

# WRITERSMOSAIC

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Jason Allen-Paisant in conversation with Colin Grant

Discussing Aimé Césaire's *Return to My Native Land*

at the London Review of Books bookshop

[Music]

**Colin Grant (CG):** This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*, and I'm Colin Grant. I'm going to be talking with the poet, Jason Allen-Paisant, about the Martiniquan poet, Aimé Césaire, in particular about Césaire's poem, *Return to My Native Land*, which was first published in 1939 and was reissued late last year. But I began by talking with Jason about his own collection, *Self-Portrait as Othello*, which Jason dedicated to those who inhabit the liminal space.

[Music]

**Jason Allen-Paisant (JA):** Those who live in multiplicity, those who can't claim to be a singular self, not that any of us probably are, but some of us probably claim to be. But I—let's start that again. I think I'm talking—well, I know I'm referring to people who are always at the intersection of identities, probably because of where they're from. I think the immigrant condition often lends itself to that because you're always between places. You have arrived here, in Britain, in France, where have you, but you're always still back there, somewhere else.

**CG:** So Aimé Césaire would have been one of those people?

**JA:** I think so. I was thinking about that when you were mentioning reading out the quote, not thinking that you were directing it to me [laughs]. But I don't know if Aimé Césaire would have—hello, everybody, by the way. Good evening. It's nice to be here and to see the place filled out, it's really lovely, and to be celebrating this book. I don't know if Aimé Césaire would have characterized himself that way. I have a hunch that he might. He is somebody who left his native Martinique at the age of merely 17 years old, came to Paris in 1931. Am I doing the maths right? He was born in 1913, arrived in Paris in 1931—

**CG:** Yeah, sounds about right.

JA: —to be a student at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. Anybody familiar with the French system and the école préparatoire? It's this prestigious section or segment of a high school that prepares you for entry into what they call the grande école, which are these prestigious—they're tertiary institutions, but they're like the Rolls Royce of tertiary institutions. And he ended up there in this, I would say a condition of arrival, which is also a condition of shock. There was a lot to take on for the boy that he was coming from Martinique. There was a lot of learning. He was already a very bright person, but he began to go even deeper into the French literary canon and also other literary canons because Césaire was a classicist. It's the classics that he, one might say, majored in. Certainly at the École normale, his major thing was Latin and Greek, but he was also proficient in Italian. He mentions reading Dante in the *Divine Comedy* in the original, for example. He was a very hungry—intellectually hungry individual that embraced a multiplicity of influences and cultures. And it comes out in his writing. It comes out in his writing, his interest for the worlds of ancient Greece, the Classics, as I've said, his interest in African civilizations, oriental civilizations.

CG: Yeah. The reason why I'm looking at your book is because I've written down here that *Return to My Native Land* was published in 1939. He was young then.

JA: Yeah, he was young. How old would he have been?

CG: Twenty six. Wow. Impressive, because it's an autobiographical poem, isn't it?  
You better say yes to this.

JA: It is [laughs]. It is clearly autobiographical.

CG: There's a but. There's a big but there.

JA: But it's not a confessional poem or a strictly autobiographical poem. I think it's—

CG: Yeah, he doesn't name himself.

JA: It's connected to his life, obviously, to the person he is.

CG: Sure. But he's following a man's journey from their homeland, Martinique, to Europe, to France, and discovering something about himself whilst he's there.

JA: It's looking back at Martinique from Europe. I think it's fair to say that the poem really starts from Europe. Europe is the vantage point. We're probably going to talk about this anyway, but the moment at which he begins to write the poem was in 1935, in the summer of that year. He was in a city in then Yugoslavia, on the

Dalmatian coast. Anybody here speaks—it would be Croatian, yeah? Šibenik. Šibenik. What's—how do we pronounce that? But that's where he was. He'd been invited there by a friend, whom he'd met randomly in the streets in Paris, a guy, a bloke called Petar, Petar Guberina. And Petar brought him home. And he was given a room, and the room overlooked the Adriatic Sea. And he saw an island, that's how he tells the story, and he said to Petar, 'What a beautiful island. What's the name of it?' And the name of the place was Martinska. And the name immediately evoked Martinique to him. Martinska literally translates to the island of Saint Martin. But it was a moment of serendipity for him. It was the summer, it was beautiful. I think it was gorgeous as well. And perhaps an association was made with the beauty of his country. Certainly that was what set him off, a sense of coming to—spoke about the name, but the serendipity of coming close to encounter his island, even though he's thousands of miles. He famously said that, 'I didn't have any money to go back to Martinique, but I had enough money to come here. And I met Martinique here.' So he started writing the poem. He started writing the poem in that room. The following morning, he said—he took his school notebook. Incidentally, in French, as you probably all know, the poem is called *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*. So he wrote the first, I don't know, pages of the notebook from Europe. And I think we get—I certainly get a sense of that in the opening pages. It's not clearly said, but I get the feeling of the island looked at from a distance, probably a great distance.

CG: Well, in your introduction, you say about writers like him: something at an unconscious level pushes a West Indian artist, like Césaire, to go away from his birthplace in order to better understand the uncanny condition of the plantation society and the colonial system which is still so present in everyday life of Martinique. That's what he was doing.

JA: Yeah. Yeah, that sort of thing.

CG: And you couldn't do it by remaining in Martinique?

JA: I don't know that you couldn't, but I think an entire generation of intellectuals felt that they couldn't. Let's just think about all the West Indian intellectuals from the post-war period who came to Britain or who came to France, who migrated because they thought that—I think it's a complex array of factors, clearly. Within that, I think, is a sense of smallness.

CG: Yeah, yeah. They want to get to the centre, don't they?

JA: They want to get to the centre, because they've also been educated to think that this is the centre.

CG: And Césaire was educated to think that he was French.

JA: Of course, of course. That's the French approach to colonisation, assimilation.

CG: Shall we give the audience a little flavour of some of the writing? It's one of the pleasures of this book is that almost every line is a jewel. So can you give a little reading at the beginning?

[JA reads from *Return to My Native Land*]

'At the end of the small hours, the rising wind of the past, of broken faith, of an undefined duty slipping away . . . and those other small hours, the early morning of Europe . . .

To leave.

As there are hyena-men and panther-men,

so I shall be a Jew man

a Kaffir man

a Hindu-from-Calcutta man

a man-from-Harlem-who-hasn't-got-the-vote

Famine man, curse man, torture man, you may seize him at any moment, beat him, kill him — yes, perfectly fine to kill him — accounting to no one, having to offer an excuse to no one.

a Jew man

a pogrom man

a whelp

a beggar

but can you kill Remorse with its beautiful face like that of an English lady stupefied at finding a Hottentot's skull in her soup tureen?

I want to rediscover the secret of great speech and of great burning. I want to say storm. I want to say river. I want to say tornado. I want to say leaf, I want to say tree. I want to be soaked by every rainfall, moistened by every dew. As frenetic blood rolls on the slow current of the eye, I want to roll words like maddened horses like new children like clotted milk like curfew like traces of a temple like precious stones buried deep enough to daunt all miners. The man who couldn't understand me couldn't understand the roaring of a tiger.

Rise, phantoms, chemical-blue from the forest of hunted beasts of



twisted machines of jujube-trees of rotten flesh of a basket of oysters  
of eyes of a lacework of lashes cut from the lovely sisal of human skin I  
would have words huge enough to contain you all and you too  
stretched earth  
drunken earth,  
earth great sex raised in the sun  
earth great delirium of the phallus of God  
earth risen wild from the sea's locker with a bunch  
of cecrops in your mouth  
earth whose surfing face I must compare to the  
mad and virgin forests  
that I would wish to wear as countenance before  
the undeciphering eyes of men'

JA: I'll stop there.

CG: Thank you. So you're Jamaican?

JA: I am, yeah.

CG: My parents are Jamaican. I grew up in the capital of England, a place called Luton. And—

JA: You were born in Jamaica?

CG: No, I'm born here. [Exaggerated Jamaican accent] Born here. But whenever my mother talked about people from Martinique or Guadeloupe, she'd say they were language people, and so they were foreign, they weren't known. What drew you to Aimé Césaire?

JA: I studied him at university. He was on my syllabus in my second year, I think it was, of French. I did a major in French for my undergraduate, and he was on the syllabus. We had to study him.

CG: Okay, well, a better question is why are you still reading him for 20 years or more?

JA: How could you stop reading someone like Aimé Césaire? You've heard the poem, right?

CG: Right, yeah.

**JA:** [Laughs] It's quite a high standard. I'm a poet, as everyone knows. It's something that you've got to absorb into your DNA as a poet. There are lots of things that you want to do that way.

**CG:** How do you do it? How do you absorb another poet into your DNA?

**JA:** Well, I read them over and over again. I memorize poetry as well. I think when you've got the lines in your head or in your body or wherever, you begin to somehow connect to the work in an intense way. It's there. It's there. It's something that you can draw upon.

**CG:** I'm interested in that because I write as well, but I'm wary of absorbing too many other writers' tone, voice. So up to a point, I'll stop reading them. I don't want to hear Naipaul anymore, thank you very much. Maybe he's not such an attractive character, maybe that's why I don't want to hear him. Maybe I'm not as mature as you in terms of my confidence about my writing, but I don't want myself to be too porous. But it sounds like you want to be porous and let these people in.

**JA:** Well, that's how I've approached poetry. I think when I—I've also been taught like this, so it's what happens by chance, I suppose. I feel that—no, I don't feel like my

voice is contaminated. I think my voice is created by, forgive the food metaphor, but digesting, absorbing a whole range of voices. I think they chime with me and they resonate with things in my life, my affects, my experiences, and what's going to come out is always going to be a—I think as you grow as a writer, your unique alchemy is formed, and it's not necessarily an imitation of one particular person.

CG: If you were at a dinner party, maybe with me, and you wanted—if I said to you, 'What kind of a poet is he anyway? What kind of a poet is he?'

JA: Cosmic.

CG: Cosmic. Because there's a line in the book, *Return to My Native Land*, where the protagonist says, 'I want to roll words like maddened horses.'

JA: Restless.

CG: Restless horses?

JA: No, maddened horses, but it makes me think of a restless lyricism. I'm not sure what I mean by that, but there is an intensity to the lyricism, and there is a—if I were to compare it to an element, I would say fire. I feel the desire of the poet for

something, for an embrace, for the whole world, for feeling connected to the world, for feeling that his being is at ease within the world. I don't want it to sound abstract. It's that questing desire. I think at the base of it is a lot of erudition. But how do you write the poem so that the erudition is worn lightly, and it's not brow-beating or heavy-handed? I think that's what Césaire manages to do. It's impelled by philosophy. But to say that is not to say that it's heavy-handed. He manages to carry that off through the lyricism. And how do you arrive at that as a poet? It's a question that I keep on asking myself. It's something perhaps undefinable, something that you can't logically pinpoint.

**CG:** But it must have been a crucible for him being in Paris in the '30s and meeting people like Senghor. So we mentioned in the beginning this notion of Négritude. So for people who don't know what Négritude is, one of the phrases that he coined for this movement, what is Négritude, and why did it come about?

**JA:** Négritude is essentially a word for a cultural awakening, an awakening to Africa and its different worlds, to African wisdom, philosophy, culture, civilization, which seems probably commonplace to a lot of people today, but at the time, we're talking about the early 1930s, it was a huge moment to talk about the fact that Africa has a civilization or has civilizations, has thought and has history and that sort of a thing. That's what Négritude comes down to, an awakening. An approach to art as well

that had to do with the embrace of African approaches to art that have been marginalized in the Western history of art. He talks a lot about this concept called participation, which is the idea, according to him, this is how he puts it, that for the African artist, they participate in the object that they make. So African art is not just a distanced thing of creating something out there and that your creative energies go in one direction, that the African conception of art is one in which you are transformed by the object that you, quote, unquote, 'make'. That was a constant thread in his thought. So Négritude is those two things. It probably can be characterized in other ways as well, but ultimately, it's what it comes down to, a solitary shock about the worth of African culture and having a seat at the table of knowledge, of intellectualism, and of wisdom.

**CG:** And would he have been influenced, because there are people at the time from the Caribbean, people like Claude McKay, African-Americans, the [inaudible] of the Harlem Renaissance?

**JA:** Yes, he was influenced by writers from the Harlem Renaissance. He wrote a short piece on Alain Locke in *Tropiques*, which is a magazine that he co-edited with friends and colleagues from that period. He talks about encountering the work of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and similar figures. That was a big deal for Césaire, living in Paris in the '30s. And he talks a lot about what Senghor, the

Senegalese poet, Léopold Sédar Senghor, who was a student alongside him at the École normale, what Senghor brought to him, this understanding of Africa. I mean, what are we talking about when we talk about this understanding of Africa? Perhaps it's clear, but let's spell it out. Africa was denigrated where Césaire came from. They were African, of African heritage for the most part, but it was a place that you needed to distance yourself from, turn you back on. And he—

**CG:** It was an embarrassment.

**JA:** It was an embarrassment. It was below culture or subculture, sub-everything. And here was Senghor, and in body, so it was the first time meeting Africans. I think that needs to be said. It was the first time—and interacting with them. The literary salon that he attended in the mid-to-late '30s was influential in introducing him to African thought. It was a salon run by two Martinicans called Paulette Nardal and Jeanne Nardal. They were journalists and writers. And Césaire would go to their home. Quite a number of members of the African intelligentsia and the black intelligentsia in Paris would frequent that literary salon. So those two figures are often marginalized, but they're very important figures as well in the space that they created for him as a young man, as a young student in Paris.

CG: I wonder if you could give us another reading that gives us a flavour of the kind of people he's interacting with, not just literary people, but ordinary black people in his journey through Europe. One of the things that is clear is that he inhabits other people's voices as well. He has lots of quirky characters who pop up, and there's an old man that you're going to read about, aren't you?

JA: Yeah, I think I chose this because I was thinking of how to give the audience a flavour of the different modes of the book. Because—

CG: Yeah. Because one important thing to say is that he divests himself of the Eurocentric view of life that he's been schooled in and has an ability to inhabit and express an Afrocentric view. Is that what you're trying to do?

JA: In this passage that I'm about to read, he's doing something more intricate, I would say, but I'll read the passage before talking about that. Let me read these two pages, and then we can discuss that some more.

[JA reads from *Return to My Native Land*]

'And I, and I,

I who sang with clenched fist

You must be told the length to which I carried



cowardice.

In a tram one night, facing me, a Negro.

He was a Negro tall as a pongo who tried to make himself very small on a tram seat. On that filthy tram seat he tried to abandon his gigantic legs and his starved boxer's trembling hands. And everything had left him, was leaving him. His nose was like a peninsula off its moorings; even his negritude was losing its color through the effects of a perpetual tanner's bleach. And the tanner was Poverty. A great sudden long-eared bat whose claw-marks on that face were scarred, scabby islands. Or perhaps Poverty was a tireless workman fashioning some deformed cartridge. You could see clearly how the industrious malevolent thumb had modeled a lump of the forehead, pierced two tunnels — parallel and disturbing — through the nose, drawn out the disproportion of the upper lip, and by a master stroke of caricature had planed, polished, varnished the smallest, neatest little ears in all creation.

He was an ungainly Negro without rhythm or measure.

A Negro whose eyes rolled with bloodshot weariness.

A Negro without shame, and his big smelly toes sniggered in the deep gaping lair of his shoes.

Poverty, it has to be said, had taken great pains to finish him off.

She had hollowed the eye socket and painted it with a cosmetic of dust and rheum.

She had stretched the empty space between the solid hinge of the jaws and the bone of an old, worn cheek. On this she had planted the shiny little bristles of several days' beard. She had maddened the heart and bent the back.

And the whole thing added up to a perfectly hideous Negro, a peevish Negro, a melancholy Negro, a slumped Negro, hands folded as in prayer upon a knotty stick. A Negro shrouded in an old, threadbare jacket. A Negro who was comical and ugly, and behind me women giggled as they looked at him.

He was COMICAL AND UGLY,  
COMICAL AND UGLY, for a fact.

I sported a great smile of complicity . . .

My cowardice rediscovered!

I bow to the three centuries which support my civil rights and my minimized blood.

My heroism, what a joke!

This town suits me to perfection.

My soul is supine. Like this town, supine in the dirt and mud.

This town, my face of mud.

I demand for my face the dazzling prize  
of being spat upon!

**CG:** Wow, thank you. I've met him. I met characters like that, is what I mean. They're broken, shipwrecked people, who've come from elsewhere to the metropolis, and they can't find a place for themselves, and they're despised. And as a black person, sometimes you feel embarrassed to be in their company.

**JA:** Yeah, but I think—I hear you, and I feel you, but the character who interests me most here is the speaker. I think they're the one that's performing a work on themselves, a kind of operation, a sort of surgery on themselves. I feel that work and the effort of it. I feel that deep vulnerability of self-examination. I feel that vulnerability to court shame, because there is a shame in what he's saying, because he's talking about being disdainful and being contempt—and seeing this Negro through the eyes of contempt, and not being able to see him through any other lens. And he's giving us that. I feel him giving us himself almost as a rite of passage to be able to move to a different place. And we see that in the wake of this passage. Because I realized that the tone of the poem immediately changes after this passage. We immediately begin to hear him using the word 'us', the pronoun 'us', and it becomes a 'we'. And we get the line, 'Our heart daily busts with meanness', and suddenly he is part of his people now. At the beginning of the poem, I didn't

read the exact beginning, but it's quite distanced. It's a distanced gaze. He's looking at these scenes of objection. He's looking at the poverty of his people. He's looking at Martinique as a place of muteness. All of this muteness accumulated in the body through centuries and centuries of colonial violence. And all of that amounts to something of sadness and a contempt or near contempt. And suddenly, after this passage, he gradually, and as I said, there's something that immediately happens, but what you get after this passage is a gradual moving into viewing his people through the lens of grace, a grace with which he's able to see everything and his people and the possibility of a different future, the possibility of a different way of seeing, which is really, really important.

The question of what can poetry do, and what am I, and what can I do as a poet? And we know, of course, that he would go on to become a politician and a politician poet. He was very much a politician who spoke poetry from the lectern, from the stages, but it's very rare. If we had time, we could talk to you—give you extracts of some of his speeches, which you wouldn't hear a politician talking like that today. But it's—so I wanted to read this scene because I find it uncomfortable sometimes to read. And even reading it just now to a crowd, I feel it's a mix of things. Am I seeing myself a little bit in that Negro? It's a very uncomfortable thing. But he has to enter into that gaze to liberate himself from it. The line that says, 'He was COMICAL

AND UGLY', is written in bold, is written in caps. 'He was COMICAL AND UGLY, COMICAL AND UGLY, for a fact.'

CG: But he moves from disdain to empathy.

JA: Yes.

CG: You can see that this character is a candidate for compassion.

JA: Yes, and what it is to address one's complicity.

CG: Well, listen, I'd like to ask you all to put your hands together to thank Jason Allen-Paisant. [Applause] Thank you. Thank you, Penguin, for reissuing this. I think it's a valuable tool for understanding how someone can evolve from being considered himself a Frenchman and someone who maybe despises or is unsure about his African ancestry to move and evolve, to become a person that's more holistic. And I think you heard today—I think Jason's wrestling with that idea of this evolution of this poet in the making. So thanks very much, Jason, and thanks very much to the London Review Bookshop.

[Applause and music]

I was in conversation with Jason Allen-Paisant. To hear more writers, go to [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk).

Jason Allen-Paisant was in conversation with Colin Grant

A recording of this interview can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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