

Introduction

This book represents a synthesis of three distinct tendencies or directions that my academic and creative work has taken. One is an awareness of the need for reimagining the Caribbean in a world context. This concern can be summarised in the question: how can a small, increasingly ignored, dependent region contribute to the dominant debate of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries – i.e. the impact and meaning of globalisation? This question, it seems to me, comes even more clearly into focus when the perspective shifts from the relatively better known and more visible anglophone island states of Jamaica or Trinidad and Tobago, to an even more peripheral multi-island Caribbean micro-state, St Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG). Can a country of some 389 km² (150 mi²) and a population of 109,462 (United Nations (UN) estimate for 2015) have much to say to the wider world beyond offering anti-colonial rhetoric, couched in a smattering of Marxist analysis and mixed with gratitude for occasional national or international handouts during natural disasters?

A second tendency of my work arises from an encounter with colonial and postcolonial conditions, both in the Caribbean and in Britain. At the intellectual level, I have become preoccupied by a number of issues, explored here, that colonial and postcolonial studies have ignored or find difficulty in including in their grander analyses. A commonplace of postcolonial studies is the supposed subversiveness of the colonial/postcolonial subject, through the tropes of mimicry, cultural hybridity, and writing or speaking back to the centre. Though these paradigms are useful, I have long felt uneasy at their failure to account

for disjunctures and contradictions that play themselves out, I would suggest, in a context of local differences that have little to do with the metropolitan centre. An example I examine in this book is the history of the Shakers, or Spiritual Baptists, a religious practice with its roots in the St Vincent countryside that spread, first, to St Vincent's urban areas, and then to neighbouring islands, including Grenada, and Trinidad and Tobago. Since the nineteenth century, the community has differentiated itself from the Methodists – the church that, relative to the more mainstream Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, welcomed black social outcasts – by the prominent position it accords to women leaders. The challenge thus posed by the Shakers – essentially faith-based and located among the local black and rural labour force – is difficult to contain within the paradigms of mimicry, hybridity and speaking back to the centre. I would prefer to see it as creating a space for difference on the terrain of what postcolonial studies refers to as 'the periphery', but that, to those who live there, is far from peripheral. The tendency of postcolonial theory to recuperate every such local difference as a subversive act of 'speaking back' to the metropole obscures the autochthonous nature of a movement like the Spiritual Baptists, engendered out of specific local circumstances to which outside influence is itself marginal.

Furthermore, the smallness of the society I examine encourages an interactive analysis, between micro-level analysis (i.e. individuals) and the collective, in the form of both positive and negative developments in the public sphere. For example, I examine the role played by a self-educated ganja middle-man, sometime farmer and now urban café owner, who, by lobbying for the relaxation of the drug laws, intercedes between marijuana farmers and respectable mainstream society – the so-called 'good and great', both local and international. Among the former, of course, is the islands' inimitable Prime Minister, informally known throughout the Caribbean as 'Comrade Ralph', a charismatic leader whose closest associates have been socialist icons like Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro, but whose best efforts have not prevailed in making socialism take root in Vincentian society. In this regard,

the ganja warrior is closer to the spirit of the place than the political ideologue.

The third tendency explored in this book reflects a personal journey, away from conventional disciplinary analysis, primarily sociological, to the use of creative expression for social analysis in the context of the Caribbean. In a previous book, *Island Voices from St Christopher and the Barracudas* (Nanton, 2014a), I draw on my social observation of various Caribbean societies to dramatise and satirise a range of class, race and gender anxieties through ventriloquised monologues and dialogues spoken by inhabitants of this mythical place created by me.

My intellectual project, then, is one of complicating work that I find limited in some way so as to point to potentially more productive ways of thinking about a place or an idea. Though the price for this can be the charge of naiveté, revisionism or neo-colonialist thinking, this tendency to problematise or complicate has informed my thinking over a long time. In a contribution to an early collection of essays following the Grenada revolution entitled *Crisis in the Caribbean* (Nanton, 1983), I explored the regional crisis in the context of St Vincent's political economy, which showed a continued strong leaning towards conservatism in policymaking and outlook, leading me to pose the question: 'Crisis? What crisis?'. In an entirely different context, as a researcher and practitioner of race-relations policymaking in Britain, my concern was to challenge a one-strategy-fits-all approach to race policy formulation and implementation. For example, in a context of anti-racial-harassment policies, how might an equalities discourse access and monitor so-called black-on-black violence– for example the practice of robbing gold bangles from Asian women by black youth? Or, for that matter, the vexed question of who should adopt a black child – a devout black Pentecostal family or a white atheist one in a predominantly secular society like Britain? At a policymaking level, would the implementation of an equalities policy that suited an inner London suburb with a high black or minority presence be just as applicable and effective in a rural county council setting with a fraction of the relevant minority group (Nanton, 1984)?

No doubt the personal also plays a part in this problematisation project. I was born in St Vincent and educated in the ‘metropolitan centre’, i.e. Britain, in the course of which I returned to St Vincent as a Ph.D. researcher for fourteen months in 1979–1980. My aim was to study the transfer of power in a small Caribbean country: the role of the State in SVG. As a doctoral candidate I was expected to view the society through a sociological lens and do the things that a diligent student of sociology conducting fieldwork might do: collect data, conduct interviews, compare and contrast situations, and such. These plans were prepared some 3,000 miles away at the University of Sussex. I arrived, not to a sleepy Caribbean backwater, but to an island experiencing a major volcanic eruption, with the population of its northern half evacuated into schools, church halls, abandoned buildings and private homes in its southern half during the first eleven weeks of my return. The immediate disruption and knock-on effects continued for some time. This experience literally blew apart any preconceptions of my months-long prepared role as academic scholar and researcher. The St Vincent Government broadcasting authority, desperate for any sign of outside support, announced on the radio one day soon after my arrival that: ‘In our hour of need Vincentian sociologist Philip Nanton has returned.’ Flattering as this announcement sounded, the reality was considerably different. My role was to sit on the back of a lorry or two to ensure that donated foodstuffs from abroad were not stolen en route from Central Police Station to evacuation camps. I then had to bring together the conceptual lens that I had adopted with the material reality that I experienced on the ground.

My point here is that this experience armed me with a degree of scepticism about received wisdom and conventional discourse, including, for example, postcolonial theory. The experience also encouraged me in another sense – that is, to become my own organic case study. The personalised strategy adopted in this work, for better or worse, can be read as a response to that experience.

In the light of this admission, what then might a reader obtain from the eclectic mix of this work? I hope that the reader will

obtain, firstly, an alternative paradigm with which to re-examine the Caribbean; secondly, a cross-disciplinary analytical tool – that of frontier study – that integrates and straddles the disciplines of history, geography, literary studies, and social and cultural analysis, with a view to opening up new avenues of discussion about the Caribbean and other frontier societies; and thirdly, a work offering a close examination of an under-researched multi-island Caribbean society, St Vincent and the Grenadines.