

## **A Lickle Space for Me**

Edson Burton

I should have been beating my chest with Usain Bolt-like bravado. I had just finished watching the last instalment of *Windrush*, a four-part TV series delivered by Mike and Trevor Phillips, commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the HMT Empire Windrush in 1948. Whether inner-city or Oxbridge-educated, its numerous contributors repeated stories of struggle and eventual triumph, across every walk of British life. Instead of bravado, I felt the return of a frustration bordering on quiet anger.

I could no more relate to the Black Britain of the Phillips brothers than I could to *The Cosby Show*. I grew up in Bedford, born to Caribbean parents: my mother a restless Christian; my father on nodding terms with God. My parents were in a mixed marriage – my father from Jamaica, my mother from Nevis – which meant I was never sincerely bound up with the outsized nationalism of either island.

I have eight siblings; four more I know of in the Caribbean. Through my siblings, I experienced quite different permutations of British and Black British life including the 'White pub' scene. Mum and Dad's pig foot soup was a last resort. We ate pies, chips, fish fingers. At one time, Burning Spear could be playing in one corner of the house while my sister rocked

back and forth to Bowie on repeat. There was one dodgy pub in Bedford where skinheads were rumoured to congregate.

When I turned to writing, the world I channelled was drawn from what I didn't see depicted in the national narrative. It was something of a deliberate conviction to set the record straight and something of the old adage, 'write what you know.' Knowing is one thing but I also felt some responsibility to the men, women, boys and girls whose stories are too often sanitised, bowdlerised, or ignored.

More subtly, the point of view that intrigued me most revealed my subconscious reason for writing. As a child in this cauldron, I witnessed the truth behind the tall tales we tell; I saw the cruelties behind closed doors, the wreckage left in the wake of drunken nights, infidelities, and the resilience of men and women working on the shop floor. I could not make sense of, nor could I judge, the destructive choices that I saw played out every day. So I wanted, most of all, to find a way to pull back the curtain to reveal the inner room. To make sense of the lives I saw, by writing the stories of the peripheral, the quiet, the backstage character. I wanted to make a lickle space for me.

**Dr Edson Burton** is a poet, drama writer, curator and historian. His radio credits include the supernatural trilogy *Deacon*, starring Don Warrington, now available on Audible.

His theatre writing spans a range of theatre-based, promenade and site-specific work including *The Ithaca Axis* (2013) poetry/theatre show *Curry Goat & Fish Fingers* (2016), a Frederick Douglass dramatization, *An Abolitionist Returns* (2018), the game show-themed *The Edge* (2018) and the ribald *Anansi & the Grand Prize* (2019).

His on-screen history specialist appearances include Hairy Bikers series *Pubs that Made Britain* (2015) *Books that Made Britain* Bristol Sin City (2016), *Lost Civilizations Series 1: The Remains of Slavery* (2017). *The Antiques Road Show* (2018) *Britain's Most Historic Towns: Georgian Bristol* (2019) in addition to regularly appearing on local news and radio in response to Black Lives Matter.

He is the author of the poetry collection *Seasoned* (City Chameleon, 2009), co-author of *What's Your Trinity Story, Vice and Virtue* (2018) and various online and print articles.

Edson is a member of Bristol's History Commission, the film programming collective Come the Revolution and Queer People of Colour Collective Kiki Bristol.

He is the father of two young adults, uncle to a cat and a lover of Easton, Bristol where he resides.

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

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