

## Review of Limbolands by Ian Dieffenthaler

Limbolands

Maggie Harris.

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Guyanese-born Maggie Harris now lives in England and Limbolands, her first commercially published collection, explores a collision of cultures. Her poetry locates itself at the meeting place of West Indian memory and an English context and reinforces the good things about hybrid existence.

The poems are grouped into five sections. Limbo/lands sets up snapshots of a transcultural existence; Spirit/lands explores the author's spiritual and religious heritage. In Father/lands, Guyana the old Fatherland is envisaged through the poet's father and in Motherlands, England, the new Motherland is framed by mother/daughter relationships. In I/slands, the author defines herself and her contemporaries who transcend national and racial boundaries. Through a network of voices, Harris celebrates this I/sland condition. She asks "so my children / women of colour / white / black / mix race / colour / afro-saxon / phrases or sentences?" Sentences it is. And sentences that are the "candle light of the human race/candlelight!" (p92) Among current West Indian British poetry it is rare to come across such a lucid statement of the nature of hybridity. Cy Grant, a fellow Guyanese author, perceives pan as paradigm in his history of the steelpan. He celebrates the transmutation of industrial waste - an oil drum - into musical instrument and points to the ability of that instrument to promote a oneness that defies the ever-changing base of the West Indies. Harris's notion of limbo is similarly imagined, in that her "in betweenness" is never fixed. From her crossroads she builds each poem from materials garnered from one or more of its directions. In the limbo walkers, the narrator, a child, is seen to:

siddown wit mih fadda by dih river  
he dead dead we know dat  
dih berbice waters wetting he feet not mine (p24)

In her dreamworld, she and her father marvel at the Guyanese riverscape until the child's persona becomes indistinguishable from the river on which her father pilots boats: "she's a girl chile runnin / naked wicked an wile". Yet, in real time, the narrator recalls that on her father's death she was cast out of her landscape "dere int no room fuh no mixrace / whiteface goldhair girl."

She lef de Berbice to she own pace wash mih  
footprint lef no trace  
I gone to another worl  
As if to confirm her inability to choose between new world and old (her limbo), she confesses  
an when day ask where do you come from  
mih mouth it flap like fish is choke I choke  
an day gimmih glassa water (p27).

Harris resolves this duality by using the figure of the Limbowalker who "eye ah fall out see dey cyan walk pon dih water." The child's river is the adult's route between two worlds; it is essential to return to the source, to the absentee father, to make these miracles occur: "miracles dat in life he dint have no time to free." This backward glance is thus integral in defining a future in which life/death, adult/child, black/white, old world and new world are equally weighted. Where we might think that "the instances of immigrants / are drawn from half remembered breaths," (p11) Harris, in the crossing of the mind, insists that "they stride mid channel / Growing taller / Disbelief dissolving with each step."

It would be wrong though, to concentrate solely on the mechanics of limbo. We all know limbo poetry that hobbles off the page: these poems sing off the page. As poems. Harris is aware of the power of language, English and Creole, and connects with her audience in the way that only poetry should. In *Fireflies*, the poet/limbowalker examines a relationship thus:

here - my love says - a mango from your country  
its force ripe too-sweet juices  
dribbles on its journey  
re-enters those dark passages  
those kitchens made of wood  
those textured subterranean halls  
where fireflies light the darkness (p12)

Figures dip in and out of the poems, not least fireflies lighting candles. Transcience is re-imagined as limbo in Nureyev's dancing: "Floorboards were only springboards / that dance on the plains of a migrant's pain." Loss and belonging are turned over again and again: "Aisla is flying in her highrise flat, is stacked like a cube in breeze .block/Demerara sugarcube, crumbling, dissolving." In *Abandoned Stations* where "comfort is mistaken for identity", loss is only emphasized by the rush and rhythm of the poem: "And icons and pylons/and railway sleepers/suck and stifle and recycle the cries/howling through abandoned stations."

A central concern, through, is a meditation on motherhood and its post West- Indian condition. In appropriating the Bible for in my mother's house, Harris's poetry becomes a kind of motherhood. Harris through an affectionate portrait of her mother realizes, that she, like Lorna Goodison<sup>1</sup> is becoming her mother: "her Guyanese ways...incanted new sacred spaces where our feet now pace". Yet, in *Blame* she knows her daughter based in England will not become her mother: "how can one raise goddesses if we can't spell their names." Compare John La Rose's *Not from here*<sup>2</sup> where the poet addressing his son insists, "it is no mud we dry on our boots." It is tempting also to compare Grace Nichols' *Hurricane*<sup>3</sup> with Harris's. The former works as an heuristic device; the latter propels the work from England to Guyana and back again.

For Harris, the meeting place of cultures is a site of myth making and this places her with that other Harris, Wilson, whose interest in embracing the "vestiges of the subconscious imagination" retained in the religious and artistic practice of the West Indian is well recorded.<sup>4</sup> Harris unites Anancy and Arachne in her long poem *Mythmaker* which dices up several ancient fables in order to create a new history for our times. The poem ends with "A & A still scissored" in "mimicry and majesty and ink" - myth, then, is stamped upon the psyche of the people of the crossing.

Notes:

- 1 Goodison, Lorna, *I am Becoming My Mother*, New Beacon, 1995.
- 2 In La Rose, Anthony, *Foundations*, New Beacon 1966, p33.
- 3 In Nichols, Grace, *Sunris*, Virago, 1996, p34.
- 4 See Anne Walmsley's *The Caribbean Artists Movement*, New Beacon, p213.