

WRITERS MOSAIC

Paul Mendez

in conversation with Colin Grant

Colin Grant: I've come to meet Paul Mendez at his home in north London, overlooking Hampstead Heath, this wonderful Heath. Many people come to look back over the city, but also to breathe the clean air, sometimes to swim and wander through the Heath. So, Paul, do you spend much time gazing at the Heath?

Paul Mendez: I do, actually, far too much time. It's very beautiful and it changes every day and it looks different depending on the light. So, in front of me as I sit here right now, I am looking at a beautiful London Plane tree and, I think a poplar, and the leaves are sort of tinselly and moving on the wind and it's golden against the pure blue sky and it's very beautiful and looks so different on different days and it's mid-September now... I mean you could sit and watch for a long time.

I'm very much a people-watcher as well, and there's a path going from the top of Parliament Hill all the way down to almost where the railway line is at the bottom of the hill, and there are people coming up and down that all the time; and you can see some characters. I've seen someone on an electronic skateboard pushing a pram – with one hand... I mean how can you not stop exactly what you are doing to watch that? And as a novelist, I am always watching people. That's how I work. That's how I create characters from this huge databank of faces et cetera, that I've seen.

CG: So, you are building characters based on a kind of physiology?

PM: Yeah, absolutely. I'm all about the body, all about the way people look, their facial expressions – what they give away in what they say, but it's given away in how they behave, how they move, how they interact with other people. I guess that's part of a legacy of being a Jehovah's

Witness and constantly knocking on people's doors and having to immediately respond to whoever has opened that door.

You don't know who that person is going to be, but you have to, within a very, very short period of time, get their attention and then keep it and convince them that you are not some crazy Bible-basher. But actually, you know, you're just a normal human being who happens to have these very eccentric beliefs, nonetheless. And, also working as a waiter for fifteen years in restaurants, these are both very, very, very good training for novelists, I think.

CG: I wonder how it steers your perception in a way? I started off my adult life as a medical student at the London Hospital in Whitechapel. Four long years, and we were taught to think of pathology. You're walking down the Whitechapel High Street and there's a guy bent over, he's got a mirror in his hand, half his nose is missing. What's that? Oh, that's tertiary syphilis. So, again and again we saw people as walking pathology and it took a while for me to re-learn how I might see people; or rather to challenge how I was viewing people... to view them not through pathological eyes, but through the eyes of pathos, perhaps. I wonder whether your gaze has changed in the course of becoming and working as a writer?

PM: Um... That's a very good question, I don't know. Probably. I guess it's much more mental now that I'm creating people...like I've said, based on people I've seen before, people I've known before. None of the characters in *Rainbow Milk* are based completely on any one individual.

CG: They're composite characters?

PM: They're all composite characters, and they're all people I have created based again on this. A friend of mine Peter Blegvad, a Danish-American artist, has this series of work that he has been working on since the seventies under the title 'Remembered, Observed and Imagined': it's objects illustrated as remembered, as observed, and as imagined. And I just always thought – and it's three very, very different representations of the same object – and I've always thought (since I met him, anyway), I thought that was a really, really good way to describe my process of writing fiction. All of my fiction work, anyway, is based on memory, based on what I see, what I think, and what I create from scratch.

CG: How beneficial, or not, is it to live with another writer?

PM: Absolutely beneficial.

CG: In what ways? Can you give us some idea about that?

PM: I mean, I don't know what it would be like to live with another writer, but living with this writer in particular, Alan Hollinghurst, he is one of my favourite writers, he's an incredibly patient, and loving, kind person, who has an incredible personal schedule that's based on reading and writing. And when we got together, I learned from that and took that as my own schedule. So, now with pleasure, I write and read all day every day, seven days a week. Everything is work but everything is also pleasure. Also, he understands the process that you go through in writing a novel. There are some times where, you know, you take your foot off the gas slightly and you're more interested in research and taking things in and just thinking and giving yourself a little space, but then there are also times where you are getting up at 6 a.m. in the morning and you're at the coal face all day until 10 p.m. and that's when he takes over everything and he's bringing me stuff, you know, bringing me tea, bringing me coffee, bringing me dinner et cetera, and I do the same for him. So, we have a perfectly symbiotic and harmonious relationship which I think is great for productivity on both sides.

CG: And are you each other's readers?

PM: Yes, yep. Alan read every stage of *Rainbow Milk*. *Rainbow Milk* went through a lot of different drafts. Sometimes, he had more notes than I could bear, so I ripped it up and started again. Obviously, he's an incredible editor, so he has a great breadth of experience and also a great eye. He's got a Master's degree in English from Oxford and has impeccable access to language. It means I can go to my actual editor, my publisher, Sharmaine Lovegrove, with a manuscript that she almost doesn't have to do anything with and she's like, 'Wow Paul, you are such a great writer!'

CG: She must love you.

PM: I'm like, well, you know...

CG: That's the interesting thing, isn't it, about writing, people will assume that the writer is the auteur and does everything. Sometimes, I think, with books, they should reverse the acknowledgements and put them at the front.

PM: Yeah. I mean, Dialogue Books has started from the very start of life as a publisher...In every Dialogue Books publication, there's a page at the back which gives a breakdown of who has worked on that book. Almost like it's film credits or something because every book ... a team has brought that book to life, whether it's the copy editors, the proofreaders, the designers, the main editor et cetera, and they all deserve credit for that, and *Rainbow Milk* is no different. Yes, I agree with you on acknowledgements.

CG: Can we talk a little bit about Dialogue Books, which was set up by Sharmaine Lovegrove, this great editor? How would you describe it to the uninitiated? What kind of publisher is it?

PM: Dialogue Books is a small publisher, part of Little Brown and Hachette. It almost has an independent publisher feel, but obviously, it is part of a much bigger, corporate empire, if you want. That sounds quite sinister, but it's not. I think they found Sharmaine Lovegrove and said, 'We want you to head up a list where we find underrepresented voices to publish from Black writers' ...I think we're stopping using 'BAME'?

CG: Yes, quite right. I don't think anybody likes that phrase.

PM: No, it doesn't do anyone any favours! ...But, in any case, from Black authors, Asian authors, writers who are writing in English or otherwise, or even in translation, but not from a sort of white, middle-class stock. Working class authors, LGBTQI+ authors. We have budgets ring-fenced and a sensibility that surrounds bringing new voices into the publication sphere.

CG: You use the word 'we' there, which I think is really interesting because sometimes I think writers just feel that they are coming in on something that is already set, and they're like an adjunct, they're not part of it.

PM: No, we're a family, we're absolutely a family at Dialogue Books and Sharmaine is the mother and we all love and respect her and she fights all our corners and she gives us the best possible start to life. My book has taken off, almost more than I can handle.

CG: Let's talk about how that book came into being. It ended up with Sharmaine Lovegrove. We're going to go back and talk about the evolution of the book, but at what stage did Sharmaine get involved with you and the book?

PM: Well, I met Sharmaine at a mutual friend's birthday party in Hackney back in 2012, and I was sitting opposite this beautiful Black woman and we were noticing each other when she said, 'Really interested to see what you're writing, and when you are ready, send me something.' I didn't feel I was ready, despite having spent the previous winter taking a three-month purdah period to write what was the first draft, or first attempt of *Rainbow Milk* as a memoir. I did have stuff to give her, but I just wasn't ready to share it with her at that time. So, it was not until she was announced as the publisher of Dialogue Books that I sent her a message on Facebook and said, 'Congratulations! What's your email address going to be? On your first day, Can I send you my work?' And she said, 'Yes.' And in the interim, I put together a 300-page rambling manuscript based on essays and observation pieces and other forms of non-fiction, you know, life writing, even bits of attempts at poetry. But it had a narrative and it spoke of the journey, this is what the purpose of my writing has always been and what *Rainbow Milk* has captured. The process that I underwent from being a devout Jehovah's Witness, getting baptised at the age of sixteen, to being a sex worker living in London, having quit acting school and living with sexual assault and possible HIV transmission, and wondering where my life had gone. *Rainbow Milk* was always about capturing that transitional period, and so, the *Rainbow Milk*, if you like, that I sent to Sharmaine on the 10th of July 2017 was that. And she passed it onto Dominic Wakeford, and he decided that he wanted it to be a novel and wanted to challenge me to write fiction for the first time and offered me a book deal a couple of months later.

I think if I hadn't sent the manuscript to her on her first day in her job, I would probably have had to wait. After that, she published straight away books like *Cygnets* by Season Butler, *Permission* by Saskia Vogel and books by Lucy Ayrton and Amer Anwar that were all finished. I probably would not have been at the top of the pile. So, it was just luck.

CG: How do you make that transition from memoir to novel? What stages do you go through? And did you ever feel that you should have stuck with it as a memoir?

PM: No, not at all. I feel absolutely liberated by writing fiction, even if I'm using my own material as a source. But you're right to ask which stages I went through because I started off with the idea that I could do the same, but just sort of make it better written, fill it up with pretty descriptions and snappy dialogue. It took me a long time to break away from the idea that it was a memoir and with a memoir, when you're still alive, you're still living that experience. Where do you start and where do you stop?

I found myself writing about lots of stuff about my secondary school years and trying to set up this whole period that I had described that I wanted to capture. And again, my deadline was July 2018 to hand in for a spring 2019 publication date. Around May, I got to a point where I had lost momentum, and Dominic Wakeford left Little Brown for a senior commissioning editor role at HarperCollins.

I was losing my editor and felt... I don't know, not that I was being abandoned or anything... but I just felt really scared because this was very, very new to me. So, I said, 'Let me just stop this!' and I gave my work to Alan to read. We had a sort of summit about it once he had read it and made his notes and we sat at this very table and went through page after page and, honestly, I couldn't see my text for the amount of pencil of Alan's notes and I just decided it wasn't right and I had to start again.

I announced to Sharmaine that I was going to be late and that I had to start again. She gave me a November deadline this time, so, I tried to do the same thing again and it was still very memoiristic but trying to capture this six-year period I've described. But again, I was still very close to my own experience, and still very much in first person and I'm still opening up wounds of my own history in order to tell the story, and it just wasn't good for me at all.

And it was January 2019 in the end that I handed in this new version, after Alan had seen it again and sort of torn it to pieces; and I reworked it and handed it in to Sharmaine in January. On the 4th of January, I decided I had to write the thing in the third person. So, I emailed her and said, 'I am really sorry, I know it's five months late and I just handed in my new manuscript, but I'm retracting it.'

CG: How did she respond?

PM: 'I will have another version for you in two months' time, I promise'. She said, 'Do you know what, Paul... I keep pushing you back, but this is the last time I'm pushing you back, because I have other authors that I want to publish, and this is a schedule. This is real life. This is business. So, just do what you need to do, but make sure that this is the last time.' So, I said, 'OK'.

Then I started writing in the third person and created new characters. I created the character of Graham for the first time, so that was the first time Jesse had a white stepfather and it enabled me to write about Black masculinity as a function of white masculinity for the first time – which I really believe in, particularly in terms of my own experience, even though my dad is Black.

And it just completely freed me, writing in third person. I still kept the whole narrative as far as Jesse was concerned and very much within the realm of his experience as a 19-, 20-year-old, sheltered ex-Jehovah's Witness. But I was suddenly able to see the world completely differently and to see the world as a 36-, 37-year-old man looking at London in 2001-2002 and doing loads of research around it et cetera.

So, I wrote a 64,000-word manuscript in the third person in two months and Alan and I travelled to New York for a trip early in March 2019. And when we landed in New York, I sent via email this new manuscript which I didn't hear anything about for two months. [laughs] Sharmaine sort of sat on it... you know she had other things to do and I totally appreciate that.

CG: Were you biting your lip? What were you doing? Were you agonised about that?

PM: No, I was wondering, what am I going to do after the book's published? And that's when I decided to apply for the MA at Goldsmiths – the course that I am currently on – and concentrated on other things. And, around May time I re-read the manuscript and decided where it could be improved, and I started working on it again. I sent Sharmaine an email saying, 'I don't know what stage you are at with it, but I'm working on it again. Please don't read it, if you haven't already. I will have something... a new draft for you but no wholesale changes, just cosmetic.'

CG: Did that draft include the pre-story, of the Windrush generation?

PM: The story of that is slightly separate. I was doing a lot of work in the British Library and doing lots of research and obviously the Windrush scandal had just broken in *The Guardian*. It was on the tip of everyone's tongue, like I said in one of my essays [for *WritersMosaic*], I just wasn't as aware as I am now of my grandparents being part of the Windrush generation. Obviously, they didn't describe it in that way. They didn't tell me anything about their lives before moving to England, or even the early days of living in England. So, for me, reading *Small Island*, and *The Lonely Londoners* gave me more of a clue than they ever did as to what their lives were like.

CG: Just to remind our listeners that Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* is a kind of early take of Caribbean migrants in Britain and how they navigate themselves in this cold, forbidding climate. It's quite a funny book as well.

PM: Quite a funny book, just incredibly informative and entertaining and, obviously, the first time, or one of the first times, you see creole, or Afro-Caribbean creole, being used in literature... as in, Literature with a capital 'L'. That's one of those things that gave me the confidence to do what I did with Norman. I was at the British Library one day researching Jamaican flora and fauna as it would have been in the 1940s and 50s and I found this really brilliant book but I can't remember the name or the title of it off the top of my head but it was just all of these beautiful illustrated drawings of native-to-Jamaica plants and I was thinking about my paternal grandfather who I never met... who my dad has never met... he died when my dad was two years old. And I knew that he was this tall, very good-looking man – I think his name was Stanley – and as soon as he moved to the UK with my grandmother in 1956, he started to suffer migraine headaches and started to go blind, and doctors told him that he was too tall, and that he was closer to the sun and, therefore, was almost photosynthesising, or something. I don't know what was going through their minds. I really don't, and that the sun was different to what it is in Jamaica. This is what my grandmother told me, and that's all I know about Stanley.

And so, just with these little facts – and doing something that I later learned that Bernardine Evaristo did with *The Emperor's Babe*, taking small sketchy facts and creating a fiction around them – based, therefore, on research, I went about creating the character of Norman. I'd done some acting. I played Othello et cetera, for semi-professional theatre

companies, and so, I had access to character creation in that way and I went home, smoked a spliff and recorded myself as Norman, speaking in Jamaican patois and giving a monologue. Knowing I have two children and being blind and worrying what their future is, almost as if it was the last day of my life, or Norman's life, and that's what became the first draft of Norman. I love this 'now and then' perspective on Black masculinity, on Black British masculinity, to show perhaps how things may or may not have changed for us, moving here with whatever ambitions we have and being born here with whatever ambitions we have.

CG: It's also a meditation in both parts, I think, on living with uncertainty – life being a roll of the dice and not knowing where or how the dice are going to fall.

PM: Absolutely. I think I've mentioned it in one of the essays [for *WritersMosaic*], the colonial education that Jamaican people get and people from all over the Caribbean get. They have this idea of what England is going to be when they move here. I don't think anyone has put it better than Andrea Levy in *Small Island* with Hortense.

CG: Hortense is a bit of a snob, actually, isn't she?

PM: She's a total snob and thinks of herself as a de facto white woman... white English woman. You know, she's got this education, she's an English teacher. In Jamaica, she's very well-spoken and very well put together and well-dressed, and she sends off Gilbert to settle down while she prepares herself to make a big impression in England, in London. It was a real shock for her.

CG: And for Norman?

PM: I think it would have been for Norman's generation, as well.

CG: Yes, because you mentioned the attitude that they think they're coming to a paradise, but they come to Sodom and Gomorrah.

PM: We leave the Garden of Eden for the land of milk and honey and find Sodom and Gomorrah. I don't know where I found that line from.

CG: It's a great line.

PM: Thank you. It just sort of happened. And it's true, I think that does encapsulate what Afro-Caribbean people in the fifties... They didn't have social media, they had access, I suppose, to Black voices being beamed into the Caribbean from the UK by means of the BBC's *Caribbean Voices*, for example, but there was no other way apart from letter writing that they would have found out what life was really like in Britain. And let's face it, Jamaica at that time wasn't the best place either. I think it would have felt for Norman's generation at that point and my grandparents' generation, that anything would have been better than what was going on there. And of course, this is ... Norman moves to the UK six years before Jamaica finally became independent. Nobody knew how that was going to go. So, the English immigration laws kept changing. Nobody knew whether the door was going to be slammed shut and they wouldn't be able to leave Jamaica if they wanted to. It was a case of 'whatever we're gonna find, let's just go'.

CG: If we go to the major part of the book, and the character of Jesse, to explore for the listener some idea of his evolution... There's one line that stuck with me where, I think, he's described by somebody as 'a black boy pretending to be a white boy pretending to be a black boy' – which I thought was brilliant. Can you unpack that for us?

PM: Yeah, so, this is the whole idea of Black masculinity being defined against white masculinity and Jesse having been raised in a majority-white area, in a congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses that's mostly white men, all the elders are white men, anyone that you would look up to is a white man. His father, or stepfather, is a white man, he's being raised by a white man and, actually, his stepfather doesn't really give any real attention to raising Jesse in the way that a Black boy needs to be raised.

So, he learns about... especially having left the organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses, lost his centre of gravity – no longer allowed to socialise with or associate with, in any way, anyone he's ever grown up with, cast out into this world where suddenly he's seen as a young Black man and has to behave in a way that people expect young Black men to behave. The only people he can learn from, are rappers who are African American, and the people who listen to their music, i.e., his colleagues with whom he is working at McDonalds, who are all Asian boys and white boys who have this sort of – if I can say this – 'wigger' kind of posturing, based on the music that they listen to and the culture that they subscribe

to, and that's how Jesse channels his access to his Black masculinity and that's how he learned to be Black.

And that is actually something someone said to me once, 'You're like a black boy trying to be a white boy, trying to be a black boy', and that really stuck with me. I think it's symptomatic of a very narrow concept on the part of some people, many people in fact, of what a Black man can and cannot do. You know, we are no longer in chains physically, but we are still very much captured within this tiny cage. I think all men are, in a way. Masculinity is a cage and I think Black masculinity is a cage within a cage.

Jesse has to go through that, at that time, because he doesn't have any protectors; he doesn't have any friends. He only has the people around him, and it is only when he moves to London and cuts himself off entirely from his previous life and becomes a new, fresh person with a completely new future almost, that he can break away from that and live the life he sees in his own mind, for the first time.

CG: Well, I was thinking of Equiano, Olaudah Equiano, who wrote himself out of slavery in a way, and I saw Jesse writing himself out of the life that was predetermined for him through his reaching out to art through literature.

PM: Absolutely. I mentioned this phrase 'losing your centre of gravity'. I, like Jesse, was raised with the Bible from a very young age and was raised with a particular interpretation of the bible ... Jehovah's Witnesses are a great group of people, amongst each other. They associate only with each other. They marry each other. They don't allow anyone else in. So, therefore, you've got a community where, as long as you abide by their principles and rules, you are looked after. Everyone is your family, it doesn't matter what colour they are, race, age. You know, I spent all of my childhood visiting grannies and different people who were not related to me, but who were my aunties. Running errands for them and drinking tea with them, having conversations, long conversations, about the Bible and spirituality and life as a Witness, and that was wonderful. That is something that I will never regret. That gave me, I suppose, an empathy, an ability to talk to people from all walks of life that came from them and so, because of that as well, I didn't see myself being Black in that way.

That's something that James Baldwin and Franz Fanon and people like that have written about, this whole idea you can be in an environment and respond to that environment in the way that everyone else is

responding to that environment, but it's only when someone shines a mirror in front of your face and says, 'you're Black', that's the only time you realise.

CG: Well, you have inhabited there your majority consciousness. It's only when you move to a place where your consciousness is not the majority, that that's challenged, I suppose. Let's spool forward then to this transformation for you with the writing of *Rainbow Milk*. What has it meant for you in the way that you perceive yourself and the way that you are perceived, do you think?

PM: I think as a Black man, as a Black gay man, et cetera, I'm always standing at different intersections and I'm always responding to whoever is looking at me and always managing their expectations of who I am. We were on holiday in Devon last week and ... nobody knows that I'm a writer. I look much younger than I am and much younger than my partner and people just look at me like some little boy with a sugar daddy or something. I think Covid-19, as well, has made people in more monocultural parts of country much more aware of who is around and who is visiting, and clearly doesn't look local. Because we may not have the same customs as them, we might not have the same attitude to hygiene ., and they make it very obvious that you're not welcome sometimes, not in an explicit way but in that sort of... they just freeze themselves up away from you and take a wide berth as they walk past you and sort of maybe turn their back on you when you're walking past, as if not to breathe the same breath as you.

It really reminded me of being at school, primary school when I was eight years old, and cool white kids saying, 'Don't go near him, you might catch summat.' These are adults, grown adults who don't recognise that I'm English, that I'm Black *and* English. I think that's the whole problem with this country. But, anyway, at the same time, writing a novel has given me a voice. I've always had a voice... I've always had opinions. I've never changed, but now people take me seriously because I've written a novel. I think maybe people take me too seriously actually because I've written a novel, because there are so few Black British gay male novelists.

Bernardine Evaristo wrote an article in *Vogue* talking about the contemporary literary scene, and said, 'How many Black British male novelists have been published in the last ten years?' I'm paraphrasing her, but I think she quoted that she'd found eight – this was at the peak of

Black Lives Matter over the summer – and she said, ‘and if you want to start somewhere, start with Paul Mendez’s *Rainbow Milk*’; and that’s wonderful. Bernardine has been an incredible champion of mine and I really do not know what I’ve done to deserve that, but it does put me under pressure, because there’s only me, it seems, of my generation – third generation Black British, Afro-Caribbean people, I’m the only Black male novelist at the moment, British-born.

CG: That will all change very soon.

PM: Already is, as I speak – I’m sorry – I’m forgetting there are others like Ashley Hickson-Lovence and others, Keith Jarrett is working on a novel as well. And there are lots of poets, as we said earlier, but in terms of novelists... *Rainbow Milk* has struck a chord, and so, I’m expected to comment on Black masculinity and the Black British male experience, which I can only say from my own experience and maybe from that of the characters that I have created. I can’t create a primer, which is what people are looking for, of what it is to be a Black man in Britain today.

CG: But you mentioned *Vogue*, I think you appeared in *Vogue* recently.

PM: I wrote a little piece for them that they commissioned, on hope.

CG: I like that idea. I also like the idea there’s more to be said about joy, for instance, rather than continuing to think in the negative about being a victim, and I know that people are coming knocking on your door and asking you to write for *Esquire* and such magazines. How are you going to manage that, do you think, in the future with your determination to keep on writing as a novelist?

PM: I’ve always suspected that there are some people out there, especially people of colour, when they come through with something and it’s successful, the first thing people want to do is throw a lot of things in your way so that you can’t do it again. I’ve had so many ridiculous offers... I’ve had to say no to. ‘Can we have 3,000 words on your estranged relationship with your mother and stepfather and stuff, by next week please?’ ‘No, I’m going on holiday’. ‘Would you like to be on *Question Time*?’ ‘No.’ Bernardine Evaristo was on *Question Time* for the first time a couple of months ago and she’s written nine novels and won the Booker Prize! Why do you think I’ve got time to do that? Why do you

think I'm in a place where I've got confidence to feel like I have the authority to go on *Question Time* and argue with white supremacists and right-wing idiots?

CG: What do you think is going through the minds of those commissioners who reach out to you in that regard?

PM: I think that they've just heard my name and I'm 'of the moment' and there's such a huge push... we are living in the year of George Floyd's death and over that summer it was Pride month...it's Black History Month next month, and I know that I'm going to have just as much enquiries next month just as I had in Pride month which was ridiculously busy.

CG: But this is extremely flattering, is it not? It must be difficult to say no.

PM: It is, and I've spent this whole summer, you know, when what I really want to do is start work immediately on my second novel. I actually wanted to have finished the first draft of it by now, before I go back to uni. But I've written I think twelve short stories, essays, articles for different publications, and anthologies, all of which require a lot of research. I have my own opinions but I suppose, I'm doing an academic degree now and so I'm much more aware of citing people properly and all that kind of thing. Backing up my comments with research. I've really plunged myself into research which creates a hell of a lot more work than perhaps it needs to.

CG: Can we finish with this, because I'm very interested in what you gain from doing an MA at Goldsmiths College. I don't know you very well, but I get the sense that you're a young man with a lot of things that are going to be opening up for you, but also, a young man who has got a lot of baggage and has got a history. You give me the sense of someone wanting to catch up.

PM: Absolutely.

CG: And can you catch up through the MA perhaps?

PM: Yeah, I wouldn't be doing any other MA than Black British Writing, because it's a literary degree. It's the English literature degree that I didn't do. And doing an MA without having done a BA, and I said that to the

course convenors at the very beginning, when I applied. They said, 'just apply'. So, I applied and wrote an essay based on Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge*. I had a Skype interview with Deirdre Osborne, a brilliant editor and expert on Black British writing, Black and Asian British writing and also one of the course convenors of the MA. And she said, 'Look, you've got the ability, it's going to be a challenge, but come along and do it.' I wanted to study English literature, but I wanted to study the work of Black authors, Black British authors particularly.

CG: Why?

PM: Well, it's two reasons. I needed to study English literature, but I also needed to study Black history. I wanted to learn Black history through the voices of Black writers. That's very important to me. It is important for us to be in control of our narrative, and I didn't want to read about Black people... As a Black person, I don't want to read about Black people from white people, necessarily. A lot of the academic world about Black writing, about Black British writing, is handled by white academics and that's fine, but I want the core reading to be of Black people by Black people, and anything else is a bonus. But I just wanted to inform... it's all very well writing a semi-autobiographical – I hate that phrase, but *whatever* – novel to start with, but then, how do I inform my future work? What am I going to do next? And I can only really reconcile that by studying, closely, other Black writers. I've found out about so many brilliant Black British writers who I had never heard of before, to my intense shame. People like Buchi Emecheta. I'd heard of people like Malika Booker and Warsan Shire and various others. I hadn't read any of Bernardine's earlier work before I read *Girl, Woman, Other* while editing *Rainbow Milk* last year. Then I started the degree, and the second book on the syllabus was *The Emperor's Babe* and I was just completely floored... and how have I not read her work before? You mentioned Olaudah Equiano... Finally got around reading his book as part of last term's syllabus. And so, I'm starting to build a picture. Also, I need to mention S.I. Martin's *Incomparable World*, because that was the first time I ever realised, notwithstanding access to Olaudah Equiano, that there was a big population of Black people living in London in the 1780s. There was this whole political arena dedicated to getting them out of the country and repatriating them to Sierra Leone, which there was a huge resistance to, and that there was a Black literary scene in the eighteenth century. I didn't know anything about that. So, I'm learning about my

legacy, I'm learning about my forefathers. That is incredibly valuable to me and inspiring to me and, like I said, what I hope will inform me for my future work.

CG: Well, Paul Mendez, you have inspired me and thank you for your work. I am really, really, really looking forward to what you do next.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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