

Philip Nanton

in conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi

GABRIEL GBADAMOSI: Philip Nanton, thank you for speaking to us on WritersMosaic. To begin: you're from a small island, it's fair to say, in the Caribbean that's been described as a dot on the edge of a massive volcano. From your perspective, a Vincentian, what's in play in Caribbean literature today?

PHILIP NANTON: Well, I think, that from my perspective, as you say, let's start with the idea of the dot in the Caribbean. St Vincent is not particularly known for a tremendous lot of things, you know. We are not exactly known for high culture; we're known more for agriculture. So, you immediately have, for me, an interesting problem. For me, the question is, how do you make central something that is often seen as simply marginal? And I would say that *that's* the question that I find particularly interesting. You know, for me that is the central issue, because even in the Caribbean, let's face it, St Vincent is not exactly a major player, as it were.

GG: One artist who is extremely well known from St Vincent was the poet and jazz musician, Shake Keane.

PN: Sure.

GG: And I understand that he was a mentor of yours, and one of the things you learnt from him was humour and nonsense, as a very valuable tool in dealing with life in the Caribbean. Would you care to talk about that for a moment?

PN: Yes... I think by the time we have finished this interview most people in the Caribbean will probably want to shoot me, but never mind. I think humour and nonsense is essential because, let's face it, you know, how are you going to survive if you're in a tiny dot and people don't even know where it is.

I had this interesting experience some years ago when I happened to have to travel on a Vincentian passport to Europe and I visited Hungary. And when I went to the immigration desk, the Hungarian officer looked at my passport and then they took out a map. But unfortunately, the map they had, didn't have St Vincent on it. So, that is the sort of problem that I have to confront.

GG: In fact, I noticed that in one of your poetry collections there was a place called... What was it called? ... St Christopher & the Barracudas!

PN: Yeah, I decided it would be most useful to invent a country because you might as well, why not, if people have never heard of the one you're from?

GG: Exactly. I spent a lot of time looking for that on the map.

PN: You would struggle to find that one. [Laughs] And the reason that I invented it was, basically, I wanted to put into that country the people whose voices I wanted to take over. So, that was a way of solving that particular problem and it proved very useful because, you know, a lot of people from different parts of the Caribbean could identify those kinds of characters within their islands. So, it really

didn't matter, you know, that it was this island that I invented, or this island country that I invented.

GG: Perhaps this is a moment to listen to a brief extract from one of the monologues – let's say, but 'speeches' is better – from that collection.

PN: Sure, you know in the Caribbean that there is a lot of... people are actually quite religious. And I thought that if I'm inventing this country and I'm bringing characters in, to be fair, I have to have somebody who has some sort of religious leaning. So, I wrote this piece in the voice of a church volunteer; it's called 'Rebranding Vestry Committee'. So, you immediately see that we're into higher management language in this imaginary island.

So, it's in a monologue. I'll only do a bit of it to give you a flavour of this church volunteer. You can imagine her cleaning the pews very diligently every weekday when nobody is there, and then this is what she says:

Rebranding Vestry Committee is all well and good but why, of all people, must we be saddled with Mrs Maynard? Since three weeks after Lent I told Father, 'Father', I said right by the vestry door after Confirmation Class, 'Father, fundraising is a doing word.' Look, you can't just let people like that woman into the committee any old how. Joan Dalrymple, Susan George, well, yes, these are decent hard-working people. Everyone has a job to do. Mrs. Barnstaple washes the napkins week in and week out. The chalice, the plate, spotless. Not one complaint from Father. But Mrs. Maynard? Does he want money raised, or not? Does he actually want the font repaired? You have to have order and things must be done on time. Father means well, but since he went on retreat I don't know what they put into his head.

And so on, and so on, and so on... That was just to give you a flavour. And the point is also that, of course, that situation... every church in the Caribbean will have somebody who is of that disposition, that was the point as well.

GG: One of the reasons why I wanted people to get a sense of the kinds of voices you explore is because as I understand it, you've had a double life. You've had many more, I'm sure...

PN: [Laughs] Yes, I've had a treble...

GB: The two I know about, Philip, on the one hand you've been an academic sociologist and on the other hand, a person who's explored subjectivity, the actual experience of life, of people in the Caribbean. And I wonder how those two play off? I notice, for example, that you returned to do some research in your home island, St Vincent, but that was disturbed by the sudden eruption of a volcano, and you could see a gap between policy, on the one hand, and 'events, dear boy', on the other.

PN: If I can tell you a story about that experience... Yes, this will show how ancient I am. This was back in 1979 when I turned up to St Vincent to do my so-called doctoral research. And so, I happened to land in St Vincent and – ironically, the volcano is erupting again at the moment from time to time – but it was in the middle of one of the fiercest eruptions for many, many years. As a result of the eruption, the government (not very wealthy, obviously, as it's a small island and very poor), was anxious to show that it was getting support from international sources here and there.

So, my first few days, really, I would listen to the radio and then somebody official would come on and say, we are getting this amount of clothes from Canada and this amount of gifts from England and America, and so on. And, obviously, they were running out of gifts and things coming in, and one morning I turned on the radio and I heard, to my consternation, that in our 'hour of need', returned Vincentian sociologist, Philip Nanton has come back! And I thought, 'What is a returned Vincentian sociologist going to do in a volcanic eruption?'

And, actually, all I could do was sit in the back of lorries trying to make sure that food got to the various destination of the camps where people had to be evacuated to.

GG: There's this society, this bunch of societies, on scattered islands that evolved with the modern world with inputs from Europe, Africa, the pre-Columbian populations, from East Asia, that emerged in the twentieth century into independence and – through culture, in some instances – really came to world attention. But you have a very different perspective about the challenges facing the Caribbean in the twenty-first century ... based on your sense of the Caribbean as a frontier. Could you talk to us about that? What do you mean by that: 'frontier'?

PN: Yeah, sure. I suppose in doing my research on the Caribbean, one of the things I noticed is a lot of the concepts that inform thinking in the Caribbean are often indebted to European concepts and that's not surprising. You know, because they were European colonies, and so the type of education would have that sort of style; in the English Caribbean, you know, versions of grammar schools were very common and high schools. The whole sense of, you know, Britishness and the link and all of that.

So, the looking towards Europe has been very strong. And one of the things I've started to think about is that while that is the case, at the same time we are very much located in the Americas, you know. So, why don't we develop... we talk about sovereignty and so on, but we need to recognise the implications of being in the Americas... that there are also 'American', as it were, ways of looking at things and, of course, one of the central American ideas is to do with the frontier.

And I started to think, well maybe we could take that idea and apply the frontier notion in the Caribbean. I started to wonder about, for example, the frontier history is actually just as much a part of the Caribbean as anywhere else. When I say frontier history, what I mean is, historically the Caribbean was the centre of

conflict over territories, both in terms of competing colonialists as well as competing with the local population that the colonialists found. You have a set frontier involved as an idea of something, of something that you acquire, you control. And also, over time, the region as a sort of outpost. All of those are sort of 'frontier' concepts that you can very easily apply to the Caribbean. It struck me also that, in terms of the frontier, if we see the frontier as what I call a relationship between some concept of civilisation and some concept of wilderness, then the frontier is somehow located somewhere between those two.

And so, for example, the frontier character in America is a cowboy, who roams the land on his own, and I would argue that, in terms of the Caribbean, you know, the fisherman who goes out on his own is just as much carrying out a frontier activity as is the American cowboy.

So, what you can do is you can start to interpret the concept but within a Caribbean context. So, St Vincent – which, you know, I happen to know a little bit about – about a third of its economy was illegal marijuana growing. Now, that is very much a frontier way of living because the farmers are not legal, they can't use bank accounts, they have to look after the seeds for the next crop, they negotiate, and when they sell their crop, they sell it with a mixture of sometimes guns, sometimes bullets, as well as cash for the crop. So, all of these are pioneer frontier-type activities.

GG: Well, that brings us kind of fairly neatly on to the subject of piracy and I don't just mean the *Pirates of the Caribbean* with Johnny Depp in it, but I learnt from your book, *Frontiers of the Caribbean*, that the last Caribbean pirate was indeed hanged in the 1830s, about the same time as emancipation from slavery. And so, as it were, the sense of that which is legal or legitimate being distinguished from that which is possible and human, must be very deeply embedded in people within the Caribbean and I'm just trying to explore with you how that emerges in some of the voices and characters in your writing?

So, for example, I learnt from you that the native Carib or Garifuna people had a word for slave, but that was 'son-in-law'. So, they're negotiating across cultures and across experiences, but at the same time, there seems to be in all of your characters a kind of an inbuilt tension between that which is wild and that which is polite and civilised.

PN: Absolutely.

GG: Perhaps, could you give us another short reading of one of your pieces in which the listeners can hear for themselves how maybe some of those tensions are working within character or situations?

PN: Yeah, okay. I'll give you an example of that, perhaps in the safest, most proper situation which is in the police force. This policeman, again this is one of my, obviously, my island inventions, and so I thought it would be interesting to write a memorandum note from the sergeant who is now 'acting' and whose name is Theophanous J. Belingy, and he's writing to the chief of police; he's sending him a memo because basically he feels he has been passed over, and so he wants to be assessed, to move up the ranks in the police force, and this is the note that he sends. And it's called 'Memorandum Number 2'. And it goes like this:

Chief, I know you is a good man. You heard my wail and lamentation when I was cast out into the utter darkness of the Barracuda Islands. I know that it was you that brought me back to serve here at the mainland force after so many years and I know that it is you who is responsible for making me Station Sergeant (Acting) here in Casuarinas Village. As long as I live I will always be beholden, and I hope you get the ground provisions I sent up to you last week.

But chief, I must put pen to paper again, to wit on here-to-fore, every smaddy and finney man in the force get elevate and become inspector. I

don't want to call no names, but I hear on the radio just last week how Charles, Dougan and Mackie get elevate. Chief, I was in the force a long time before them. If management is sharing out for officers to elevate, then why I stop a corporal for so long and only just now reach sergeant? Why I can't get elevate to make inspector, too?

I can't tell you how many times on a Saturday night I have to break my sleep to get call out to keep the peace when some drunken, God-forsaken fisherman want to lick up his woman and mash down they house.

Ask any of them customs officers on Grand Barracuda: Who organise the police guard when the white people yacht get thief out right in the anchorage every other night? Who stop the feuding after Marksman goat break down other people fence and eat out their peas garden?

Who settled the dispute between the Pizza Hut and the Green Boley? If it's not me chief, then is who? Is not for me to tell you your business, Chief, but 'Pax et Justitia' chief ... that is the motto of our nation. 'Pax et Justitia', that is all I looking for. Is my turn now, Chief, and I respectfully and dutifully write to request that I get elevate to the rank of Inspector of Her Majesty's force.

Your obedient servant,

Former Corporal now (Acting) Sergeant, Theophanous J. Belingy.

GG: I just love the use of the Latin there. I mean this guy is going for broke. As I listen, what I hear is what you often write about, which is the kind of fierce independent, frontier, individualism of the Caribbean, but at the same time the kind of pathos of people undergoing mismanagement, poverty, marginalisation. Is this always a tension that you see as you look out across the Caribbean?

PN: Well, I'm afraid so. [Laughs] Yes, I see a lot of that and that is what makes me, you know, want to catch the next incident or next situation... Absolutely. Because it seems to me that those tensions are absolutely central, and in a way, they're there also because, you know, what you have is these tiny societies that are determined, you know, to be taken seriously and they want to be big societies. So, you immediately have these kinds of tensions going on.

GG: But your tone is immediately, *immediately* comic. A kind of gentle send up, ironic.

PN: Yes, because it's all nonsense. [Laughs] I would accept that.

GG: Can I ask now about the other arts that you engage with as a writer? I notice that your books very often come with collaborations with visual artists. Never mind your engagement with Shake Keane, as a musician. What role do visual arts and music play in the way that you write?

PN: I try to see the situation, you know, as clearly as possible, and if I find an artist's work which sort of speaks to that thing that I'm presenting, then I'd like to combine the two. I just enjoy the collaborative idea very much.

It started just with the collaboration of one artist in the first collection in the *Island Voices* collection. She's a Vincentian artist, Caroline 'Booops' Sardine, and because she did the cover of the book for me, and I liked it so much, I gave her all of the pieces and I said, 'Well, why don't you just respond to each of them?' Which she was very, you know, happy to, and I liked them so much, I thought, well, this would be great to incorporate the visual response and the written alongside each other, and so, that's how it came about in the first instance.

GG: Can I also ask about the way you, as it were, publish your writing? I also have in my shelf a CD of Philip's work. So that, actually, you're not limited to the page, but you're bringing the 'voice' and with that I suppose I think of the *History of the Voice*, by Kamau Brathwaite speaking about the central importance of the Caribbean 'voice' to a Caribbean identity and future, really. What role does creating 'sound' versions, spoken versions of your work, play in your thinking about writing?

PN: Yeah, I would say that actually, in many ways, and certainly in the first two collections, that was central, and it came about partly because I had, before I'd started writing any of these pieces, I had some experience of making a few programmes for the BBC, for Radio 4 and Radio 3.

And in that process of making – it was only a few programmes in the late nineties, about four or five, I think I did – and working with radio producers who were really, you know, absolutely mind-blowing... how they could get sound, the right sound, to back up a story and so on, and how it enhanced a story. But just the whole business of working in sound... the irony is, it is a sort of a Caribbean tradition because if you think back to the forties and fifties, the *Caribbean Voices* programme that Henry Swanzy produced for eight years on the BBC, beaming stories back to the Caribbean. I met Swanzy and I wrote about his role just before I left England. And I was particularly taken by, you know, getting involved in radio and that had quite an influence in terms of when I started to listen and look at this society, it seemed to me that 'voice' was a way to try to capture elements of that society.

GG: Well, that usefully brings me to one of my favourite pieces which, to end, I would absolutely love if you would read: which is a series of instructions given to people on *your* islands of St Christopher & the Barracudas who are about to make the huge journey to another country, another culture, another language, in Cuba.

PN: Oh, the Cubans. Yes.

GG: Some of the operation services supplied by the Cubans to the people in the Caribbean.

PN: So, this piece if I can just briefly say how it came about. I was sitting in the airport, St Vincent's airport, waiting for my local flight to come to Barbados, and it was in the evening, and suddenly a large number of elderly Vincentians came into the departure lounge where I was and it turned out – because this was quite unusual – that there was a large Cuban transporter waiting to take them all to Cuba. Because Cuba and St Vincent... Cuba has this very good arrangement with other Caribbean islands. People who are suffering from glaucoma... if they need an eye operation, they don't have the money to have the operation in the island, or the specialism, so they will identify people and take them to Cuba, carry out the operations, and then bring them back.

So, I was sitting in the departure lounge and then the nurse who was accompanying them, a Vincentian nurse who was accompanying the elderly folks, she stood up and decided that it was important that they have some cultural understanding of where they were going and how to behave in Cuba, as they had never left St Vincent before. So, I call this piece 'Official Advice on Going to Cuba.'

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Can I have your attention? The time has come for you to travel to have those eye operations. They have been donated kindly by the government and people of Cuba. Now that we are waiting in the airport lounge for the airplane to take you to Cuba, I have to give you a few tips. Listen carefully. They will make your stay in Cuba go smoothly. For many of you, this is the first time that you are leaving your home to go to another country. Cuba is a big country, much bigger than St Christopher & the Barbudas. The hospital where you're going is a big place and if you wander around it, you will get lost. They don't speak English in Cuba, so, don't give the doctors and nurses any long story in English, they won't understand you. The food is different

from what you are accustomed to eat. You are a guest in their country, and you can't get ground provisions. You will have to eat what they give you. If you dash way the food, you won't get anymore. After your operation, you will have bandages around your head and over your eyes - don't pull them off! It is their job to do that. A next thing is manners. The swimming pool in the hospital compound is not for you. Don't go and jump in it! Now, the Cuban people are a very friendly people. When they speak to one another, they like to touch each other. Sometimes, they will give you a hug. It don't mean nothing more than that. Lastly, let me speak plain to you men, especially. If the nurses them hold your hand or hug you, it don't mean they want to have sex with you. When you start to feel better, don't molest them when they are going about their work. Remember, you are ambassadors for your country and, therefore, you are representing your nation. If you get desperate and excited, do the right thing, go to the bathroom, and relieve yourself.

And so on and so on...

GG: [Laughs] And so on, and so on... Well, what can I say, Philip Nanton? St Christopher & the Barracudas, the gifts of islands that keep on giving. Thank you very much.

PN: [Laughs] Oh, thank you, Gabriel.

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

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