

Why I write

Jason Allen-Paisant

I use the term 'fugitivity' because to open my collection of poems, *Thinking with Trees* – meaning not merely *about* trees, but along with them, with the help of them, in their presence – is to enter a different world from the one that's often proposed; it's creating a mental landscape that can sustain life, particularly in a time such as this. To be fugitive is, of course, to run away, to escape. But fugitivity is not a cop-out, it's a refusal, and refusal – to vote with your feet – is a political stance. To slide away from a culture which enables, which is built on, anti-Blackness is its own form of critique.

In this time of Black Lives Matter, of Covid and climate change, which is, in every sense of the word, a time of plagues, I, like many others, have been thinking about breathing and the breath in new ways. My poetry calls attention to breathing. *Thinking with Trees* is a performative book, a spatial book. It's been described as 'a radical rethinking of the pastoral'. A part of rethinking the pastoral is thinking about bodies that are uneasy in the landscape, is looking at assaults and violence against racialised bodies and how that brings into focus the act of breathing, the atmosphere – in all the possible senses – of our human and non-human space. Often, for Black bodies, the act of walking through a forest or woodland – seemingly innocent, even banal, for some – entails strained, halted, accelerated, pressured breathing. Constriction and apprehension, questions and anxieties, are triggered when a history of Black bodies in white hinterlands

– of slavery, of capture(s) – is awakened by disruptive memory, a disquieting sight, the recall of last night's news. And yet, the forest fosters breathing – deep breathing. The forest is its own act of breathing, that brings me closer to life, through its energies, odours, vapours, soundscapes. The forest is very much, a place for breathing.

For these reasons, I consider *Thinking with Trees* an interrogative, lived poetry that places the body into a particular space – combining the outdoors and the field of 'ecopoetry' – while asking what it means to occupy that, to live with the complex meanings of 'nature' in Afro-diasporic experience, including in the white north. These are the questions that have been beckoning me to poetry. My urge is to explore a narrative of Black bodies in liberating terms – to confer positive visibility to our bodies in an eco-poetry in which our presence can be imagined.

What is this liberation? I write to see myself in places where I'm absent. I am 'out of order' through my language, through my gaze. *Reste pas à ta place* (Don't accept your place in the order of things'): this phrase by the French writer Rokhaya Diallo resonates in everything I do: I write poetry to resist an assigned place so long imagined as absence.

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Jason Allen-Paisant is a poet whose work explores embodied experience in the context of Afro-diasporic history. His critically acclaimed collection, *Thinking with Trees* was named an Irish Times Poetry Book of the Year in 2021. His work has appeared in *Granta*, *The Guardian*, *The Poetry Review*, *Callaloo*, *New Poetries VIII* and on the BBC, and is forthcoming in *More Fiya: A New Collection of Black British Poetry*. Jason has been the recipient of a prestigious Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship. He holds a Doctorate in Medieval and Modern Languages from the University of Oxford and is on faculty in the School of English at the University of Leeds.

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

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