh-uh. That's not the story. That's a story. But let's not forget that this is also a celebratory story, that these people do not see themselves as victims." No one I spoke to, even if they've had transgressions meted out to them, no one saw themselves as a victim. They're proud and they're rightfully proud of what they've done, not just for themselves, but for their families. So I think although I salute Amelia Gentleman and her book, it would be a terrible tragedy, a long-term historical tragedy, if we came to permanently attach the word "Windrush" with "scandal". It was my desire to celebrate, to champion, without denying some of these awful moments that people had to endure - I'm not going to deny them, but, ultimately, I'm going to celebrate these wonderful lives. And they all, I think, are both a tribute to themselves, to this country, and to their families. And when I was going around the country, and I've said this before - when I was going around the country interviewing these elder Caribbean people, I imagined myself almost to be like a producer on the *Antiques Roadshow*. Their treasures are the stories that haven't been heard and I was going to dust them down, I was going to feather them down, and I was going to reveal them to be the wonderful resources that they truly are.

PC You've chosen to write about Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer. So the - I mean the connection with Jamaica is obvious, but why did you pick those subjects? And how did you even begin to research them?

CG I've often made the point that I was British by birth, but Jamaican by will and inclination. And when I was growing up in Luton in the 1970s and earlier, I think we didn't really believe ourselves to be British because we weren't welcome. I'm old enough to remember a man called Enoch Powell in 1968, politician giving a very famous or infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech where he's essentially saying, "Pack your bags. You're not welcome. On you go." And that was the spirit of the times. I mean Enoch Powell was repudiated, but I think a lot of white people in this country believed in him and held the same kind of beliefs. So I grew up in that kind of environment, where you didn't really feel welcome. But I also grew up in an environment where I was surrounded by Caribbean people who I adored, and I initially wanted to write about them. And I can remember being fortunate enough to go to Jamaica with my mother when I was about 30 or thereabout. I'd been to Jamaica by myself as a 19-year-old and I had this notion in my mind that I was British by birth but Jamaican by will and inclination. And what I admired most was the coolness of the Jamaicans, just the way that they moved. I loved the way that they walked. My father had a walk which was just fast and then slow. I loved to emulate his walk. And I went to Jamaica for the first time on my own as a 19-year-old and I was staying in Kingston, in the capital, and every morning I'd pass some higglers on the street. And this higgler would shout to me, "Hey, Englishman! Englishman! Englishman!" And I would ignore him. And at the end of the week, I went up to this guy and said, you know, "What makes you think I'm English?" And he says, "You walk like an Englishman." Oh, dear, so maybe there's something there about me not being fully Caribbean, not being fully Jamaican. But I admired

the Jamaicans. And when I was 30 or thereabout, so I went to Jamaica with mother and she opened my eyes to things which I hadn't really seen before. And partly that was just the graffiti. If you were to go to Trench Town or Jones Town, or Jones Pen, which was what it was previously called, again and again on the walls, you will see the graffiti, the face, the chubby face of Marcus Mosiah Garvey. And I'd heard about Garvey, obviously, through my parents and through Caribbean people in England, but I never got the sense that he lived in the way that he seemed to live still in Jamaica. And there's this researching Garvey, I thought he was an extraordinary figure, even though many people felt that he was a charlatan and a buffoon. But I liked that idea that he polarised people in the way that many Jamaicans do, actually. So we looked into someone like Garvey. There were people for him - there was God and there was Garvey. And there were others who had lost their shirt, who had been fleeced in their own mind by buying shares in the Black Star Line, Garvey's shipping line. So I wanted, in a way, to paint a picture of Garvey because I thought he was this giant and he hadn't really been, in my mind, given the kind of treatment that he deserved. I'd read a two-part biography of W.E.B. Du Bois, the great African-American scholar who was Garvey's nemesis. And he had a two-part biography, which both won the Pulitzer Prize, by a man called David Levering Lewis. And I said to myself, I'm going to give Garvey the Du Bois treatment. I'm going to give him a Pulitzer Prize-winning book. It didn't win the Pulitzer Prize because I'm not from America. In fact, it didn't win any prizes, so nothing to do with the prizes. But I think I wanted to restore Garvey because I think, other than through the work of someone like Tony Martin, this great Caribbean scholar, the people who told the story of Garvey had told it from the point of view of his enemies. And so I was righting a wrong and I was going to be a critical friend. That's one thing. But also I recognised that the drama really hadn't been explored. So, for instance, I start the book in 1940, when Garvey's back in England and his movement of millions of people has dwindled. His Universal Negro Improvement Association has dwindled. He's got a small retinue with him. He's had a stroke at the beginning of the year. By May, he's recovering from the stroke when he sits down in London in a cold, drafty house with his secretary, Daisy White. He sits down and he reads a headline which he knows cannot be true, and the headline is "Marcus Garvey dies in London". And when I read that, and then read his response - and his response was to read all of the damning obituaries that came. They're all saying the same kind of thing. He was a charlatan, a buffoon, a disgrace to the race. And even though his secretary tried to shield him from these damning obituaries, he read them all and suffered a second heart attack and died. His obituaries killed him. When I read that, I thought, woah. Woah, that's a start, isn't it? And I'd never read that in any book on Garvey before. And I thought people had missed a trick here. So I recognised that there was this huge drama to be told about Marcus Garvey's life in a kind of granular way that hadn't been told before. Although there are great scholars like Robert Hill, who has almost made a life of charting the rise and fall and rise again of Marcus Garvey, no one had, I don't think, put the political and the personal life together. So I determined to do that. And then, you know, with regards my other books - like *I & I*, *The Natural Mystics* was this book about the original Wailers, Bob Marley, Bunny Wailer, and Peter Tosh - it was just being enamoured of them when I was growing up and realising amongst my friends there was always one whom you favoured. Most of my friends favoured Bob Marley. Some of my more righteous friends favoured Peter Tosh. But I always was a Bunny man. Bunny Wailer was my man. And, again, I was conscious of the fact that the story of the Wailers, in my mind, hadn't really been written because the focus had been too heavily on Bob Marley, almost to the extent that these other people were, in terms of serious literature, were eclipsed. So I reckoned that, you know, Bob, Bunny, and Peter were first among equals. Each of them could've been the one. One was raised and elevated and the other were kind of left behind. They were rather like three bullocks growing up in a paddock and they're growing big now, and along comes a man called Chris Blackwell and he opens

the gate and lets one of them through and the others have to remain behind. So I was going to reunite them and complicate the narrative that we have of Bob Marley. But also I wanted to - and I've become obsessed with the Caribbean, I suppose. I wanted to, in a way, use these men, use their story, to tell the story of the modern Caribbean, to tell the story of modern Jamaica, to tell a story about liberation. And you can see that in a very simple way just by charting the way that their dress sense changed. So right at the beginning, in the early '60s, they're wearing two-toned suits. Zoot suits sometimes were brylcreemed hair they're rhythm and blues singers. And ten years later they're wearing battle fatigues and wearing dreadlocks. They're Rasta men. And there you see the change in Jamaica in the early '60s and late '50s. The Rasta, the bare-foot nasty negger no one wanted anything to do with them. But within 10 years, they came to define Jamaican Caribbean culture. So I wanted to use people like the Wailers to tell the story of modern life in the Caribbean. And I suppose that's all I've really done. You know, many people talk about the fact that writers only ever write one book, and in a sense I've just been writing the one book again and again with slightly different versions because I think that the richest place on the planet is the Caribbean. The Caribbean was the place of the beginnings of modernity. It brought people together who didn't want to be there. It brought shackled criminals whom Cromwell sent to the Caribbean. It brought buccaneers and adventurers, and, later, slave owners. It brought enslaved Africans. It brought indentured Chinese and Indians and, later, poor Irish and Germans. It was the beginning of the modern world. And you can sort of see the seeds of the modern world in places like Trinidad, Barbados, St Kitts, Jamaica still to this day. So although I say I've been writing the same book again and again and again, there's nothing to stop me continuing to do so because it's such an endless supply of rich stories, a rich tapestry which hasn't yet fully been told.

PC Yeah, I think - yeah, I think you're right. There is so much there that's interesting. The thing that always resonates with me in your writing is that - is the phrase "the pigmentocracy". That really resonated with me. And I wonder if you agree with me that the reason that Bob was the one that got through the gate was because he was mixed-race and because his look was that - yeah, a fairly Europeanised look in terms of facial features. And so he was a gateway to the kind of the culture that they were talking about, and he was the one that was pulled forward.

CG That is an interesting premise that you put, Pat, about Bob Marley, and I think it's largely true. When I was putting together the book about the Wailers, *I & I*, *The Natural Mystics*, my pitch was that they each - Bob, Bunny, and Peter each represented three ways of being Black in the beginning of the second half of the 20th century. So Bob Marley, fair-skinned, photogenic, dual heritage, practical. He's not going to sell out, but he's going to be pragmatic. Peter Tosh, very tall, very Black, always wore dark glasses, threatened people. If you were to see Peter Tosh, he'd be peeling a mango. He might wave the machete in front of you menacingly if he didn't like the question, ended up being murdered in 1987. And Bunny Wailer, a man famously - who, when this group was about to take off internationally, doesn't want to go on tour. He'd rather plant his crops, smoke his weed. So there you have three ways of being Black. You have Bob Marley, the practical man. You have Peter Tosh, the militant man. And you have Bunny Wailer, the man in retreat. But it's even more complicated than that because I think, although he - as far as Chris Blackwell and the promoters were concerned, Bob Marley was photogenic and would be a great look and straddled the races, he's also the hardest worker. I mean he wrote 600 songs - I'm sure you know, Pat - by his mid-20s,

and he didn't smoke as much weed as Peter Tosh. So as well as being a kind of obvious pin-up boy for the group, a frontman because of his look, he's also the hardest worker. That has to be said. One thing which is fundamentally true about Bob Marley is that he totally identified with being black. Partly that was to compensate for his skin colour, because to be a fair-skinned red boy, red neggar growing up in Trench Town in the '60s was a hard thing to do because, for instance, the Rastas would start a chant, "Death to the white man and his wrown allies." You don't want to be a brown ally of a white man in Trench Town, so Bob Marley compensated for that by being blacker than black. But also there's a story which I think is true, which I account in *I & I, The Natural Mystics*, and that's the story of Rita, Rita Marley, whom Bob Marley, when as teenager, would get to rub black shoe polish in his hair to make it blacker, to make it coarser so that he appeared to be blacker than he was. So although Bob Marley was fair-skinned, he was fundamentally a black man. He was like what Peter Tosh says, "So long as you're a black man, no matter what shade, you're an African." But you're right, Pat. Jamaica, like so many islands in the Caribbean, is a pigmentocracy. The fairer skin you have, the better. There's a story in *I & I, The Natural Mystics* about the 10 types beauty competition, where there are 10 categories of Black, from white to really black, from ebony to ivory. And it was a competition to allow all the groups in Jamaica to be represented in these beauty contests. But what was interesting was that it was a democratic process, but hardly anyone - hardly anyone - wanted to be put into the ebony category.

PC Yeah, the subtext of that is very, very strong. I mean I grew up with, "If you're white, you're all right. If you're brown, stick around. If you're black, stand back." What we're going to do next is have a reading from *Negro with a Hat*, and we've chosen a section where Marcus Garvey, having arrived in England, wants to go to the House of Commons to hear David Lloyd George speak.

Reading from *Negro with a Hat*

PC We're just asking you to do a little sort of horizon scanning first. So a little bit about your writing, a little bit about what, I suppose, the role writers in general can play, and a little bit about the society we live in. That's a huge question. You can choose any part of it you want to (audio breaking).

CG One of the project that I've become very excited about in the last year or so is Writers Mosaic, which is a project to bring new writing to the form. Essentially, it's a project providing a platform for writers who, historically, have been denied a platform, so writers of colour, essentially, but not all writers of colour because "colour" is a very broad term. And it speaks to me very clearly and very forcefully because I've had lots of hurdles as a writer in this country. Even having published five books, it's still tricky to try and convince someone to publish me. And I recognise that I've been very, very lucky and I've been lucky in that people want me to write reviews. But I know that other writers who are equally talented don't get a chance to be as published as I have been and also to even write reviews. So the platform Writers Mosaic is a way of nurturing, mentoring other writers, giving them opportunities to write and paying them for it, and honing their skills. And I think we're at a very exciting time in our culture. We're not back in the day, where you might send a short story to an agent who says he's not interested in ethnic writing. Everybody seems to be interested in what people of colour are writing now. So it's long overdue. And I relish this moment that we're in because I'm in it and I can also help speed along this transition. I think we've transitioned to a really

interesting place in time, where we're having intergenerational conversations as well. I think one of the joys of writing is to be able to find young readers. And I start with my own children, and they pass on my writing to their friends. And, hopefully, they'll pass on their writing to their children as well because I think sometimes - I'm sure you're both aware of this - there's been this separation between the generations. And each new generation, they get a chance to write beliefs that they are starting from scratch, that there's nothing that's gone before. And the platform Writers Mosaic is going to be a way to link the present to the past, so we're going to be also having slow reviews. We turn back the clock and we look back to writers like Sam Selvon once more, Una Marson, some writers whose work hasn't been given the kind of platform that it deserves. So I'm very hopeful about the time in which we've found ourselves in. But I think for many years, when I was a reader, I thought I was living in a land where we were under enemy occupation by people who thought ill of us and would give us no opportunity to have any meaningful purchase on the culture. And in a way, with books like *Homecoming*, I think we're moving from the margins to the centre. And as we say in Jamaica, "all are we as one," and I want that to be true of the writing and of the books that are published in this country, that recognise that we have this great plethora of writers who add to this wonderful tapestry of British life. So we reach - as we say, we will reach - we will hear much more of Bageye because my next book, which is to be called *How Many Miles to Babylon?* is a kind of sequel to *Bageye at the Wheel*, where I take the reader from the point of me starting at this private school, this expensive private school, through to my trials and tribulations at the BBC, where I have taken the record of holding the highest number of disciplinary hearings in the history of the BBC because I'm tall and Black, primarily, through to my starting with Gabriel Gbadamosi and a number of other friends, Writers Mosaic. But in and amongst those stories, you will hear more of Bageye, how he came to terms with my writing career. But more importantly, we'll hear more of my mother, Ethlyn, who, when I write, is always at my elbows. I wouldn't be a writer but for my mother. For many of my books, I've been a kind of ventriloquist. It's my mother that you're hearing when you read a book by Colin Grant.

PW And finally, Colin, this is another question that we like to ask all of our guests because we want to end on a note of celebration. What are the best things about being Colin Grant?

CG Well, Colin Grant is quite a grumpy old fellow a lot of the time, but it means that he's often surprised and given to smile because there aren't many things to be grumpy about in the world of Colin Grant. His base, his default is to be a bit miserable and to be wary. But, actually, he has much to be thankful for. When Colin, i.e. me - when I was growing up, my mother said to me, "Without a vision, you perish," which is a line from the Bible. And what sustains me I think is that I have very strong vision that has been with me all through my life, I think. I think I've always been a writer even though I was only published in my early 40s, but I have the kind of writer's sensibility, the writer's heightened awareness, alert to her or his environment. So the great thing is to be able to draw on all of my senses and to reach for that which is always unattainable, just beyond my reach. But the joy and the pleasure of being Colin Grant is to strive to get there, to fail and fail again, but to fail better, as Samuel Beckett would say.

PC Excellent. Thank you very much. And I expect at least your encouragement of a biography of the I-Threes shortly.

CG I'd love to write about the I-Threes. I'd absolutely be delighted. If you have money and you have publisher and you'll come to me, I'll be your writer for sure. But you'll probably get there before me, Pat, anyway, I'm sure.

PC No, I know my limits. I'm definitely drama. That's (overlapping background noise).

CG Well, thank you for all you do on Amplify, and I relish the chance to speak to an audience outside of the four walls which is normally my home.

PC Yes. But also I'm very glad that we're working in partnership with the Mosaic because I think that any voice that makes our voice loud is important.

CG Yeah. And it's great that we have this sort of synchronicity with Amplify, and I think it does speak to this idea that things are changing and that, God-willing, through our work, we will ensure that that change is lasting and sustainable.

PC Extracts from *Bageye at the Wheel* and *Negro with a Hat* were read by Leemore Marrett Jr. The extract from *Homecoming* was read by Patricia Cumper.

PW Do check with our website, theamplifyproject.co.uk, for other podcasts in this series and for further information about Black British writing.

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