

WRITERSMOSAIC

What We Leave We Carry

Hay Festival

[Applause]

Colin Grant (CG): Hello, and thanks for coming. And especially hello to Mary Purcell, who's come to see this event, a good and dear friend of ours. My name is Colin Grant. And I always like to start by reminding you that you've come here not to be alone, but to be in a shared space with a shared community of people who also want to be here with you. You're not at home, watching television by yourself, eating your crisps; you're here at an event with other people. So, what I would like you to do first of all is to turn to your neighbours on your left and your right and say, 'Peace be with you.'

[Audience members say 'Peace be with you.']

CG: Great. So, I've been told to say that the sponsor of this event is *WritersMosaic*. In fact, we are *WritersMosaic*, so we're sponsoring ourselves. So, I'll have a free glass of water. [Audience laughs] So, *WritersMosaic* is a magazine and a division of the Royal Literary Fund, which has been in existence since 1790. Its real mission is to help writers to continue to write. In 1790, in the early years, it was to get writers out of debtors' jail because, spoiler alert, writers don't make any money. So, the Royal Literary Fund continues to support writers, both financially but also editorially. And we are the magazine that currently exists on the Royal Literary Fund.

And one of the key projects we have, and it's been a collaboration with Penguin Random House, the publisher, Jonathan Cape, we brought out a collection podcast called *What We Leave We Carry*, which is also the title of the book. And *What We Leave We Carry* is a phrase, stanza, from a poem by a poet called John La Rose. The poem is called 'Not From Here'. And to my mind—I'm normally the author, but in fact, I'm a co-curator of the book. To my mind, 'what we leave we carry' is a lovely phrase because it refers to the idea of what do you leave behind when you leave your country of origin, and what do you bring with you both physically and emotionally when you come to Britain.

And all the people on this stage with me have been migrants, at some stage of their lives, to Britain, and are included in the book. And what I learned early on when I had this commission three or four years ago was that I couldn't do it without other people's help because we've done 70 interviews around the country of migrants to this country, asking them why they came and what their experience of being a migrant has been and how they feel they might become British. And so, I'd like to welcome, firstly, Amanda Vilanova.

Amanda Vilanova (AV): Hello.

[Applause]

CG: Eric Ngalle Charles.

Eric Ngalle Charles (ENC): Hiya.

[Applause]

CG: Suzanne Harrington.

[Applause]

CG: For the book, but also for parts of *WritersMosaic*, there are certain themes that we wanted to explore. But maybe I should just start by asking you, when you got the call from Colin saying, 'Can I interview you for this book?', what were your first responses? What were your first thoughts about whether you were a migrant and wanted to identify as one?

AV: I definitely identify as a migrant [laughs]. I'm originally from Puerto Rico. And when I got the call, I was incredibly excited because there's a whole range of Latin American migration in the United Kingdom that maybe isn't seen or discussed as much as others. So, I had this great opportunity to speak to friends and people I admired and first- and second-generation Latinos. So, I thought, *oh, yes. Got my Latin American ticket in*. That was my response.

CG: Thank you. Eric?

ENC: No, I was thinking what aspect of my memory did you actually want and what I was comfortable in terms of sharing with an audience. Did you want me to tell you the experience of growing up in Cameroon, or the experience of living in Russia for the two

years and two months, or my experience of coming to Wales as a 64-year-old Zimbabwean? So, I did not really know which aspects of my memory. But then we started talking, and then I made the decision. Yeah.

CG: Yeah. And what we were able to do was to craft a narrative for the podcast. And then we've extracted, from those podcasts, the transcriptions that relate to various themes that we have in the book. Suzanne?

SH: I wasn't sure what you actually meant, and I thought it was about interviewing other people. So, we were chatting away before I realised you were interviewing me about my experience [audience laughs]. It was great. It's been almost 40 years since I moved from Ireland, and so, it was fun to revisit things that weren't fun at the time because everything is funny eventually [audience and panel laughs]. And yeah, it was a very exciting thing to be part of.

CG: Well, I'm excited by the project. I'm excited to be here because my parents are Jamaican. They came from Jamaica to Britain in 1959. And I think of myself not just as the son of migrants, but a migrant still. And I have a kind of migrant sensibility. And I'm always on the lookout for migrants, and I give them the migrant nod when I see them [audience laughs]. But also, in this time when there's a lot of rhetoric which is

anti-migration and insulting, in all honesty, and you lose the sight of the person because you become a block of migrants, impersonal migrants, and I think what we're attempting to do is say there are human beings here with stories. And in my mind, migrants are the most brave and fortuitous people on the planet. I really believe that. They've taken a leap of faith to come to another country, sometimes on the roll of a dice. And they come here, and they want to improve their lives, not just of themselves, but of their children, but of the society in which they find themselves. When it came to the title and the themes of the book and the podcast, we wanted to address certain notions. So, for instance, what do you bring with you when you're a migrant? What is the precious item that you bring with you or idea that you bring with you. And that has been answered both in the book, but also in a series of essays that *WritersMosaic* does. So, I'm going to ask each of the panelists what they've brought with them and what that signified for them. Amanda, what about you?

AV: I brought two items all geared by my mother's need to take care of me. And she had this idea that when you move to the United Kingdom, you have to look like a princess and impress. Big part of it, I think, for a lot of people coming here. So, we got a set of discounted hard, pink suitcases that could roll all the way around, 360, with the idea that I'd walk through London streets looking fantastic, and then everyone would think, *oh yeah, I bet she's British too* [laughs]. But it was a really incredible day. It was

such a joyous moment to purchase that with her, pack everything up, and put all these things that she thought I may need, as if it was going to be sub-zero here, and I couldn't possibly survive with all these mega elements. And then she sits down in bed and takes out a ring. She goes, 'Your father gave this to me, and I want you to have it.' I went, 'Why, why, why on Earth would I do that?' She said, 'Well, women need insurance. And if you ever have a problem, you can sell it, and you won't always call your mum, will you?' Which is obviously, this moment, where I realised that I was going to be very far away. And we do have whole lives that we can't share with the people that we leave behind. I haven't sold it. I've got it here [panel laughs]. And it has been meaningful because I've been in the UK for 10 years, and the suitcase and the ring have grown and changed with me. So, it's as if I've always got them with me.

CG: And is the ring some sort of protection that you could sell, perhaps, if things got difficult.

AV: Yes, I've only come to ponder that once. But as I said, still here. I bounced back.

CG: Very good. So, the chapter in the book that refers to what we're talking about now is called 'The Grip'. And the 'grip' is a Jamaican or Caribbean word – it's an English word, obviously – for a suitcase. And every household that I went to when I grew up in the

capital of Britain, a place called Luton, they all had these grips—I don't know why you're laughing—they all had these grips on top of the wardrobe. And they were there because there was a possibility that you might need to get back your clothes and your items and go put them in the grip and return to where you came from, just in case. Just in case people like Enoch Powell had their way. In 1968, Enoch Powell, you will remember, some of you who are old enough, that he wrote a speech which became known as the 'Rivers of Blood' speech, where he worried that there were too many migrants, the Black man was going to have to whip hand over the white man, so it's time for them to pack their bags and go. But we haven't gone, and we're here to stay. I should point out I'm wearing this lovely gown, which is a wrap that has been given to me by Eric's mother. And I'm very pleased. If I ever leave Britain, I'm going to carry this with me [panel laughs]. So, Eric, how about you? What did you bring from Cameroon?

ENC: Oh, I didn't bring a luggage. I didn't bring a ring. I brought one particular memory. I was at the airport. My mother was there, but she did not speak with me. My cousins, my nephews, they were all at the airport. And my mother walked towards me without actually looking at me. And then when I looked at her, I noticed that my mother was crying. And my mother then took my hands into her hands, and one by one, she gave each of my fingers a gentle bite. I did not have a clue what my mother was doing because at that moment, everybody knew I was going to Belgium. But as it turned out, I

never got to Brussel; I ended up in Russia. But the significance of this moment is something that has always stayed with me because my mother biting my fingers, she was entering into an agreement between her, my ancestors, and myself, that wherever I go, whatever troubles I might face, I will come back to her in Cameroon while she was still alive and not while she was walking within the passages of her grave. Yeah, so, that is that memory that I brought with me.

CG: Thank you, Eric. And Suzanne, from Ireland.

SH: Well, I came over in 1987. And Ireland now has got quite a lot of cultural cachet, but back then it really didn't. So, I was a sort of cultural refugee. And I bought a letter with me from a psychiatrist because Ireland had literally driven me mad in the '80s. And I bought a bag with some clothes and two books and this letter saying, 'To whom it may concern, this woman has just discharged herself from psychiatric care in Ireland. We strongly advised her not to do this move to the UK. But now that she has, could you please take up her treatment again?' So, I thought, *I'll be fine*, and I went to—I found a place to live, and I got myself sorted, and I got a job doing the thing I wanted to do, which was working in Kensington Market, because I thought that was cool, and found the GP, and the GP read the letter, and they sent me to the hospital for an assessment, and they sent me off with a prescription for Valium. That was my mental

health treatment, which I threw in the bin, and I was fine in the end. But yeah, it wasn't anything like a talisman or rosary beads or my granny's recipe for soda bread, it was none of that. It was completely different. But, yeah.

CG: There are also a lot of stories in the book. One of my favorites is about what a Serb would bring. And there are many Serbs in the book, and one of them told me that the thing that most was most precious to a Serb when they left their home to come to a foreign land was their manual coffee grinder. And sometimes they're very ornate objects, but their actual act of grinding the coffee reminds them of home, reminds them of ceremony, reminds them of family. And I think sometimes we forget the emotional cost of migration and the courage it takes to leave your friends and relations behind. Sometimes it takes a lot of courage to remain behind as well. Sometimes we forget that.

One of the things we wanted to explore in the book also was this idea about when you feel that you are becoming British. At what point in your life, when you are in Britain, do you begin to maybe lose a sense of your identity being firmly established with your country of origin, but moving towards the country that you now have adopted? And there's at least a couple of Cameroonians in the book, one of whom is Clementine Burnley, who, when she was 17, went from Cameroon to Glasgow to study at

university. And she had been brought up in a compound where everybody was very sociable, and she was trained and schooled never to ignore anybody. So, she was very, very talkative and loved welcoming and conversing with people. I don't know whether you've all been to Glasgow, but she would walk down Byers Road – it's not a very long road, maybe half a mile, three-quarters of a mile, if that, so it should take you maybe half an hour to go down Byers Road – it took Clementine four hours to go down because she would stop and talk to everybody [audience laughs]. And she said that she realised that she was becoming British when it only took her 15 minutes to walk down Byers Road [audience laughs]. Amanda, when did you begin to feel the shift from Puerto Rican to being British? Or do you feel British?

AV: I was having this conversation last night actually. When I first moved to the UK, I think I probably felt a bit more American. It's funny when you're bilingual, you think you have these two opposing personalities and what comes up every time. And I recently visited the United States and came back and was like, *I think I've been in the UK so long*. It was just something about the way people treated you and talked to you that I've just completely gotten used to the tone and 'Sorry' and 'Hello' and 'Excuse me', which is interesting. However, I find that I need a space where I can be just completely Puerto Rican-ish, I guess. And I've housed a bunch of friends, Latin American friends, who like salsa music and we recreate that. And thankfully, I've now gotten married to a very nice

man who makes me plantain and rice and beans and all that sort of thing because you just always need a bit of that. My mood will change, and I'll think, *what's up?* And then I'll have some plantain, and I'll feel a bit better. Because there is something about you that you need to connect with all the time. And I don't know if I feel British, but I'm definitely British-like.

CG: Oh, maybe British adjacent.

AV: Yeah, yeah, sort of a British flavour, I'd say.

CG: Eric?

ENC: I don't think British as such. But we are in Wales, right? So, I should have started this conversation with [speaks Welsh]. That is as far as I can go [panel laughs]. [Speaks Welsh]. So, I could feel I'm becoming Welsh, but not British as such. But my daughter is British. But something strange happened. I tried to repeat the same thing that my mum did to me in 1997 at the airport. My daughter was 16 at the time, and this was the first time that I was preparing to go back to Cameroon. So, I called my daughter, Iya. She came, and she was sitting with me. She said, 'Dad, you are behaving a bit strange.' So, I said, 'Okay, can you give me a hands please?' She's 16 years old. So, she

gave me a hand. So, I bit her baby finger. She looked at me suspiciously [audience laughs]. I bit her ring finger. She started giggling. And then she goes, 'Oh, Dad, you don't have to be so dramatic, right? I'm going to remember you.' [Panel laughs] She doesn't realise I was trying to pass to her ancestral knowledge like that. Yeah, we are good. Yeah.

CG: Thank you very much, Eric.

SH: And Suzanne. I don't—it's funny, I feel like I've straddled the two places for—I've spent one third of my life in Ireland and two thirds in the UK and beyond. And I don't—I feel the older I get, the more Irish I feel because Ireland has changed so much now that I'm proud to be Irish. I want to belong to Ireland, but from a distance; I don't want to go back there. But the—it's like cracking a code. So, when I get a taxi in Ireland, they'll say to me, 'What part of England are you from?' Which is kind of weird. But here, nobody would mistake me for being an English person. So, it's like having a dual code inside your head, and you slot—look, when I'm in Ireland, I slot straight away. But I do—the thing that you just said about the woman walking down the street and it taking—I notice I've definitely become—I have over the years become a lot less inclined to chit chat and a lot more brisk, definitely. And I think that might be a London thing rather than an English thing.

CG: So, I grew up in Luton in a Caribbean household. And whenever I was a kid and people asked me where I was from, I had a nice little, I thought, intelligent phrase which I'd rehearsed. I would say I'm British by birth, but Jamaican by will and inclination.' And if ever my father – who was called Bageye, because he had these permanent bangs under his eyes, was called Bageye – if ever Clinton George Bageye Grant heard me say that, he'd say, 'Stop that tripe. You were born right here. You are English. I am British. Now, let's get that straight. Don't let the man take you for fools.'

But I still hold on to this notion that I was Jamaican or Jamaican adjacent. Because I always loved the way that my father walked. My father was a Jamaican, as was my mother, and my father had a walk like this, which is just faster than slow [audience and panel laughs]. And so, I tried to emulate my father's walk. And when I was 19, I went to Jamaica for the first time by myself. And I went to the capital, and I was staying at a bed and breakfast place. And every morning, I'd walk to the Bend Down market. They call it Bend Down Supermarket. It's like the Bend Down where all the produce is on the ground on mats. And every time I went to the market, there would be a higgler, who's a street seller, who'd shout at me, 'Hey, English man, English man, English man.' [Audience laughs] And I tried to ignore him. I don't know who he was talking to. And

after about a week, I said to him, 'Well, what makes you think I'm English?' And he says, 'You walk like an Englishman.' [Audience and panel laughs].

Before we move on to—we have a musical component coming soon. Before we move on to the music, can I get a sense from me all about what perception you had of Britain before you came here, and what informed that perception? And then the third part is, did the perception live up to the reality?

AV: [Laughs] Well, yeah, I think, I don't know. Obviously, Puerto Rico looks to America a lot, to the United States a lot. So, my perception of the UK has everything to do with Jane Austen novels and romances, princes, that I'd find a prince that would—I don't know, that sort of thing, like North London, very North London, white Britain, really, which is what I expected. And then I arrived, and I now live in Peckham, Southeast London. And I absolutely love it. And I love the absolute variety of years and years of variety and change and waves of migration that have come through the United Kingdom, London particularly. And I've met some incredibly interesting people that live in the spaces in between whatever English or British identity is. So, my favourite places are the places I didn't know existed and now I find beautiful and inspiring and amazing. So, it was different, but I think it's lived up to some really lovely things that I know about.

CG: Lovely. Eric, how about you? What was your perception and how did it change?

ENC: I had no perception of the United Kingdom, let alone Wales. Coming to Wales or coming to the UK was never part of my plan. But I grew up studying English literature. So, when I came to Wales, I started identifying myself with some of those writers. So, I met Grahame Davies. I met [missing name]. These are the first people who prepared me to settle in Wales. And then in 2000, I was invited to a place called Gregynog. Gregynog was so beautiful that it kind of looked like my grandfather's compound. That's when I thought, *oh, maybe I'm not far away from home. Maybe. Maybe, maybe, maybe I'm home.*

And there's a wonderful thing that is very common among us, the Welsh people: we have this tradition where when you meet a stranger for the first time, you are obligated to tell them stories for three nights and three days, and once those three nights and three days have expired, then you have to reciprocate by telling you stories for three days and three nights. And then beyond that, you can say, 'Colin, [speaks Welsh],' which means, 'Colin, where are you from originally?' The idea being, by the time we've spent this amount of energy telling each other's story, the question of where you're from becomes, yeah, it's neither here nor there. You become friends. And that is what I've

learned about being in Wales, and my Welshness is about storytelling. I mean, my friend Theresa is here. She's a wonderful storyteller, and she can tell you more about Wales and the Welshness, so, yeah.

CG: Thank you, Eric. And Suzanne, you came because what idea did you have of London, England, when you were in Ireland?

SH: I had John Peel coming through the radio, and I had *Smash Hits*, *Jackie* magazine. Bearing in mind, in Ireland, everything was completely illegal when I was growing up. *The Face*, the magazines, were basically the thing that got—I just thought this place sounds like a mythical utopia. And the *NME* gig guide was another huge thing. It was just watching—seeing the music, the bands that you could go and see every night. My parents and my grandmother and my mother used to describe England as that 'Godless country', which was hugely appealing [panel laughs]. I was so sick of God. Honestly, I was so sick of the whole God thing. So, coming here—and the anonymity. My picture of London was this vast—it was much more vast in real life than I could imagine because I'm from a smallish town. But the anonymity, the fact that you could drop dead in the streets and somebody would step over you, that was all really appealing [audience laughs] because I was just sick of small town life and God. So—and London really delivered, really delivered.

CG: Well, that brings me on to another thought I'm having. I'm going to start with you. We will go around this way this time. Where you moved to, and do you move to where your people are? So, did you move to an area where there are lots of Irish people, lots of Cameroon people, lots of people from Puerto Rico, not Costa Rica. So, was the appeal of Ireland in the personification of Irish people more attractive to you when they were in the UK?

SH: No, I didn't want to be anywhere near anything to do with Ireland, apart from a handful of friends who felt the same. And I did—my initial friends when I came here were Irish. But we were all on the same boat, literally. We were escaping, and we wanted to meet people who were not Irish, who didn't think like—we wanted to get away from—because we've grown up in a monoculture, monotheistic monoculture. So, we were just desperate to immerse ourselves in the big, big, heathen city. And we did, and it was just fantastic. But there was, obviously, there was a big Irish community. I first lived in North London. And there was the Archway Tavern down the road where the builders would go in and cash their—get paid in pints. It was all that. And there was ballrooms and dance halls. I couldn't have gotten further away from that, just not of any interest.

CG: Well, that really resonates with me because my father, as I've mentioned, was from Jamaica. And Jamaica, you may know, is a pigmentocracy. And by that I mean the fairer skin you have, the better. And so, the people with the dark skin are at the bottom of society, and they can't ascend. And they always are given the rough ride in life. But when a lot of the Caribbean people came, no matter what level of the pigmentocracy they were in the Caribbean, in England, they were just Black, as far as people know. People didn't make any kind of nuance between the different shades of Black.

And so, I grew up in an Irish estate in Luton. All my friends were Flynns, O'Laughlins, Dunns, O'Hearns, Glynnys, O'Learys. And I think when my father came to Luton and to the UK, it was like having a blank canvas. You could start again. Nobody knew where he was supposed to fit in the social tier. Until one day, we were on this council estate in Luton – there are 1,500 families on this council estate in Luton, there are several hundred Irish families, there's six Caribbean families scattered around this huge estate – and then one day, the council, in their wisdom, decided to put another Caribbean family right next door. And I'll never forget, my father – a bit of a rascal – my father summons the children to the window to observe these people coming in as they're unloading the van to their new house, and he says, 'Imagine this. I travel 4,000 miles to get away from these people, and who do they put next door?' [Panel laughs]. And that's one of the interesting conundrums of the book and the project, that sometimes the

people from Cameroon or from Puerto Rico don't want to associate themselves with each other when they get here. How did you find that experience?

ENC: I, to be honest with you, I wasn't looking for any Cameroonian community. When I came to Wales, I was looking for an individual. Because I had, in the summer of 1998 in Russia, I had a horrible experience with a group of Cameroonians, who took me hostage. I was guilty of a crime. They took me hostage, and for three days and three nights, they tortured me to the point of death. In fact, I prayed for death to embrace me. But something strange happened that time because my mother came to me. She came to me through a song. [Sings]. It's about a woman who's lamenting the death of her children. But my mother changed the lyrics this time around. She was telling me that if I allow these guys to kill me and bury me, she'll come to Russia, dig me out of my shallow grave, and kill me again [audience laughs]. So, I was so frightened of what my mum would do to me, I survived the torture from those people.

So, when I came to Wales in July of 1999, the last people I wanted to meet were Cameroonians. But I was looking for one guy. And in 1990, when I was 10 years old, Cameroon played against England in the World Cup. And this guy, who's one of the best mathematicians in Wales at the moment, Olivier, came to Cameroon. And he was invited, 'Oh, Olivier, you're from the white man's land, the land of milk and honey.' He

was telling us, 'Oh, guess where I watched the 1990 football game? I watched it in an amphitheater at Cardiff University.' Yeah, so, that was my motivation coming to Cardiff. I was looking for this one Cameroonian. And I arrived with the National Express in the morning, and I saw this Black guy, and I walked up to him, 'Excuse me,' with my thick Cameroonian accent, right. 'Excuse me, do you know a Cameroonian?' This guy looked at me like, and he just walked off [panel laughs]. Yeah, but the rest is history because I found him, yeah.

CG: Good, good. Thank you. And Amanda, do you associate with Latin Americans, Puerto Ricans? Is there a magnet for you?

AV: Well, my expectation wasn't to meet any Latin Americans in the United Kingdom, and I moved first to West Hampshire so found none. However, it's been interesting. I always say this joke. There is a group called 'Puerto Ricans in the United Kingdom' on Facebook. There are 64 members, 34 have left [laughs]. Puerto Ricans don't come to the United Kingdom. We're a very rare breed. And I didn't think I'd come across any Latinos because I had no idea about the history that there is a relationship. And then came across this beautiful place called Elephant and Castle, where I met Venezuelans, and Colombians, and wonderful clubs, and all the rest of it. But it was a complete surprise because when I first came here, one, people don't know where Puerto Rico is,

don't know about its relationship with the US, so people have no expectations of me at all. I'd just be, 'Ah, I'm from Puerto Rico.' And they'd sort of nod, 'Oh, great.' There wasn't even a 'Latin American' box when I moved. No, always 'Other'. And I guess in some ways, it's incredibly liberating because there's a whole history of relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, and people who have already made up your mind about you when they meet you. And however, that doesn't happen in England. But I have explained many a time where Puerto Rico is, and I'm still not tired, actually. So, if anybody doesn't know, let me know, and we can have a chat after [panel laughs].

CG: Thank you. So, we're going to have a bit of a musical interlude now, because one of the themes that we address in the book – there are 12 themes in the book; there's a theme about embracing the idea of becoming British, there's a theme about accepting that you are British, there's a theme about whether you want to return or not to the place of your origin – but one of the things I wanted to get from everybody is the place of music in their souls and in their journeys, in their stories, of being migrants. And I start with my mother's story. And in every Caribbean household that I grew up—I grew up in Luton as you know, but in every Caribbean household in Luton in the '70s on a Sunday, my friends at the back are about to play the song that you would hear, 'Welcome to My World'.

['Welcome to My World' by Jim Reeves plays]

'Welcome to my world

Won't you come on in?

Miracles, I guess

Still happen now and then

Step into my heart

Leave your cares behind

Welcome to my world'

CG: Yeah, and it seems a bit counterintuitive, but a lot of the Caribbean people felt nostalgia when they heard that song. Anyway, yeah. So, I asked everybody else, what songs then somehow characterise their migration story. And we're going to hear a song that you've chosen now, Amanda. We're going to have ['Fabricando Fantasías'].

['Fabricando Fantasías' by Tito Nieves plays]

'Quisiera poder hablarte

Decirte cuanto te amo

Y abrazarte como antes

Quisiera sentir tu risa

Volver a tocar tus manos

Siempre tibias cada día

Quisiera'

CG: Tell us about that song, Amanda, why you chose it.

AV: Yes. The song is called 'Fabricando Fantasías', 'Fabricating Fantasies' by Tito Nieves. And my mother is a huge salsa fan. And she is of the generation of romantic salsa of the '90s and early 2000s. And that is a song she played and played and played. And it's a beautiful song because, practically, it's fantastic to learn salsa to. It's got a really nice, steady tempo, it's slow, and beautiful, but also sounds beautiful if you don't understand the lyrics. But he's talking about the death of his son and how he's fabricating fantasies of seeing him again. And I've always found it, when she played it in the car or whatever it may be, that how could you do such a joyous and beautiful act like dancing salsa with a partner and also discuss this thing? And now, my memory of it is that, me and my mother in the car and her maybe listening to that if she's missing

me. I don't know. I admire my mother very much and talk about her constantly. And I taught my now husband to dance salsa to that song.

CG: Oh, lovely.

AV: And he played it over and over again. He's actually gotten really good for a Worcester guy. And that somehow has managed to bridge the gap a little bit, because you always feel that there's two whole elements of you that don't quite unite somehow. And I find that that song and having shared that with two people that are very, very important to me have kind of managed that, so that's why I chose that.

CG: Thank you Amanda. So, we're going to turn to Eric now, and I'm going to ask Eric to introduce the title of the song and who it's by.

ENC: My song is [missing song title].

[Song plays]

CG: Hey, why did you choose that song?

ENC: So, there's a chorus. I go [sings chorus]. I was standing on the window on the balcony in Ulitsa Griboedova in Sochi in 1997. I was the only Black person in this place. But curiously, there was this woman, her name is [missing name], and she'll be sitting by the road, and she will sell what in Russian we call [missing words], which is salted fish, and she will sell [missing words], which is homemade alcohol. And she'll be looking at me. And this song, I don't know whether she had this radio which had only this song. And [missing name] would play this song until one afternoon, she invited me. And she asked me where I was from. But [missing name] started teaching me the Russian language. And the one minute she was there, and the next minute she disappeared. A couple of weeks later, I asked my neighbour, 'Where is [missing name]?' And he said, 'Oh, [missing name] is dead.' Yeah, there were no goodbyes, no more. So, this music is associated with this memory.

Again, once I started understanding the meaning of this music, I started missing my girlfriend. Although I was 17 when I left home, I had this girl that we had plans. When I came to Wales in July 1999, a few months later, she sent me a letter. And in the background, [missing song title] was playing. I said, 'Okay, so let me read my letter from my girlfriend. Oh my God, oh my God, [missing song title] is playing, the love music is playing in the background. And the letter said, 'Dear Eric, I miss you. I love you.

Yesterday, I went to a church, and I met a pastor.' So, I switch off the music because the tone of the letter changed. And yeah, she dumped me.

[Audience and panel groans and laughs]

CG: And so, you don't have that negative association with the music?

ENC: No, but I still love the music because of [missing name], but I don't think about that letter anymore [audience and panel laughs].

CG: Thank you very much, Eric. And finally, Suzanne, what song have you chosen, and we'll hear it?

SH: It's a song by a country Western singer in Ireland called Gloria. And it was number one in Ireland for about 90 weeks when I was a teenager.

CG: And it's called?

SH: ['One Day at a Time'].

[‘One Day at a Time’ by Gloria plays]

‘One day at a time sweet Jesus, that’s all I’m asking from you,
Just give me the strength to do every day what I have to do,
Yesterday’s’

CG: So, I was expecting you to say The Smiths or something, but Gloria. Why Gloria?

SH: Well, because she helped me to get out of Ireland. I mean, 90 weeks of number one [audience and panel laughs]. She was part of the impetus to leave. And although the first gig I ever saw in Ireland was The Smiths when I was 15, but it was so rare that a good band came to Cork, which is where I’m from, that if you wanted to see any proper music, you had to go to Dublin or London. And I didn’t want to go to Dublin because it’s just more of the same. They look down on you in Dublin if you’re from Cork. So, I thought, if I go to London, I won’t know—I’ll be just, again, a blank slate, like your dad. And now we have Kneecap at 90 weeks – or not 90 weeks – they’re at number one now rather than Gloria. So, Ireland has changed radically for the better.

CG: Thank you. Well, let’s open up to the floor. If there’s anybody who’d like to ask any member of the panel a question about migration at this pivotal moment in our culture,

especially, I would love to hear from you. Anybody want to pose a question? Can't see anybody. Yes, please.

Audience member: I just wondered—my mum left Ireland a long time before you; she came in the '50s. And having lived here for nearly 50 years, she needed a passport. She was actually going away, abroad. We only ever went back to Ireland. Mum hadn't been anywhere other than London, Cornwall, and Ireland. Anyway, when she applied for her passport, having lived in London for 50 years, she was absolutely horrified when this British subject passport arrived. And she was like, 'I'm not using that ever.' And only then she applied for the Irish passport, and that's what she travelled on. I just wondered whether anybody else had had that experience. Maybe your parents from Jamaica did. But my mum started to feel British because she'd been married to a Scottish person and had three children. And she started to feel British, although just like your experiences, no one would ever think she was English when you hear her talk. But she absolutely hated, hated the concept of being referred to as a British subject. And I just wonder if anyone else had anything along those lines in their journey.

CG: Well, one interesting thing about the Caribbean people who came famously, allegedly, in 1948, but obviously they came before the Windrush, was that they came and the way that they were described changed over the passage of time. So, when my

parents arrived, they were 'British citizens'. And after a while, they became 'Citizens of the Commonwealth and Empire'. And then, there were bloody foreigners. And so, my mother never really felt at home here. And I would tell you that she didn't have many, many happy occasions. And what she did, and maybe it's why I write about migrants now, is she associated herself with all of the migrants in Luton. So, all of her friends were Irish friends. And what was intriguing to me was to listen to their grievances. So, we used to have a game when I was growing up in Luton. We would have a game about who'd be done worse to by the English [panel laughs]. And we'd say, 'Yeah, man, the English, we've been under the heel of the English for 400 years; 400 years in slavery.' [Audience and panel laughs] And my Irish friends would say, 'That's nothing, we've been under the heel of the English for 800 years and before.' So, it led to this notion that maybe one should return, which we talk about in the book, actually. So, my mother never really accepted the notion that she was British because she didn't feel very welcome, ultimately. What about other people?

ENC: I have never had that experience. It took the Home Office about 10 years to accept the fact that I was not a Zimbabwean, that I'm a Cameroonian. Now that I'm a Cameroonian, I don't think I would apply for British citizenship. However, if the Plaid Cymru decides that they're going to break up the United Kingdom and they issue me a

passport, I'll take it [panel laughs]. I'm just saying. So, I'm a Cameroonian. My children are Welsh. But I've not had that problem.

CG: What about you, Amanda, and then Suzanne?

AV: Yes, well, I've just managed Indefinite Leave to Remain. And I think it's interesting, because Puerto Ricans have an American passport, I hadn't gone through a lot of the migration processes. And from the moment I got here onwards, the cost of migrating legally to United Kingdom has doubled or tripled, the things you have to go through, the tests you have to take, and all the rest of it changed, not even for citizenship; you now need to take your citizenship test even if I haven't applied for a passport. And I hope they don't annul Indefinite Leave to Remain because I'd like to stay Puerto Rican. But if I have to come up against that as a challenge, we shall see.

CG: Thank you. And Suzanne?

SH: Well, my Irish passport is my fondest possession because since Brexit, people have been asking me to marry them and everything [audience and panel laughs].

CG: Oh, really?

SH: But my kids are British. They're British Asian and British Irish. So, I suppose they feel quite a different attachment to Ireland than I do. But yeah, I really, really, really value my EU passport so much. I almost have it in a glass case.

CG: Thank you very much for the question. Any other questions? Yes, in the fourth row here would be great. And then at the back later. Yeah.

Audience member: Hi. I was wondering whether since you moved to the UK there were any other groups of migrants that you found common ground with or special relationships where you feel like you can relate to them, like you were talking about with your Jamaican family and Irish migrants?

CG: Yeah, please.

SH: Everybody, really. Anybody who's been colonised, for sure, there's that. But I suppose my experience is a bit different because you only know people are Irish when they open their mouth. Do you know what I mean? But generally, my affinity would be with anybody whose country's been occupied.

CG: Eric?

ENC: Yeah, for me, it was quite different because, again, when I came here, all I had were my memories. And I used to find myself in a situation where organisations would call me and say, 'Eric, can you come and stand on the stage, and can you tell me how you got to Britain?' And I couldn't articulate how I got to Britain. And in fact, I didn't know which memories I had to share with them. But then in 2001, I met a wonderful gentleman in Swansea, and we started what we call Hafan Books, which was a publishing house which was championing voices that were in the periphery. So, I was running creative writing workshops, and I had stories that were horrendous. And I would think, *yeah, I am feeling depressed about myself, but there are people who are—so*, this is how I started finding my voice. So, although I live in Cardiff, people actually think I live in Swansea because Swansea is like my home. I go to the Dylan Thomas Centre, I go to Volcano Theatre. And yeah, so, from 2001, I started finding my voice. My first poetry anthology came out in 2003, *Between a Mountain and a Sea*. Yeah, and that was it. I've not looked back ever since.

CG: Yes. Amanda?

AV: I have to say it's mostly Latin Americans, really, the absolute breadth of Latin America. And we are very different and being put together in one big box. Oh, you're all Latinos. You realised that we've shared so many different customs and music and food and that I had no idea of before I moved here. So, actually, it's been a really amazing opportunity to know a lot more about Latin America that I probably wouldn't have if I hadn't moved to London.

CG: One of the things that happened in the 1990s was that this man called Norman Tebbit, you may remember him, died recently. I had a bit of fond regard for Norman Tebbit in a funny way because he was a bit of a rottweiler, but I admired him for being a rottweiler. But he had this test about whether you were truly British or English when it came to cricket. So, when England were playing against someone from Pakistan or India or the West Indies, who do you cheer for? And so, we would cheer for the West Indies, only because they were glamorous anyway, and they were fearless, and they were better than the English [audience laughs]. But a funny thing happened in 1980. I'll never forget this. Because I think we, as Caribbean people – well, I'm from Luton, but anyway, Caribbean origin people – began to look for people who had that similar sensibility. And so when it came to athletics, we were not going to support Sebastian Coe, Steve Ovett was our man because of his sensibility. And when it came to the Olympics in 1980, a phenomenon happened in our household. Because any sporting

event that had Black people, we would cheer for the Black person, but in the 1980 Olympics in the 100 metres, there was a man called Alan Wells from Scotland. And he was lined up against some Black Caribbean people, and we cheered for Alan Wells [panel laughs] because we just loved his personality. We love the fact that he's Scottish and not English as well, I suppose. But the idea that, actually, that your allegiance is not necessarily to your phenotype or your group, but to a similar sensibility, perhaps. Very nice question. Thank you. Another question?

Audience member: Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for coming. It's really lovely to hear you talk. Eric, I'm a huge fan of your poetry, [speaks Welsh]. Could you share a little bit about the writers who inspire you, whether they're from your countries of origin or writers today in the UK?

ENC: Okay, one of my favorite Welsh writers, and I'm being brutally honest here, is Grahame Davies. I met Grahame in 1999, and Grahame introduced me to his poem, and the poem is called 'Rough Guide'. I think it's one of the most translated Welsh poems. And in this poem, the character finds themselves in America. And in some places they are referred to as Navajo, in some places they are referred to as [missing word], in some places they are referred to as Black. But this character was looking for some place where they could just go and just be. So, the title of this poem is 'Rough

Guide'. And when I came to England, I just wanted somewhere where I could just go and be without answering to anyone. So, this is my first poem. And then the second one is 'Conflict in [missing word]'. This poem was written in the 5th century. It's at the National Library of Wales. And the text of the poem goes, 'Noisy the birds, damp the valleys, long the night [inaudible], and I deserve the reward of age, sleep.' When I came to Wales, I was absolutely knackered. Can I use the word knackered? [Audience laughs].

CG: Yeah, you have done.

ENC: All I wanted to do was to sleep. And so, those are the two poems. But contemporary, I love the poet of [missing name], I love the poetry of Rhian Elizabeth, I love the poetry of Natalie Ann Holborow. But I made the horrible mistake in June last year. I reviewed Natalie's book. And Natalie's book is set in a hospital. And the following day, I had a horrible medical incident, and I found myself at the emergency ward. And everything that I read in Natalie's book was happening [panel laughs]. The drip machines were going click, click, click. My neighbour was entering into a coughing fit. I'm like, *flipping heck. I'm a goner* [audience and panel laughs] I recommend Natalie Ann Holborow's book. It's wonderful.

CG: Amanda.

AV: Wow, quite a breadth of people. A lot of people I've met in *WritersMosaic*, reviewed books, et cetera, people I wouldn't have read before. As a classic Latin American, I absolutely love Gabriel García Márquez. I think his short stories, his long books are absolutely amazing. And interestingly, in the thing that I'm writing and working on now, I've gone back to a lot of Puerto Rican writers that I think when I was studying in Puerto Rico, I didn't appreciate because I was looking elsewhere. I was looking at the United Kingdom, mostly, I have to say. So, Luis Lloréns Torres is someone everybody should—a name you should know and you should look up because, actually, a wonderful man from a very local space that talks about huge themes that I think could connect with everyone. And being far away has made me give new appreciation to that.

CG: Thank you. Suzanne.

SH: Writers I like from—oh God, it's really hard to answer that one because there's so many. And there's a whole crop of new Irish writers that have come up in recent years that are really fresh and vibrant. And I can't at all think of one single name because I've just gone blank. But there's so many. There's the classic ones as well, obviously, like Colm Tóibín and stuff. But the new ones, the new voices, and Claire—

CG: Claire Keegan. I'm glad I got to say Claire because I was going to say Claire Keegan. *Small Things like These*. She's a fantastic writer. And that really inspires me to think that actually, we find our people no matter where they are. They don't have to be Cameroonian or Jamaican, they can be Irish, they can be Puerto Rican, if they speak to us in a certain way. One final question at the back.

Audience member: Thank you for sharing all these stories. I had a lot of feelings with that salsa song. I'm Colombian. My husband is British. And I was wondering, I have been trying to teach him to dance salsa for the last four years [audience laughs]. And after a while, we keep having a lot of cultural jokes. And I was wondering if you have some stories about a British couple that you can share with us.

AV: His parents were here actually. Wow. Oliver Hamilton, yes. I have to say, I explained to him where Puerto Rico was pretty straight off the bat when we met. And I'll never forget having—I think he—I wasn't sure if he was interested or not because the signs weren't the same as in Latin America. We'd been dating for about six months. And I turned to him and went, 'Do you like me?' Because it wasn't super—and he turned bright red and went, 'Oh, yes, of course, of course, of course.' Because there was a lot—he wouldn't text back, and you give me my space at the weekend, which I like now. But at the time, weren't exactly the cues that you're following. So, I don't know if that's

happened to you. And with Salsa, I suppose I had—we met at drama school, and we all had to learn merengue in the classroom. The teacher taught loose hips or whatever, how to dance with everyone. And then suddenly, we're both like this, and he locked his hips, and he was, oh, oh, a natural, natural move. I thought, *oh, that's a tick*. So, after that back and forth, he got really well. It's the hips I'd concentrate on [audience laughs].

CG: Very good, yeah. Well, thank you. That's a lovely way to draw to the close. I'd like to commend everybody who's been on the stage and to say that you can find Eric's book at the bookshop; it's called *Homelands*. But you should check out this site called Google, and you could look for Suzanne Harrington's book. All of the people on the stage are in the book—no, *What We Leave We Carry*, I almost forgot the title. And there are some books available. And I'd just like to point out that there is a great emotional cost to migration. And my mother used to say, 'I must have my cry' occasionally. And so, I was crying for my mother.

[Applause]

CG: So, thank you for the applause. And shall we end with another version of 'Welcome to My World'? Thank you very much for coming.

[Applause]

['Welcome to My World' plays]

'Welcome to my world

Won't you come on in?

Miracles, I guess

Still happen now and then

Step into my heart

Leave your cares behind

Welcome to my world

Built with you in mind

Knock and the door will open

Seek and you will find

Ask and you'll be given

The key to this world of mine

I'll be waiting here

With my arms unfurled

Waiting just for you

Welcome to my world

Waiting just for you

Welcome to my world'

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

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