

## **Belonging and a sense of place**

Moses McKenzie

It is a sad fact that as a Black man born to a White woman, as a British citizen who couldn't holiday in Jamaica as a child, I have no real attachment to any land or sovereignty. If Jamaica decided to protect its environment and abandon sacrificial profits and was subsequently invaded for its bauxite, and if I had the opportunity to enlist in its defence, I wouldn't. Similarly, though for different reasons, if England was under threat and began to conscript, I would sooner go to prison than defend the nation in which I was born, whose passport is the one I solely hold.

Whereas I do have — or more correctly *had*, now that it is almost entirely nostalgic as a result of gentrification — a connection to the neighbourhood (the ends) in which I was raised; Easton — as it is corporeal, and as it once was a bubble of Blackness, despite being within England. In contrast, I have an emotional attachment to the Jamaican (and wider African) peoples, but not to any West Indian or African land, and I believe I'm missing something because of a lack of connection. This could be why, alongside God and the inner workings of Abrahamic religions, one of the predominant and reoccurring themes in my work is home and comfort, belonging and a sense of place, and why I am a writer in the first place.

I have chopped and fetched the wood, the thatch and the trodden mud to pack on the walls, I have taken a chisel and hammer to stone and fashioned myself a home within escapism, fit with eaves and tofts for sojourning guests, and even abatisses so me and mine won't be troubled by any unwelcome invasion. In my home I am able to explore the conception of belonging tirelessly and without threat of contradiction, and in this I am allowed to explore myself, because I am both of these things: I have discovered a home inside the people I love, and yet I feel little for any ancestral land of mine. I have a home and I am homeless. I belong and I do not.

In recent history, when 'postcode wars' was the favoured phraseology of White media, and a phrase that in Bristol was most often associated with Easton and St Paul's, before it became 'knife crime' and before they knew what county lines were, I remember people around me resenting its reductionist simplicity. No one is willing to put their life on the line for a few letters and numbers. They put their lives on the line for the only place they feel at home — which isn't the area itself, the blocks and the burnt spoons, rather home is in the memories and the loyalties cultivated in the adventure playgrounds and cages and youth clubs and schools. And if many of our homes were threatened with violence like theirs, we would respond in the same way, because a sense of belonging and someplace to belong to is essential to our fruition.

Although feelings of homelessness are not a Black-British experience alone, it does seem to pertain to those of us who are Black-British and of West Indian heritage more than anyone else, because we are twice-removed and doubly denied a history. In the Akan Twi and Fante languages, Sankofa means to 'retrieve', and also refers to the Adinkra symbol of an alar heart, or of a bird with its head turned backwards while its feet face

forward, carrying a precious egg in its mouth. The image walks hand-in-hand with the proverb: 'It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten'. Yet Sankofa is a concept often beclouded to those of us who are from where I'm from, because you cannot fetch what is lost, you can only search and attempt to build anew, and that is what storytelling is for me.

### **Moses McKenzie**

Moses McKenzie is of Caribbean descent and grew up in Bristol, where he still lives and writes full-time. Born in 1998, Moses wrote his first novel, *An Olive Grove in Ends*, at the age of 21. He has been commissioned to write a TV series based on the novel. His second novel is underway.

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

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