

Belonging and a Sense of Place

Philip Nanton

Twenty years ago I returned from England to live in the Caribbean. I lived in England for nearly forty years. I returned to Barbados, not to St. Vincent, my island of birth. So have I returned? Yes and no. Yes, to the Caribbean, no in the sense that the experience of different places made me realize that for most of my life I have lived the life of an insider/outsider, one who is and is not at home anywhere, permanently.

A few strong memories from these years of living in England come easily to mind. For example, some of the circumstances in which my decision to remain was made. My parents were travelling back to St. Vincent and telephoned for a final word before they left. It was not the location but the cloying, cheap perfumed smell, as I felt the weight of that curved, black phone receiver held to my ear, that has never left me. Into the receiver I said, with no sense of irony, 'I'll try it for a while'. Another was not a memory of the island's hills, surrounding seas or its active volcano but the decision to hold on to an island accent; the early insider-ness of an inherited flat, Vincentian twang, and some limits to my pronunciation abilities. My family in England derive endless pleasure from teasing me for my inability to articulate the difference between the brown grizzly creature and the brown liquid found in pubs, bottles and cans. These features gave my English a distinctive tone as other distinguishing traits receded.

After many years of living in England, I found employment in one of the most unromantic but insider-type jobs in English society. I worked for some time in the unexciting world of local government in a middle-size, Midlands town. Local government, of course, engages in many of Britain's

most intimate, public services: education, individual care, the regulation of business standards, law and order, and the counting of votes. There are few more insider jobs. One weekday lunch time I sat with a colleague in a pub in the town centre where we worked. Deep in discussion, we ordered two ham sandwiches. The order was placed on a small docket that was plain on one side and with a number to identify our table on the other. The sandwiches duly arrived, but the waiter failed to remove the numbered docket. Absentmindedly, I turned over the docket. Written on the back were the words: *Two ham sarnies for the two nig-nogs*. Was it the intention that we should see the note? I choose to believe the note was surreptitious, a quiet few words passed between the kitchen staff and the waiter at the bar who brought them to us. My role at the time was Race Relations Adviser to the County. The docket was too precious to lose in any formal, bureaucratic race relations tussle. I kept it for many years as a reminder of my status.

Philip Nanton

Philip Nanton is Honorary Research Associate of the University of Birmingham. He was born in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and studied and lived in Britain from 1960 to 2000. Since 2000, he has lived in Barbados. His career began in British local government policymaking, and after completing his D.Phil at University of Sussex (1986), he combined the world of a practicing academic and that of a creative writer. He has published reviews of contemporary Caribbean literature in journals and magazines including *Caribbean Review of Books*, *Shibboleths: a Journal of Theory and Criticism* and *Caribbean Quarterly*. He has more recently developed as a writer of humour and a spoken word performer. In 2008 he released a CD *Island Voices from St. Christopher and the Barracudas*: the book based on the CD was published in 2014 by Papillote Press. He has performed sketches from this

collection across the region from Guyana to Jamaica. His second collection of sketches and poetry, *Canouan Suite and Other Pieces* (Papillote Press, 2016) was highly recommended in the 2018 Cuban Casa de las Americas Awards for Anglophone Caribbean Literature. In 2017, he published *Frontiers of the Caribbean* (Manchester University Press). He has recently published *Riff: The Shake Keane Story*, a biography of the Vincentian jazz musician and poet Shake Keane.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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