

WRITERS MOSAIC

Alex Wheatle and Colin Grant

In Conversation with Susan Pitter

[A few song lines play out from *Natural Mystic* by Bob Marley and the Wailers]

There's a natural mystic blowing through the air

If you listen carefully now you will hear

This could be the first trumpet

Might as well be the last

Many more will have to suffer'

Susan Pitter (SP): Hello everybody. So Colin and Alex, thank you so much for joining us here today at Ilkley Literature Festival 50th anniversary year, so of course we bring the best for the best celebration of the best literature festival.

I'm delighted that the three of us can take part in this conversation.

We share so much, being the children of Jamaican parents who came here in the so-called Windrush era. We're all born roughly around the same time. You'll have to read all about that, we're not divulging our ages today [audience laughter]. But what we do know is that we came of age and grew up in the 70s and 80s. And though we can share a great deal, I can't walk in your shoes as black men. But your books help us to take us on a journey. In *I'm Black So You Don't Have to Be: A Memoir in Eight Lives*, Colin, you've created a beautiful collection of intimate portraits that build a poignant, sometimes painful testimony, laced with wit and revelations of the black British experience of family, identity, race and generational change. Alex, your breathtaking memoir, *Sufferah: Memoir of a Brixton Reggae Head*, illuminates the impact on your life of knowing nothing of your parentage, of loneliness and unfathomable brutality at the hands of the care system and the police. You paint a picture of your time in the 70s and 80s Brixton, from the solace and joy in reggae music to imprisonment for protesting in the 1981 uprisings, and your search for identity. I just want to start off by asking you about the timing of your books. You know, you've written works before, some of them memoir formats, some of them fiction, some of them non fiction. But I wanted to ask, what made you want to dig deeper now? What's different now and why you chose now to write about your lives, basically? Why now and not before?

Alex Wheatle (AW): OK, shall I go first? With me, after—I'm not sure how many of you are aware of the *Small Axe* series directed by Steve McQueen. After that was broadcast, many people approached me, wrote to me, messaged me, 'Alex, this is incredible, what more is there to tell?' Because they felt it was a bit short. They felt sometimes it was about context, because Steve McQueen only had an hour for this drama. So that is when I decided, *right, perhaps now is the time to write my biography*. And so, I always intended to write it, but maybe I wanted to wait, maybe until I was a little bit older. So yeah, I began to write it after my episode was broadcast, because it got a tremendous reception after it was broadcast on BBC One. And so I just wanted to fill in the gaps and maybe answer a few questions that people wanted to know and I wanted to be open, so it was perfect timing for me.

SP: And Colin?

CG: Yeah, I read a book by Margo Jefferson, who's a writer, great writer, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, African-American writer, who wrote—her first book was called *Negroland*, which is about the upper-middle-class black people in America, which I knew little about. So I thought that was fascinating; the idea that there are aspects of even black life that are still

hidden. So that intrigued me about how one could do that in the experiences that I've had. Then she wrote a book called *Constructing a Nervous System*. It's about how you build an identity through your experiences, with her it was through music, what kind of musical influences have influenced her life. When I was writing my sixth book now, I was thinking, *Oh, the previous five books, they've not been as revelatory as they might have been*. Because I don't know about your life, but I'm much more revelatory in the company of my friends, who I know, they know my vices, and they're not going to share them with other people [SP laughs]. But also, it's more honest to be like that. I thought, *Well, why don't I try to write in a way that I would write if I was talking to my friends in a pub, or something?* In the early introduction, I talk about this thing called the black nod. Are you familiar with the black nod? [They laugh.] I suppose there are other kinds of nods out there. [Laughter] I got the idea of the black nod, writing about the black nod, from watching Second World War films, where the British prisoners of war would be escaping from some German prisoner-of-war camp, and then suddenly they're on the streets of Berlin or some other city, and they can't speak a lick of German between them, and they're pretending not to know each other because they don't want to reveal that they're escapees, so they just nod at each other as they pass. And we did that, I think, when we were growing up. If we were in a place where we weren't familiar, we'd look for a black person to do the

nod to, just to say, look, I see you, I've got your back in case there's any trouble. I thought, this time round, I was going to invite everybody, no matter their colour, to the black nod. So I nod in the book, and I open it out to you to receive the nod and to nod back.

SP: Thank you. So let's start off diving into the book with the early days. They're not particularly easy early days. Colin, you're raised in Luton with your siblings, and until your teen years with both your parents, Ethlyn and Bageye who you describe as being a tyrant who ruled through trauma and pain, that was both physical and psychological.

CG: Yep.

SP: Alex, when your mother returns to Jamaica, she leaves you in your father's care in Brixton. Unable to cope, he hands you over as a baby to the care system. And you write of unimaginable, for the reader, trauma. Shirley Oaks, that children's home where you stayed until age 16, meted out brutality and racism to a child who had no-one. Those circumstances you bring to life, both of you, on the page. How did they impact and shape you as black men first, and as writers too?

AW: First of all, I wasn't sure who I was. I had no identity, because I never received any visits from any family members, or any black people in particular. And so I was raised to feel inferior to everybody else. And I remember, I guess what was most painful was every other Sunday, they would have Visiting Day for the other kids in my particular cottage. And I used to look out the window and ask the guardians, you know, 'When is someone coming to visit me?' And they would tell me that, 'Oh, because my parents left me on the dock of the bay, and they went back to the jungle.'

And that's all I knew, because I didn't have—when I had social workers come to visit, they spent their time with the guardians, I'll never forget this, eating custard creams [CG laughs]. Because as a kid, you're only given the rich tea biscuits, never custard creams. [Laughter] You have to be on your best, best, best, best behaviour to get a custard cream.

SP: For the luxury!

AW: Yeah. And so they spent very little time with you, the social workers, so I could never build up a relationship with them, to trust them, to share what was happening to me. And so most of the time, I lived in fear, I lived in fear, and I was made to feel inferior and because of the colour of my

skin and everything else, and because of my working class as well, because many white children who I spent time with, they were forced to live in fear too, because of the class levels and so on. So I didn't realise my identity until much later, until my late teen years. So that came later, but as a child growing up, I knew nothing about my black identity whatsoever.

SP: We'll come on to identity, and what about as a writer?

AW: As a writer, I think 16, 17, 18, I used writing as some sort of therapy, because you've got all this anger and resentment and trauma inside of you, and where could it go? And at the time, I didn't know what counselling was. I didn't know how to access that in my day. I mean, we're talking, what, late 1970s, early 1980s. Today, you know, it's great when I visit schools, they've actually got counsellors on site now, but in my day, you know, and the teachers weren't equipped either, so there was no place for me to go. So it came out organically for me. I just had to share it somehow. And that, you know, my best friend became my pen and paper. And so I just wrote down what I was feeling inside here and here, wrote it down there, and that made me feel a little bit better.

SP: Thank you. Colin?

CG: Yeah, it was Bageye, my father, Bageye, was a tyrant. He was called Bageye because he had these permanent bags under his eyes. And one aspect of his tyranny was being in a car with him. So he yearned to own a car. He'd worked at Vauxhall Motors in Luton. And how embarrassing must it be to work at a factory making cars but not own one? So I wrote a book about him wanting to own this car. And whenever he got the car, when he got the car, he didn't want to drive by himself. He'd always select a child to drive with him. And I was one of five siblings at the time, and each of my siblings learned how to long down their mouths—make themselves look miserable—so they would never be chosen. So he always chose me. I never knew how to make myself miserable [laughter] so he'd always choose me. But to go in a car with a Bageye was to go in a car with someone who has the equivalent of a grenade. He hasn't pulled the pin yet, but he might pull the pin. So it was a very combustible time.

And so Bageye, who's a complicated character, who I'm sure he has some positive qualities, but when we were growing up, my siblings, he was the giant in Jack and the Beanstalk. So he was often residing at the top of the house. We were the collective Jack at the bottom, and the Beanstalk was the staircase. And we would devise—the staircase would be lined by a carpet—we'd loose the runners on the staircase so that he would trip and break his neck [nervous laughter] and we would scrape off poison

from the fly killer paper into his coffee so that he'd drink it and poison himself. Come the day, he always had some sort of sixth sense. He would never drink from that cup, or he'd skip over the loose carpet. And so for many years, when I was asked about my father, I said I feared that my father would die before I had a chance to kill him. So that was my feeling about him. But the other side of that is that he was quite a colourful character, and a lot of the people that I grew up with were kind of violent, because men were very good at beating—they were world-class beaters, these West Indians! But they had some amusing qualities to them, and I tried to reflect that in the book as well.

SP: How difficult was it—Just briefly touch on this for us—how difficult was it for you both to revisit that trauma and pain and get it onto the page?

AW: It was very difficult, because I began the process when I was 15, 16, 17 years old. And so at least when I approached it many, many years later, at least I had that experience back then, as I kind of did my self-therapy. So it was a little bit easier, I think. It wasn't the case of I'd never visited it before. And so by the time the Steve McQueen series came on, I was ready. It wasn't as traumatising as I first expected. And so the words came quite easily. When you live the life of what I have, and the

experiences that I have, the memories are still playing like a cinema in my head. So it was very much easy to relate that and put it on the page.

SP: Right.

AW: So I found it easier than maybe some others. I don't know. But I think because I did that therapy beforehand, the pen could flow.

SP: And Colin?

CG: I think I come from a family of storytellers, and my mum's a great storyteller. So all the stories were always there around me as I was growing up. And so it was quite easy to sort of pick them. But the most difficult thing was to locate them in the bigger picture of the theme of the book, which is all really about understanding and forgiveness. But the biggest problem was the fact that the people I'm writing about are all alive. And as we both know, we all know, that Jamaicans are the most litigious people on the planet. So I was nervous about how it might go down with some people. So that's the trickier thing, how it would be received.

SP: Right. Okay. So we touched on identity and how that was shaped, particularly in the 70s and 80s, which was a tumultuous period. Give us a sense of the people, the places, the culture that shaped your identities as young black men growing up.

AW: Well, in my case, some people found it hilarious because I came from Shirley Oaks when I was, what, pushing on to 16 years of age. And growing up in—Shirley's only about 12 miles south of Brixton, but the culture change is just enormous. And so I think I was still celebrating John Travolta and Saturday Night Fever when I entered Brixton. And so I—

CG: Did you bust the moves?

AW: I would not dare! I would not dare because Brixton is a reggae town [laughter], not a disco town. But me, unaware of this, I was wearing my three-button trousers. You remember those high-waisted three-button trousers with the flares?

CG: Nice! [laughs]

AW: I was wearing my—what do you call them? The wide-lapelled flower shirts. I mean, they were so wide that they can knock people off the street

when you're walking along the street [laughter]. You know, and I was wearing these platform shoes as well. And so I was about 6'2", instead of about 5'7" [laughter]. And this guy called Earl, he was at the hostel where I was about to reside, and he looked at me like I was an alien.

He said, 'Where you come from, boy?' And I asked him, you know, 'Can you show me around?' He said, 'What, dressed like that?' And then when he said, 'Look, we've got to sort out your clothing.' And he saw me walk along the street and he said, 'We've got to sort out your walking too!' [Laughter] You know, so I had a very quick education to learn within my first few days, even for people to talk to me. And even then, that was a problem because I had this Surrey BBC kind of voice and stuff, and they spoke in this kind of cross-hybrid kind of thing, kind of Brixton, kind of Cockney. You know, I couldn't understand a word they said! All this Brixtonian slang. So I had to kind of—as you do, you kind of nod. You know, you kind of nod, kind of pretend that you understand, but I didn't have a clue. So it took me a few weeks to pick up on the lingo. Years later, people remarked that I'm very good at dialogue, but I was forced to listen attentively to see what people said or, you know, check their body language and so on to see whether they approved of something or not. So, yeah, it was funny. It was funny in those early days.

SP: You mention as well in your book the role of someone who, it looks like, played a pivotal role in helping to shape your identity and sense of worth as well. And that was Simeon. You could tell us a little bit about him. I understand you also have a reading for us, on Simeon.

AW: Yeah, Simeon. He was a Rastafarian in his mid-40s. He found himself in prison because he liked to smoke a chalice in front of the police. There you go! But he was a very avid reader. He was a cabinetmaker. And we shared a cell in prison after the Brixton Uprising of 1981. And he was the first one who actually sat down with me and instilled black pride in me. And he spoke about where I came from. And, you know, Africa was a place of great civilisations and so forth. And he told me to be proud of that, you know, because I told him the story about, you know, the guardians told me that I was left on the dock of the bay and then went back to the jungle. And he said, 'Oh no, no, no, no, no.' He said, 'Get that out of your head'. And so, yes, he was definitely the one who made me believe that, you know, I wasn't low-caste and my life had some value and I could make a contribution. You know, so he made me believe that. And I think it's still a problem today where sometimes young people believe they have nothing to contribute so they seek other avenues to do what they do. So I was very, I was very fortunate to share a cell with him. So I'm just going to share a page or so. This chapter is called Prison School.

And I made very few friends in prison. Simeon was the father I never had. There were days when I felt incredibly alone. At night, I tried to brace myself against it. I knew an attack would come. Depression was a constant shadow. Simeon encouraged me to sing. He reminded me of the power of the human voice. 'Sufferahs marched around the walls of Jericho for six days, singing their songs,' he said with a glint in his eye. He loved his history. 'And on the seventh time, they blew their trumpets and let out a mighty chant. The walls came tumbling down. Yes, sir, if you choose the right words, you can tear down the walls of any city or institution. Sing out, my youth!'

Dennis Brown was one of Simeon's favourite reggae artists as well. *Deliverance Will Come* from his *Words of Wisdom* album has a place in my top three Dennis Brown songs. I can still hear Simeon's deep baritone as we sang it together. [Sings] 'For I have seen the land of my father in my vision from the hills of captivity.' It opens with blazing trumpets and a driving bass line, and its lyrics offer hope for a better tomorrow. More believable and relatable than any sermon I've heard from a preacher. The album cover itself is a true work of art. Check it out. Message to my family here: when you host my funeral, play this and get everyone skanking. I'll be smiling.

So that's the kind of effect he had on me. And a lasting one.

SP: Thank you. Yeah, and a lasting one. Absolutely. Let's move on a little bit now around protest and resistance, because that was the time that we were in. Colin, thinking of that, you write about the dilemma of being black, that dilemma as being invisible as well as hyper-visible. Can you elaborate on that a little for us?

CG: Well, I wonder whether you heard the phrase, I'm sure you probably did, about the way to get on in life. There's a Jamaican phrase which is, 'play fool to catch wise'.

SP: Mm-hmm.

CG: And that's the idea that you dial down your difference in order to disabuse people that you constitute a threat, which comes from slavery. And some people talk about dialling down your colour. And so to get on in the BBC and to get on in any institution, you have to dial down your difference. So I remember going to my interview for the BBC, and I'd whistle Vaughan Williams! Or I'd quote, I don't know, Schopenhauer. I wouldn't start reciting the lyrics of *Burning Spear*, is what I'm saying. I'd

give them the idea that I was just like them. And that works for a while. But then you get caught short by thinking that you can come clean now. When I joined the BBC, when I even joined the London Hospital Medical School, I imagined myself to be like a Greek soldier in the Trojan War. You want to get inside the walls of Troy. And you present yourself as a Trojan horse. And that's a little present for them. And so you do that in order to get in. And then when you're in, you have to bide your time. You can't do it as quickly as the Greeks did it. You have to bide your time. Maybe after 15 years you can reveal yourself to be who you really are. And if you don't do that, then you can get into serious trouble.

SP: [Laughs] Alex, your protest was one that we recognise in the history of Britain, Black Britain, as well, in Brixton in 1981. Tell us about that.

AW: Yeah. Can I just briefly go on prior to that, when social workers would visit me. And sometimes, because social workers would change so often, one visit, you see your social worker. They try to get you to share your deep feelings or trauma or whatever. You don't speak to them. And then the next visit, you'd have a new social worker. And they'd ask you, 'Oh, Alex, do you have a girlfriend?' Why do you want to know if I have a girlfriend or not? 'What is really troubling you? What do you feel deep into your soul?' I don't even know you! And you want me to share this kind of

stuff! So basically, I'd turn it on them. I'd say, 'Do you have a girlfriend? How many times do you have sex every night?' And there's me, 14, 15, asking these questions of social workers. So that was the start of my kind of rebellious nature.

By the time I got to Brixton, on my second day there, my second day in Brixton, somebody told me about Olive Morris and what occurred to her in 1968, I think it was, where she was a 17-year-old black girl, and she observed or watched a Nigerian diplomat getting beaten up by the police. And she went to intervene, thinking, *this is wrong*, you know? And she went to intervene, and for her troubles, she got savagely beaten up to such an extent that when her family went to collect her from the police station two or three days later, she was hardly recognisable. And so I was told that story on the second day of me coming to Brixton.

And then every day I heard tales of woe from young blacks my age about their times in police stations, police cells and so on. I mean, these are the days before recordings and so forth. So I was well aware of who the enemy was. And I was basically told, 'Alex, if the police approach you, just do not get arrested, run away, do anything.' And I was very mouthy anyway. And I'll swear just as much as they swore at me. So, you know, the front line was there. The battle lines were drawn.

And people seemed to think that it was the New Cross fire that kicked this all off. No, it wasn't. It was way back, you know, even before Olive Morris' time, when my father used to say that when he came to the UK in 1954, some, people who owned—some landlords or publicans would not serve him, would not serve him a drink in a pub. You know, he wasn't wanted. And so this is quite significant, because in 1981, the first pub to be burnt down was the pub that my father and many others of his generation were refused drinks, the Windsor Castle, on Railton Road in the centre of Brixton, you know, where many black people and so on lived, weren't served drinks, you know, were told to get out. That was burnt down. And when we saw that, we thought, *Oh, my God, wow!* You know, you realise you're in a—and in my mind, all I was thinking, *Alex, don't get caught, don't get caught, don't get arrested tonight.* So half the night on the Saturday, I spent running away from the police. And that's how I found myself in one of those big council rubbish bins, where they chased me, chased me around Brockwell Park, and I ran into the estate, and just leaped into the estate [CG laughs]. Black bags all around me. There was a dead cat here and a dead squirrel there, but I didn't care. I just could not afford to be caught, because I knew what might be coming.

And I had experience of that, because on my first arrest, which was a house party that we had in the hostel, I was taken to the police station, and the owner of the sound system, a guy called Trevor, a lot older than I was, he was in his mid-30s, I could hear his screams in the adjoining cell, and that frightened the life out of me, because there must have been about six, seven policemen wading into him, and there's me, I was only 16, because they didn't know my age, because I wouldn't speak. And I was listening, I was listening to that in my adjoining cell. And so when it came for me, I just curled up myself into the foetal position, and they booted me a few times. I think they wore themselves out on Trevor, and so that politicised me from that moment. I didn't want to be politicised, I just wanted to listen to reggae—

CG: Mmm.

AW: —go to parties and enjoy myself, but I was politicised from that very moment.

SP: And you both capture that so vividly in both your books. One of the things that I was struck by in the book was the support afforded to you by black women. Um, I'm sorry, I could talk forever to these guys, and we've

only got another ten minutes or so, if that. But tell us a little bit about the black women in your lives who had your backs, as it were.

AW: For me, it was wonderful. I was very fortunate. My best friend, Valentine, his mother, she would cook always a big pot of food, and it was my first introduction to Jamaican food. Yam? I mean, I didn't know what it was! Me, growing up in Surrey, grew up on roast potatoes and cabbage, and bubble and squeak. Remember bubble and squeak? And toad in a hole? That was my fare. So to actually come into a West Indian home and savour those delights! And she had six children, but any visitor who came into her household, they were, they were served a dinner. Sometimes it was 10, 11, 12. She always cooked a big pot of food, a lovely bowl of salad, you know, cucumbers sliced perfectly and so on. And she gave me a sense of what it was like to be in Jamaica, a real sense. And every time we tested out amplifiers for the loudspeakers and so on, she used to get this broom and *boom! boom! boom!* to tell us to turn it down. And when we were preparing to go to a dance, when we were carrying the speaker boxes by the side of her house, because we couldn't carry it through her dining room or front room, she would not allow that.

SP: No!

AW: But even if we chipped the brickwork, we would hear her. It was coarse and—oh God, she knew some cuss words that I won't repeat today, but a fantastic woman, a fantastic woman. Of course, there's Beverly, my wife, who I met at 18, and we dated on and off. And through her, I felt that, yeah, I can be loved. I loved that Bob Marley song, *Could You Be Loved*, and I took that literally. But Beverly answered that question for me, yes.

SP: Thank you, that's lovely. Colin?

CG: I'm going to go with my mum. It was my mother who fathered me as well, I would say, although I had a father, obviously. But my mother, when I was about 10, she realised that I had good brains, and she was feeding me all the fish that she could, but it wasn't going to work, because I was going to go to the state school, a failing state school called Rotherham. In fact, it closed down in the early 70s, so she was right. But she convinced my father that they had to scrimp and save and send me to a private school, which is why I sound the way I do, I suppose. And there was only one problem. There was only one wage coming in, his wage from Vauxhall Motors. There were five children. So my father realised that the only way he could supplement his income was to become a small-time dealer. So my education was funded by marijuana, [laughter] and I was his bagman.

We'd drive around Luton with little sachets of marijuana in my little briefcase, and we'd drop off the marijuana to his Caribbean friends who came to Britain with their love of ganja intact. He was providing a social service, but it meant that I could go to this expensive private school. So it worked.

But spoiler—crime doesn't pay, does it? Eventually, the police come uninvited. They knock on our door and say, 'Can we come in?' And then we say, 'No.' They say, 'Well, we're coming in anyway.' And they rifle through the house, and they dug up the front garden, dug up the back garden, and find this huge stash of marijuana, twice the size of this book. And he gets arrested, but he charms the judge into not sending him to jail. I should say that my mother's father in Jamaica was a policeman, so she was a bit disappointed by this outcome, shall we say? [Laughter] And after the disgrace of the arrest and the trial and the newspaper accounts and the Luton news, she showed him the door and asked him not to come back through the door. And somehow, I was able to stay on at this very expensive private school in St Albans. And every term, I'd get a note from the bursar, which I'd open, and the note would say, 'You're late with the fees again,' Mrs. Grant. It's a Catholic school run by American Monks Brothers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. And my mother would answer immediately. She'd write back immediately, and she'd say, 'What would

Jesus do?' So I got a free private school education. Praise the Lord.

[Laughter]

SP: There's something in there, isn't there, about the resilience and creativity of black people over generations. Let me move on. You've both touched on Jamaica. Colin, you went as a young visitor before going again with your mother. Tell us a little bit about those first visits. [To AW] For you, it was the reunion with your father.

AW: Yeah.

SP: Colin, there was the first visit. But also, you accompanied your mother, Ethlyn, for the first time that she went back after being in Britain.

CG: Yeah, I'll keep it brief. If you're canny, and you work at the BBC, you can get the BBC to pay for you to go to Jamaica with your mother. [Laughter] So I proposed that I'm making a documentary about her return to Jamaica. She hadn't been back for 35 years since she arrived. And every Friday in Luton, the Jamaica *Gleaner* would arrive, the national newspaper. I don't know how it arrived. As a child I thought, 'Mum, it was just sent for us? All these thousands of miles away?' And it arrived in Luton. But on the back of the newspaper were the adverts for plots of

land you could buy in Jamaica and buildings—architectural drawings of buildings you could build on that land. So she always had this dream of return, but she never did. Even though she would mark that advert and say, 'We're going home. Don't get too comfortable. We're going home.' We never went back. But eventually, I'd say to the BBC, 'Wouldn't it be interesting to find out about that journey, what it's like to return after so many years, to a foreign land now?'

And in England, I think she'd led quite a constrained life, restricted life, reduced life, because she didn't feel she could reveal her true self. And so she was very quiet in England. But as soon as we touched down at Norman Manley Airport in Kingston, Jamaica, suddenly she was singing, she was dancing, she was being funny, I'd never seen her be so funny. She was interacting with the people there and she wasn't fearful of anything. She said, 'I know my people'. She would go everywhere, in all the Trenchtown, all the dangerous parts, no problems. And I suddenly thought, because we were only there for about three weeks, what would it have been like if she'd stayed as a young person and had not gone to England?

Would her life have been as vivacious and as vibrant as it was in those few weeks? And the answer is probably yes. But she would have been

financially poorer, probably, but she would have been emotionally richer. So I take my hat off to her and people like her of that generation who made that kind of sacrifice, that they were going to create a life that was better for themselves and for their future children by leaving. So it was kind of a poignant moment of the realisation of that sacrifice, which often isn't talked about with migrants coming to foreign countries.

SP: Of course, yeah. And for you, it was meeting your father.

AW: Yeah, it was meeting my father. When I was released from prison, I made it one of my things to do, to trace my family. And I tried the Salvation Army. I tried all sorts of avenues. And eventually, I went to social services, the old area office that I was under as a child. And there, they keep files on you. And I didn't realise that these files are so thick. There's every school report, every photograph you ever took, whatever, it's all in their files and it's owned by the council. And so I had to make an appointment with the duty social worker. So I made an appointment and I was told that I cannot take the files home with me. I've got to read the files with the duty officer there. And I thought, no, I'm not having that. And so, play fool to get wise—

CG: Yeah.

AW: —I sat down with the duty social worker and swiped the files and legged it. [Laughter.] And through the files, for the first time, I learnt my parents' full names, where they lived and so on, and even documented and written down the reports of when they actually went to social services, all their meetings, everything. So that was a nice guideline for me. And so it enabled me to write to *Daily Gleaner* and JBC to, you know—

CG: Jamaican Broadcasting Corporation.

AW: —That's right, JBC. And, yes, basically I sent out letters saying, 'I'm looking for my parents, can you help me', kind of thing. And it was broadcast in JBC one Sunday afternoon. They have a show like they did with—Anyone remember the Cilla Black show, *Surprise, Surprise*? It was something like that, but on the radio. And my father, he was drinking his Dragon Stout. Dragon Stout is like a Guinness. It tastes like Guinness. And that was his favourite drink. And he's drinking his Guinness and he's hearing the radio broadcast and he hears his name being mentioned on the radio. And so he choked. Oh, my God! You know. And eventually, after he got around the shock, he got in touch. I thought, *yay!* But reading the file, I discovered that he was the one who placed me into care. So I thought, *argh!* You know. And so when I sat on the plane, I wanted to hit

him when I got there. And so our first meeting was very tense, very tense. And I think because of the tension, we both got ourselves drunk. He on Dragon Stout and me on rum and coke. On the morning, we got up kind of bleary-eyed and whatever. And we went on a day trip. We went to downtown Kingston. And he kind of tried to explain himself away. You know, I was watching all the g—you know, and a standpipe that served about 60 homes, that sticks in my mind. And the kids running around with nothing on their feet—

CG: Barefoot, yeah.

AW: —And when you saw the barefoot, you see all sorts of bumps and things on their toes—

CG: Chiggers and stuff.

AW: Yeah, that's it. And that freaked me out. I thought, *oh, my God*. And there's me crying about I was poor, growing up. And I see these kids with nothing on, you know, just running around in shorts, raggy shorts. And I thought, you know, that taught me something. That taught me something. Yes, my young life was traumatic, abusive. But at least I had a life. At least I

could fashion some kind of future. Some of these kids in Trenchtown or wherever, or downtown Tivoli, or Tivoli Gardens.

CG: Tivoli Gardens, yeah.

AW: You could be very talented, but there's no avenue for them. That really touched me. And so I think from that time onwards, I wanted to write about, um, maybe, you know, I didn't have the authority to write about kids in Trenchtown, but at least I could write about my experiences or my friends' experience. So that became a driving force for me. And it also taught me to forgive my father a little. You know? I mean, we spoke until the night, and we kind of bonded over cricket. I was a massive fan of Michael Holding, Vivian Richards, those great cricketers of the great West Indies team of the 70s and 80s. And he talked about 'The Three Ws', Worrell, Weekes and who's the other one?

SP: Walcott.

AW: Walcott. And he'd talk about Garry S—so we bonded on that. And I visited him every year, from 87 to the pass in 2011. I'd spend time with him. And he'd take me around. He was quite a reader himself. He'd take me around Jamaica, and we'd visit certain places. We'd argue and

whatever. For me, I was fortunate. I was one of the fortunate ones, because I actually met my parents. But so many I know, who I grew up with, still don't know. Still don't know, to this day.

SP: Listen, I think I could go on speaking to you forever. Ilkley, I think your clock's fast, to be honest. [Laughter.] I think—Do you mind if we do leave it there for now?

CG: Yeah, yeah, sure.

SP: And thank you to both of you; a round of applause. [Applause] We're going to get you to ask some questions now. Please keep them as concise as possible, so that everybody can have an opportunity to rush and get their questions to Colin and Alex. If you don't, I'm just letting you know that I have questions that I'd like to ask. [Laughter] So, please raise your hand first, and our trusty stewards will come over to you. This gentleman here.

[Audience member] Hi. Thank you. I'm wondering whether you feel the experience of growing up as a black male in this country is different now compared to what it was in the 70s and 80s? Have things improved, or is it the same problems there? I feel quite dispirited and disheartened with

the reports that come up about the Met Police. Has actually anything changed? We've got the Stand Up To Racism and big things that happened, but is that just posturing? Are things any better now?

AW: I'd like to think they have improved a little. I mean, at least in the police cells, there's recording equipment and so on. You cannot interview anybody without having audio and so on. And I really felt, like, at a time when I received my MBE in 2008, I thought, *yes, you know, finally we've been acknowledged. There is more consideration now for racial politics and so on, and this scourge of racism is ebbing away.* But to look at the last two, three years, you know, when we see the police still killing unarmed black men; that's what happened in Streatham last year. Chris Kaba, I think his name was. And then we had the incident with the athlete who was arrested, taken out of her car with a screaming baby inside the back seat, and Windrush—that was the one that really, really I found very offensive. And I'm thinking, why is—you know, this is not happening to Australian families or Canadian families. It keeps on impacting on us. Why? And so, especially the institution of Metropolitan Police, they have not changed enough. Changed a little, but not enough, not for 2023. They really should have rooted out a lot of this. And it's not just racism. There's a lot of misogyny and so on. And I find it disgusting. I mean, what happened a year or so ago, they actually took photographs of two black women who

were slain, murdered, you know, and shared that as some kind of pleasure. I mean, it's quite sickening, really. You know, so, oh I don't know if I would accept a MBE now, because I still believe there's some elements, some factors out there that do not accept us. Many have, but not all. Not all.

CG: I can't really speak about the police, because I live in Brighton now, and I haven't been stopped for 25 years or so. I can say that I think things have improved in terms of people like us, people of colour, people of the global majority, entering into spaces where they were not present before, whether it be the BBC or the Ilkley Literary Festival. I've been here before, actually. But the idea that we are much more integrated in the culture, I think, is very encouraging. And I've got three adult children who have been the beneficiaries of—there has been a sort of sea change, at least in the arts, anyway, in looking beyond the normal suspects. So, you know, the head of Vogue is a black person. The head of John Lewis was a black person until recently. So I think that often change comes about by the people who have their hands on the levers of social control changing. So when there's more people of colour determining programming, determining who gets to be admitted to the BBC, then things will increasingly change, and the country will become more reflective of the country generally and not just of a certain small cohort.

SP: Any other questions?

[Audience member 2] Alex, obviously the title of your book is about reggae, or places to do with reggae. And you're talking about the influence of the man that you shared the cell with. Reggae, obviously, Rastafarianism is a massive strand of that. Have you ever been drawn to Rastafarianism yourself?

AW: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes, I've tried most religions. [Laughter] Rasta was first. And, in fact, I remember, you know, I had this great bushy afro when I was 15, 16, 17, and I wanted to grow locks. But I wanted a quick kind of fix. I didn't have the patience to grow it, you know, over time. And so I went to a local chemist and bought some beeswax. And my girlfriend at the time, she kind of applied it to my scalp and tried to twist it. But, you know, it kind of burned my scalp. [Exclaims loudly] 'Ahhh!' Kind of like that. So I kind of forgot that idea. I had to wear a hat for about the next six weeks to go out raving and stuff. But, yeah, I've tried Rastafarianism. I've tried being a Buddhist. You know, I was raised in a Catholic church. But, no, because they made me sit at the back on a corner. Didn't want me to be noticed and so on.

And I remember when I was about seven, eight years old, I remember I heard this sermon where the priest said, 'Let the children come unto Jesus.' I don't know if anyone remembers that line. 'Let the children come unto Jesus.' I thought, *oh, that means I can live in the church.* That's what I thought. I can live with the priest. Because in those days, I'm not sure about now, but the priest had his house near the church or next door to the church. I thought, *yeah, I can live there.* And so after the sermon, I knocked on his door, seven, eight years old, said, 'Can I live here, please?' And he said no. And he called my guardians. I thought, *you bastard!* [Laughter] And so that kind of put me off the Catholic church forevermore. [Laughs] So, yes, but now I believe in a god, whether that's a he or she, I don't know. But there's almighty thing that I do believe in. I don't necessarily believe in a Muslim god, a Christian god or whatever. But, yes, I've definitely tried all the rest because, I guess when you grow up like me, you're just looking for something to belong to. You're looking for some kind of identity. You want to be loved by somebody. And so I thought I might find love in that space, in a space of church or whatever, but I never found it there.

SP: Thank you. Thank you for that question. A question over here.

[Audience member 3] Hi. Yeah, I was thinking about this idea of sort of fitting in. And there's this notion of you can sort of assimilate or you can have—I hate to use the word multicultural because everybody has a different idea what it means, but what would you hope the idea would be for a black person growing up now and even one who, you know, is in your age and older? Would you think they only have to assimilate or do you think they can just be who they are and that's OK? Or do you think, to be honest, we've still got some way to go before we get there?

AW: Yes. Again, it's a very good question, especially topical for today, where it seems that, you know, certain politicians, they fit in because they follow the beliefs of their leaders. And I think that's wrong. You should be accepted for who you are, what you believe in and so on, not just be accepted all because you think along the lines of Boris Johnson or whoever, Keir Starmer, whoever it might be. And so this is what I kind of shy away from, that, okay, if you don't find me acceptable, my love of the culture that I enjoy, the life that I want to live, you know, if I can't do that with you and you want to accept me for what I enjoy or whatever, then no, then no, I would not assimilate. No, I refuse to. So that is my standpoint. Some people might say that it's held me back. It probably has in terms of getting films done and so on with the BBC and other organisations because I'm quite outspoken about this because, you know,

I love my culture and where I came from, once I discovered it, I loved it. And everybody should love their culture, where they come from.

I mean, all this whole conflict that we see arising in the Middle East is because they refuse to accept each other's culture, which is a crying shame for the children growing up because they want them to both enjoy it, you know? So I despair sometimes at so-called leaders, you know, who are so tribal, so tribal, it's ridiculous. I mean, I can't even watch Prime Minister's Questions anymore because it's just—you know, we're not even debating anymore, we're just having goes at each other. I thought, *No, you know, you're grown up, for God's sake!* So that's what I believe in, you know, accept my culture, I respect yours, you know: so what? We can still get on and be friends.

CG: I hope that my children never have to write a book called *I'm Black So You Don't Have To Be*. In a way, I say to my children, I'm black so they don't have to be. And I think that they are increasingly just individuals. It helps that my partner is a white woman from near Doncaster, so we kind of assimilate with Yorkshire folk. [Laughter] And in a way, I was thinking about this recently, about the fact that I'm more attracted to my wife because she was from the north and there was a certain kind of suggestion that it's a certain kind of affinity for being almost outside of,

within the culture itself. And so I cleave to the idea that you just have to find your people, and they don't necessarily have to be the same colour as you, they just have to sort of share your same code, perhaps, or aspirations or aesthetics.

SP: I think that's all we have time for. Thank you so much to both of you. It's been an honour to share the stage with brothers, and if I say brothers, it's because—actually, I'm not doing this!

CG: [Laughs] Come on now!

SP: It's because—Oh, no—it's because—Oh, go on, then! It's because of where we've come from, and our parents' stories, our journey to get here, and being of that same era, that same generation. It's been an absolute pleasure. I would encourage you to buy both their books. There's so much more that we didn't get a chance to discuss, because the clock's fast. And they are revelatory, they are shocking sometimes, they are tender, they are poignant, they are sad, they are happy. They're everything that you want in memoirs, both of them. So please do purchase them while you're at it. Also, do think about supporting Ilkley Literature Festival, so we can continue bringing brilliant writers like Colin and Alex back 'up north' [laughter]. And you'll be signing as well, signing

the books. They can't sign if you don't buy one, so do buy. Thank you again, both of you. It's been my absolute honour. Thank you so much, ladies and gentlemen. [Applause]

Alex Wheatle and Colin Grant were in conversation with Susan Pitter

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

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