

# WRITERSMOSAIC

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Miguel Cullen

In Conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi

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Its lyrics, its incisions into what surrounded me, to the core  
It would sing in its own language of praise to me;  
It made me feel alive, in its black halos and its songs of happiness.'

— Miguel Cullen

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic*, In Conversation. Founding editor Gabriel Gbadamosi talks to poet Miguel Cullen about the ways in which words come to him.

Gabriel Gbadamosi (GG): So Miguel Cullen, poet, thank you for speaking with *WritersMosaic*.

Miguel Cullen (MC): Not a problem. I've been a big fan for a long time.

GG: Great, fantastic. It's difficult for me to know how to quite kick off this conversation because as I read your work, the three collections that we have on the table in front of us, *Hologram*, *Wave Caps*, and *Paranoid Narcissism*, I feel with your

work as a poet that I agree with the blurb given to you by the American poet August Kleinzahler, that this poetry is so unprecedented, so way out on a limb, I've got no guide ropes to take me through it. I experience it rather than understand it with my mind. Rather than grasp it, I'm simply feeling stuff.

MC: Yes, yes.

GG: So I don't mind if our conversation continues in that idiom, in that way.

MC: Perambula—

GG: Perambulatory—

MC: Perambulatory.

GG: —Walk through poems that come from the far side of the moon. But to give people an idea, some idea of your work, could I ask you first to read a section from a long poem? And this subsection is called—

GG and MC: *Perpetual Labyrinth*.

MC: Yes. Okay. *Perpetual Labyrinth*.

[MC reading *Perpetual Labyrinth*]

‘Remember that the Minotaur's brain is identical to the labyrinth

he is inside

me

I am the labyrinth inside the minotaur skull that is thinking he is inside

his own brain's labyrinth

my son will be the same.'

GG: It's a mind challenge reading your poetry. Your editor, in one of the books, actually has a really good line about your work. She says, 'Well, clearly Miguel is on something, but the poetry is also onto something.' How have you managed to forge this career as a poet together with a very long sequence of mental health problems?

MC: Yeah, I'm currently publishing a piece of *WritersMosaic* which is about my psychosis and my schizoaffective disorder and my struggle with schizophrenia. One thing that I was brought up with was to be very empirical, to think logically, to be the classic rational Englishman, stiff upper lip notwithstanding. I think that it's important that through therapy and generally self-reflection, I've found, well, I've been guided by therapy. I found that—this is taking the agricultural route, the long way round to tell you how this works. But without wanting to sound pompous, so many caveats. But I suppose what I'm trying to say is that instead of thinking in a rational, *one thought leads to another one because one thought makes sense, so the next thought must make sense for it to continue on its linear process*, I try to think in a way where my sense of presence, how present I am in my atmosphere, dictates how I'm feeling. When you're present in a natural atmosphere or potentially in a non-natural atmosphere, your mind is irradiating lines of sight, sense, and you're reacting and

responding to your environment in a very present way. This could give the image of a dandelion or something like that. The tender senses, the octopus, the dandelion, without wanting to sound too scattergun. So this feeling of words coming to you through your senses is one that I use in my poetry. So—

GG: Let's start with that. One of the things you're proposing is that this completely surprising flowering of words and ideas and images is something that, for you, is possible because you have sunk down into your feeling at any moment as a poet. And you trust that to begin to make connections between things.

MC: A lot of people do that.

GG: And those connections are, in a sense, limitless. In a way, they're slightly schizophrenic. They can tune into advertising hoardings as messages to yourself, the notion that you can detect surveillance bugs which connect you to the police and to the suspects. So it's a limitless world. How do you give it shape?

MC: I expose it. I think I don't give credence to things that bear the hallmarks of typical delusion. When I'm feeling slightly stressed maybe, to echo what you were saying, you were saying that advertising hoardings could have some synchronicity with my situation so I feel it's guiding me in some way. When those things happen, I tend to take it with a barrel of salt because I've been there. That's where I was, as you can listen to my story. I was in places where I wasn't being able to distinguish between that and natural thinking. But what I do like to hone in on is often something that I see. Let's say right now we're sitting in a place looking onto the river, and let's

say I'm looking at something. I'm looking at a tower block and it's an intralattice of different colours, white and grey, of this tower block. I remember sitting here and thinking that was like crinoline, the crinoline dresses that girls wear, and I think appear in some Jamaican—slack Jamaican dead [inaudible].

GG: What you presented me with, and I can see those tower blocks and would never have made that connection, is they are indeed like some crinkled, crumpled crinoline fabric—

MC: The fabric. Criss-crossed—

GG: Yes. Criss-crossed, ribbed and so on. And it's just very beautiful—

MC: Yeah. So it comes as a—

GG: So that's a connection that I can completely see a poet would make.

MC: But in a way it's—you see a tower block and you think brutalism, or you think the logical things that society give you that—and then what I come through is I have a certain taintedness or a certain, maybe a salty sexuality or something like that. Or something related to marginal culture, if it was a crinoline or West Indian carnival parade dress or something like that. Because I come from quite a privileged background, it seems a bit—for me, I find that quite refreshing and—not refreshing, but I find it—I find myself coming out of my background.

GG: Yeah, so what you're doing is you're escaping quite a narrow privilege, narrow social circles, but reaching beyond that to the wider life of the city in ways that you find freeing. Okay.

MC: Ways that I find express—in a way, express a taintedness that we felt growing up, me and my brother, from difficult parents and stuff like that.

GG: Okay, so let's start then again with this—something like this ground plan. You're finding that you write poetry this side of psychosis, or perhaps on the far side of a psychotic break or a series of psychotic breaks. So there is a sanity to it which has experience. And you've also got a deep experience with drug culture. Now that's very literary, everything from De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, Coleridge's experiences with opium, all the way through to Timothy Leary, Carlos Castaneda, all of this is informing your work. What's also informing your work is popular culture, the culture of the street, the culture of the city. And so for you, what's happening is that the world has been fragmented, but you're bringing the pieces together into new connections, which are quite surprising and very, very profitable, I would say, in your work. Let me take you to one particular image that keeps recurring across your poetry. It's the image of the Gorgon, of the Medusa with her head cut off and held up by Perseus. Anyone who looks at it directly must turn to stone. Let's look at the situational logic of looking at your life through a mirror, which is the only way you can look, from the mirror of a shield, which is the situation. That Gorgon emblem is, first of all, it's the brand trademark of Versace. And at a certain moment, it becomes the dreadlocks of Bob Marley, of reggae. So here you are with popular culture, haute couture, or popularised haute couture. There's also music. In your poetry, there's

also film. You reference film characters and films quite a lot. So in a way, reading your poetry, I get the sense that I'm looking into a highly burnished surface in which I'm seeing reflected a real world coming into that mirror. What is the situational logic of looking at your life in a mirror?

MC: Well, I suppose you could call it an avoidance or a fear of intimacy, or a—I suppose there's a stylisation to it. There's a sense of difficulty, of obstruction that is important in my work that I need to create the right aperture so it doesn't just all just seep out blandly. It needs to have that aperture. I suppose the opposite is that I wrote a poem on Risperidone, which is called *Risperidone*, which is one of the medications I've taken over the years. I was quite young when I wrote it. I remember Ian Thompson, who's a great father figure for black culture, coming from a fairly privileged place and for me as well, he was a great champion of that poem. Anyway, it's someone who doesn't want to be seen, who is unknown and marginalised.

GG: Perseus is also given the gift of invisibility. That's one of the ways he can approach the Gorgon because he can become invisible. He also has winged feet, he can fly.

MC: Yeah, he's got his off-white greaves or no, his winged feet, sorry. I suppose there's the idea of appearing in all your glory, a bit like Zeus in *Semele*. Zeus appeared in all his glory and he made Semele die because he was so strong. So I think there's that sense of if I show myself, it will be so shameful that everything's just going to die. So there's that element. And I think that it can come from abusive parents or that kind of thing, or just a secrecy or a sense of building up. I don't know.

I think a lot of teenage things go on in that dynamic, in that generic field. There's a lot of teenage there. *I don't want to appear*. The fear of being naked or the humiliations of teenage schoolboy bullying, [inaudible] schoolgirl, schoolboy. And then when you grow up a bit, like we should, you can be of any stature, and you can happily walk around your home naked and just not feel as embarrassed about yourself.

GG: Well, let's take that. Like Ian Thompson, the writer who's written about Jamaica in *The Dead Yard*, or Jacques Blanc, his book about Haiti, he's very interested in black culture. So too are you. You're particularly interested in the black culture and black music—

MC: Yeah.

GG: —Based culture that you've grown up with in London.

MC: Yeah.

GG: But you've found a harbour for yourself in black culture. Tell us about that.

MC: Well, me, I always knew I was a rude boy. Cut that out. [laughs]

GG: You bet I would.

MC: I don't know. I think it definitely comes from a sense of, as I discussed in the piece, to play the line that I know because I don't really know apart from that, there's



a sense of empathy towards a culture that was uprooted and in the West Indian sense, there's an empathy to the culture that is a little less, shall we say, welcome or comfortable in the streets of the UK. And I always thought, actually, in a way, that in South America I don't feel the same empathy towards necessarily—because in South America, everyone feels there's an attitude towards black culture, which isn't—it's not fearful. I think the UK has a fearful—it used to, it used to have. Floranna Benjamin made a speech a few years ago about people submitting her to this prurient, fearful, sexual, racist inquisitiveness. It was very unpleasant, cold, a bit like a parasite or something. Anyway, so I think that in Argentina it's not like that. There's a jostling rivalry, more in the sense that we're all low grade and low stock in some sense.

GG: Now this low grade—your stock is low. This is, as it were, a position that you've encountered in England?

MC: No.

GG: You haven't encountered any racism towards you as Argentinian?

MC: Oh yeah. I mean, yeah. I mean, certainly at school. At school I got—because I was quite hip hop already, people saw my hip hop style and saw that I was called Miguel, and they—I can't quite work it out but I think they immediately saw me as annoying, didn't fit in. And there's a definite hierarchy, power hierarchy, in the years within the house. So in the years of the house, if you didn't knuckle down and just say, 'Sir sir'. No sir', and do well at rugby, then you were not cool.

GG: So you're a white looking foreigner in England?

MC: Yeah. Well I'm not. Less and less. People—I don't look that foreign. I don't look, I don't look that foreign in Argentina, but I think people think I look foreign here.

GG: Yeah, exactly. I suppose that's what I'm saying.

MC: Yeah.

GG: This initial identification with black culture comes from, presumably, your experience of being othered in England. And black people are the other others. Now, along with the music comes a certain drug culture.

MC: Yeah.

GG: Not only from black culture, in the wider world.

MC: Yeah.

GG: It's everywhere. But your encounter with it was really difficult and quite dangerous.

MC: Yeah.

GG: And in much of your poetry, we see at the edges, a very difficult relationship to people who die of drugs overdoses, for example. Could you, to kick off this discussion, could you read us another poem from *Paranoid Narcissism*, which is called *Hematoma*.

MC: *Hematoma*

GG: Just to get a feel for it.

MC: Okay, *Hematoma*.

[MC reading *Hematoma*]

'The vinyl was bible-black. I traced all its lineages  
Its lyrics, its incisions into what surrounded me, to the core  
It would sing in its own language of praise to me;  
It made me feel alive, in its black halos and its songs of happiness.

They played that vinyl at a rave,  
And someone took an overdose and died.  
All the charcoal coagulum in the world  
Couldn't save that geezah.

I sometimes take out the tape-pack from that night –  
And try to listen back, for the five minutes they spliced out –  
When they upped the lights, and switched off the PA.'

GG: Great. There's a poem, incidentally referencing Dylan Thomas, the bible-black, but here's a poem in which a key element is missing. The tape recording of that evening has been spliced and taken out. And there you are, listening to that tape for that moment that has been removed, when someone died, a death overdose.

MC: It's a true story, I think.

GG: I'm sure it is.

MC: It happened.

GG: Simultaneously, it plunges us into that event, at the same time, it splices it out, you can't see it. As though it's difficult to know how to feel about that. It's the umbilical cord. In another poem, you describe another drowning as an individual falling, falling through their own umbilical cord like a dark tunnel down to their death.

MC: I think another point is that maybe it's almost like a QR code. Because you talk about the bible-black, there's an ecstatic description of the vinyl and the music, and the relationship maybe that gives someone an overdose from—

GG: An overdose of joy.

MC: —Like a Romeo and Juliet story or something. And it's almost like the vinyl is like a QR code or, for epileptics, strobe lighting for epileptics. So you put on a song

and it would affect someone because it pushes their buttons at the rave. So that was what I was going for, slightly ludic object, a described object which reifies a person. And then if that person is exposed to the other—so I'm saying it made me feel happy and it's halos of happiness, and that could be a person. And then if you expose someone to that person, then that could be too much to them and they could die, which is referencing in the poem probably a previous relationship. And then there's the—you splice it out, there's the splicing out of that. And to be honest, it was referencing a quite difficult event in my past, my recent past, which ended up being fairly spliced out.

GG: Right, okay. No, I got it. So we've now got—pulling back from that, we've now got a picture of what that device, that Versace device in the Gorgon's head, is somehow doing in your poem, or what it's doing within your poetry. It seems to be that dark, umbilical, disappearing hole at the centre of things. Around which there can be a warping. A warping which involves joy but also a warping of your ability to feel, but nevertheless remains real just slightly out of reach or out of sight. There's another approach across the poetry, it seems to me, which I found a quote for within the poems. This is a quote from the *Minotaur Variations*.

[GG reading *Minotaur Variations*]

'Some arrive early, suffer less, some arrive late, suffer more, and are compensated, by having more to say.'

GG: In many ways, this is the poetry of experience. And quite difficult experience. Where do you want to move your poetry to?

MC: I want to move it to somewhere where the joy of life can be—you just gain joy from the small things in life. To gain joy from maybe a slightly fraught encounter in a cafe where writers work from occasion to occasion. Maybe from a time in a—I'm quite interested at the moment in those liminal experiences. I remember Julia Bird, who's one of the people at the Poetry Society, she said she thought there were two different types of poetry. There was the Winston Churchill poetry where people go [impersonating Winston Churchill] 'We will fight them on the beaches.' A bit like mine sometimes.

GG: Bardic, declamatory.

MC: Yeah. And then you've got the poetry which is like Julia Bird describing the patter of the Indian—of the waiter at the Indian restaurant in Barnes or something. And it's—that's where I'm leaning towards now, I feel in a slightly—in a way. And I've been finding great fun in describing the vagaries, the vicissitudes, the thwarted egos of my new era in which I'm living in West London now, so there's quite a lot of egos around. Just the way people interact is quite funny and mad.

GG: Alright, good. So it's—there is a change.

MC: Yeah, there is a change.

GG: Many people coming first to your work might say, 'Yeah, this is weird. This is really weird.' But some people might just simply say, 'Well, you know, it's a kind of

stoner poetry.' That form of music, genre of music, 'I was going to do this and that today but I [inaudible].' But if one were to look at it as stoner poetry, there's a particular thing that happens, that it looks at things around which it's possible to have regret, lost love relationships, for example, and transforms them into peace.

MC: That's cool.

GG: It does that. That's one of the transformations I can see happening, really across the poetry.

MC: Yeah.

GG: Focusing on—

MC: There's a redemption.

GG: Yeah. You're redeeming what was lost, what was scattered. You're shoring these fragments against your ruins, in that old modernist phrase of T. S. Eliot's from *The Waste Land*.

MC: He's the one who believes in being present and mindful.

GG: Absolutely. What I could read were not only references to contemporary music of all sorts, but quite a lot of modernist poetry. Let's look at T. S. Eliot. Did you, in any sense, as you began to write poetry, want to speak and be in dialogue with that form

of English modernism? What are you in dialogue with when you are echoing T. S. Eliot?

MC: Oh, I suppose what I'm in dialogue with when I'm echoing T. S. Eliot is an attempt to, as he would say, *take the universe and scrumple and scrunch it into a ball. Oh, but how could I? How could I presume?* That's very much a non-verbatim. Very paraphrased. But some element of wanting, and this goes back to my first book, to be honest, but there's an element of wanting to find a theory for the world. I suppose what I want to say is that when you read someone like Don Patterson, his latest book, *Rain*, and you see what he does, you're like, *this is incredibly big poetry*. He's describing things like aliens but in a way that is so logical and beautiful. And he just tears the world apart with a poem. With Eliot, obviously, he was doing that as well, with *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*, mainly. Sometimes I try and give advice. And in my, I think it's my second last poem from now, I did a poem where I talk about how people from Third World someone, let's say from Peru or Somalia, might have less of a convinced view of their own longevity. And as a result, might have a more clear view of the way the time works and also the weight of our actions, like how much they're actually important in the grand scheme of things. Which sounds now like a rote cliché. But I suppose what I'm trying to say is that I was trying to parse something of what she was saying and then put it into a poem. It's just a way of using multiculturalism as a lens with which to bring the same. And that being as fruitful a source of existential information than Eliot, who started telling you about *scrumple, how could I presume, to take the world and scrumple it into a ball*. It all seems quite arid.



GG: So actually, what I hear you saying—

MC: Which is something I learned from recently.

GG: —Is that just your random connections with people within the city— And across cultures within the city—

MC: Yeah, you know what I mean, I think that could be [inaudible] other people—

GG: That this is the text from which you're generating your insight—

MC: Yeah, but I think that other people could do that as well. White people, particularly. Because I think if you copy Elliot, you're not really going to come up with anything new. And anyone can cross-pollinate in that way. It's really interesting. Uber drivers or if you've got friends, which I would suggest most people do, who are from cross-cultural friendships. Yeah, it's a massive text.

GG: It's a massive resource. Absolutely fantastic. Let me take you down to a great wealth in your work, which is some of the lines. Really, at the level, not even of the poems, but of the lines within the poems.

MC: Which is?

GG: There's one of them, 'Paranoid, he sees eyes in the raindrops.'

MC: Oh, yeah.

GG: I spent a long time thinking about that line and looking at that line. And actually, the raindrops did have eyes and they were looking at me. That was great. And that's something like your situation, the situation you described, of learning from being in contact with the multiplicity of presences in the city. There's another one. Let's maybe focus in on this line. 'I filled my inkwell with mercury, And drew faces until the weather changed.' Now we've got the thermometer, that barometer of weather, we've got its mercury, and we've got the idea of you drawing faces in mercury, which, of course, is quicksand. So difficult to do. Just within the line and in the gaps within the lines, huge spaces open up, huge possibilities open up. So your poetry works on this micro level extremely effectively. So presumably, the advice you'd want to give yourself is just do it and don't be constrained. Reach down into the instances of things and find what's new for you. There's another strand within the poetry that really called to me and spoke to me. There seems to be a consistent other voice that breaks in, whose English is, as it were, eccentric.

MC: Really?

GG: Yeah. So it uses different ways of pronouncing English words. Let me give you a quick blast of it in my own version of it. 'Listen I vrainmember the mervous brakedown dat claimed me and I sinking I *tort* ohmygod, its brief life, ohmygod' Where's that voice come from? That slightly off-beam voice, which could be a refugee from Nazi Germany, which could be somebody bringing a patois into English. It seems to be a composite, but is nevertheless a consistent version.

MC: I'm happy that you brought it up because that's one of my favourite poems from *Lootenant Dan*. I got asked that once, actually, when I was being interviewed, fortunately. It doesn't happen every day. I suppose it's a baby language. I think it's just a way of, maybe your inner child could be said, or maybe you create a—it's like when people with stammers sing, if they can talk better. It's a feminine voice. Maybe I have a multiple personality thing where I can do impressions and voices. I think that's a key one. I can do voices because in *Hologram*, I do a lot of different voices of different actors. I do impressions. It's a bit like Alan Partridge or Steve Coogan who can do every voice. So I can't do every voice but I can do a tentative, emotional, charming. It's a bit of a puree of the hard words of English. And in Spanish, I find it's much easier to speak simply.

GG: What I'd like to do, just to bring us out—what I'd like to just bring us out is to get you to read one more poem, and a poem that affected me very deeply when I read it. And I know that one of your critics has said, A. N. Wilson, how deeply these poems can move and shake us.

MC: Yes.

GG: And this was a poem that moved and shook me.

MC: Okay.

GG: Would you mind reading it?

MC: *Drown?*

GG: Yes.

MC: Okay, cool. *Drown.*

[MC reading *Drown*]

'Autumn was beginning to flare  
In the kinking woods approaching Zagreb –  
Back from Punta Cristo,  
Dimensions music festival;  
Will, my friend, was down to earth; Northern;  
Girls found him approachable;  
But the way he bled my wi-fi credit  
And answered at a waiter  
Made me wonder if this was true.

On the last day a boy drowned in the sea;  
At the beach party that night  
DJ Jim Bane played the Hot 8 Brass Band's cover

Of 'Sexual Healing' by Marvin Gaye  
'Bag Lady' by Erykah Badu  
'Baby Let Me Take You (In My Arms)' by The Detroit Emeralds.

Did the pressure when he sank stimulate his heart?

Did the oxyhaemoglobin trip his brain cells into life;

Did he see a mermaid that looked like God;

Evanesce into his own umbilical cord –

Was it like a long dark tunnel?

The set followed with the Coki-sampled classic,

‘Just One of Those Days (Dry cry)’.

GG: I wondered as I read that whether this random person who, in their young life, drowns at a musical festival on a beach one night and somehow you're there, that in writing this poem for him, your identification with him is so close, your mirroring of his death, so close that that is also your death. Is that the situation of your poetry?

MC: Yeah, I think that when I had my problem when I was 18, there was a sense of dying there. There was a sense of tragedy there that I noticed amongst my family. I suppose writing this piece has brought it back to me and, obviously, I've been becoming more and more engaged with what went on in me when I had my psychotic break. Without wanting to sound too precious, I do feel that, in a way, the way my mind works will never be the same again. It will never work the same way, it will always be more aleatoric, it will always be a bit more chaotic. And that's not me wanting to sound like a prima donna, I know a lot of people have stress and that makes their minds chaotic. It's—who knows what goes on in anyone's head, to be

honest. And I feel I'm quite clever sometimes, and I can be very good at handling situations and sharp and stuff. So it's not to say that I'm some—that it was a death knell, but sometimes it can be a trauma that is difficult to get over because it's like your eye, your aperture to the world is your head.

GG: So in a way, you're holding your head and your hair in your hands at that point. So not to let go entirely, the Gorgon image. The fundamental transformation in your poetry is from that break, that death back to life. Not the same life, but another life. A kind of life which you can, as it were, put into practice now.

MC: Here you go.

GG: Miguel, thanks very much. Take care.

MC: Thank you, man.

Presenter: Miguel Cullen was In Conversation with Gabriel Gbademosi. To hear more writers, go to [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk).

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