

Limbolands

Maggie Harris

In small-town New Amsterdam – call-name *News Amsterdam* (what we called our town sometimes because of its propensity for gossip) – everyone knew who you were. If they didn't, they'd soon find out; they only needed a parental name, the rest would speak for itself – the curl in your hair, the shape of your nose, the tint of your skin. *C'pn Harris daughter*. My schoolbooks bore the inscription *Margaret Anita Harris, 20 St John St, New Amsterdam, Berbice, British Guiana, South America, The Southern Hemisphere, Milky Way, The Universe*.

If, as was the case, you had friends whose parent or parents came from abroad, there was never any real enquiry as to exactly where they came from – England, Canada, America... ok, so? You didn't cross-question adults anyway, and many Guyanese wouldn't know or care where Missouri was, or Staines. 'Abroad' was literally another country, albeit one that that represented everything BG (British Guiana) was not – free, rich, powerful, white, and to be aspired to.

On migrating to the UK in 1971, I was under-prepared for the question 'Where are you from?' I am from Guyana, of Guyana, Guyanese. I am South American. *Guyana, not Ghana*. It always mystified me that most folk knew where Ghana was, but not Guyana. Guyana always had to have its story

told, through random references – El Dorado, XM Rum, Demerara sugar, proximity to Brazil and the Amazon, Shakira Baksh (married to the actor, Michael Caine), Jim Jones. The practice of enslavement would come in somewhere after these. But then I would meet a merchant seaman, or a member of Her Majesty's Services, who didn't only know where this outpost of the British Empire was, but had actually been there. I remember feeling such joy at these surprising encounters, even umpteen years later, as I did at The Imperial Hotel, Merthyr Tydfil, when I met a farmer who had spent some years of his youth during the 50s in Guyana. Farming sheep in Brecon, circa 2006, he had read of a writer from Guyana who was coming to Merthyr to read her poetry and had braved the passage through the Black Mountains to meet me.

At 17, I really did not know if I was coming or going, and enquiries about colour would sometimes come from unexpected directions. From being called 'whitey-shitey' in New Amsterdam to 'white nigger' in Whitstable was something of a jump. Fresh from my father's death, and the anguish of a broken love affair, my first months in the UK were nothing like I expected. Sent into the temporary care of a relative, about whom the less said the better, I was to spend months running wild, confused, friendless and cold.

I took myself off to Harrow Art College for part-time art classes, bummed around on tubes, found a boyfriend, went to my first pop festival, hitched to Lincoln and back, found another boyfriend, headed for Wiltshire to stay with cousins, then Ilford with a Guyanese family, together with whom I landed in Ramsgate. Through all these encounters my presence in this country had no purpose. To put it simply, no-one was really looking after me, and whilst a 17-year-old may well be an adult, I most definitely was not. My strict and religious Guyanese upbringing still had me kneeling to

say my prayers at the side of whichever bed I found myself in, until I began to be embarrassed by it. Whilst on one level I felt a freedom that was new to me, I was desperately confused by landladies who locked their kitchen door and the non-stop enquiries about myself, and Guyana.

My mother and sisters joined me eventually on the Kent coast, and we were to face all kinds of suspicion, bewilderment, goodwill and confusion in the coming years: two of my sisters experienced racist taunts at school, and one of them in the early days of her nursing career. But on the whole, overt racism didn't affect us as much as it did many of our fellow Caribbean peoples in other parts of the country – because of our fair skin and lack of a visible Caribbean community. This became the subject of my 2020 Wales Poetry Award poem, 'and the thing is'.

In Ramsgate we were out on a limb, true limbo walkers – amongst the white people them. It was a schizophrenic experience for a teenager, finding and forming new friendship groups in a new country. For my mother, too – having to seek employment for the first time in her life. Enquiries towards her were more informed as she was Portuguese, but then surprise at her being Guyanese. Sometimes, it would feel that our past lives in Guyana had not been real; we were jumbies (Guyanese word for troublesome ghosts).

Guyana in the 70s and 80s was a country trying to find its own way amidst corruption, violence, racial enmity, and deprivation, including a lack of basic foodstuffs. Over the years, those were the stories that came over the air/ear-waves, along with smuggled dollars in shoes, a black market and long queues outside Western embassies. Nevertheless, there were several stalwart visionary and heroic figures who stayed and worked tirelessly for Guyana, such as the Catholic educator Sister Mary Menezes, the poet and

political activist Martin Carter and Walter Rodney, Guyana's foremost historian and political activist who was car-bombed in 1980.

From the first serious poem I wrote, 'The Limbo Walkers', back in the early 90s, I was set for an exploration of not only migration, but our language, identity and history in Guyana. My immediate family were suddenly a mine of discoveries as, in each story told, I would discover more layers. Take the story of Aunt Ena. She was my father's sister, and lived right next door. She and my father were two of nine siblings, born across the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century. My father, the youngest, was born in 1908. It is difficult to write fairly of Ena, especially since I have memories of her in the UK where she settled in the 60s, leaving Guyana in 1968. Our childhood memories of her were not happy. She was a sharp-tongued woman who climbed our front steps frequently to admonish my mother about something or other, and criticise us children for some wrong-doing. She whipped me once when my parents were away in Suriname and I was hiding from her in their bed. She had been hostile to my mother when she and my father married, although she had initiated their arranged marriage. In the 70s, I would spend time with her in Wiltshire, and in 1975 she made my wedding dress, to her own spec. She was old then, I no longer feared her. It's not until I came to write my memoir, *Kiskadee Girl* (2011), in the late 90s, that I began to see her in a different light. Their family had all grown up on the Berbice River, the site of scores of slave plantations. Contemplating that life, for the first time, I did so in the light of race and emancipation – mixed-race families like ours were called 'coloured'. (My birth certificate actually says 'mixed'.) What must it have been like to leave the river (which would have had negative connotations anyway, as 'town life' was about going up in the social scale) and make your way in the world? But make their way they did. Some of the siblings went to the capital city Georgetown, my dad stayed and worked on the bauxite boats, became

captain and then commodore. Aunt Ena became a dressmaker and worked for Singers in N/A (New Amsterdam) and would do private dressmaking for the wives of the upper echelons of society – the wives of bank managers and lawyers, many of whom were white. I would disgrace her totally when at the age of three or so, an introduction to one of these ladies prompted me to raise my dress and cock my bottom at her. Ena was a businesswoman, and worked to achieve that status despite the difficult times. Her sharp tongue and sense of entitlement may well have been a product of that environment; the physical punishments she meted out are in no way to be excused, except to point out that corporal punishment went on in many families at that time. *Spare the rod and spoil the child* was an oft-repeated Victorian mantra and a by-product of plantation life. Guyanese writer Edgar Mittleholzer writes about ‘the coloured classes’ in his novel *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (1954), where the struggle towards upwards social mobility also kept others down.

Over the years, descriptions of people like us moved from ‘coloured’, and ‘red’, to ‘black’, to ‘Black and White Caribbean’, to ‘mixed-race’. Naming or labelling ethnicities can create more problems than solutions – what of the Amerindian/Indigenous blood from my paternal grandmother, believed to be in part Surinamese? What of my Portuguese Madeiran Scots White mother? Birth countries don’t help: some members of my family still refuse to call themselves Caribbean or West Indian – they are South American. I don’t know how my dad would have described himself. My mother still describes him as coloured. A recent DNA test partly identified our ancestry as located in Nigeria, which I found surprising; I had always had an innate connection to Senegal and Mali through music such as Salif Keita’s. But who is to tell? I must listen to Fela Kuti. Borders are drawn and redrawn, named and renamed, populations shift.

As with other Caribbean (and South American) countries, mass emigration from Guyana created untold disruption in families, as happens in my story 'Sending for Chantal', (which won the 2014 Commonwealth Prize for the Caribbean). A child aged four experiences the loss of her mother who leaves for America promising to send for her. The story reflects the journey that Guyana has travelled, and the Guyanese who have struggled, believed and worked against all odds to make something of the country and themselves. It also reflects the returning Guyanese, those who have made their money doing whatever they do in Toronto and New York, returning to buy land and build houses – some running from the increase of racist trauma towards their children of colour, set on fire by Trump.

My family still enjoy our Guyanese food and music and slip into Creole when together, but our *Guyaneness*, if that's a word, is a thing slowly slipping away as everyone gets older. As a writer, Guyana is still alive within me. I see myself as a traveller and recorder. In the UK, I walk fells, valleys and gorges, and listen to tales of the bougainvillea, breadfruit, conch shell and plantain of Guyana. The desire to see its Kaieteur Falls lessens somewhat because none of the natural world cares what we name it, places all run into each other, and given a chance would soon cover up any footprints we may leave. Reading the great Guyanese novelist and visionary Wilson Harris at university added a layer to my own questioning of land, belonging, and self in the context of a spirituality that is as panoramic as the territory of the Rupununi and its fabled El Dorado. I find affirmation in my role as artist. Wilson Harris's handwritten note to me, on my winning the Guyana Prize in 2000 for my first poetry collection *Limbolands* (1999), which he describes as 'well deserved', remains a treasured possession. My life as a writer has been both lessened and strengthened by my migration. Being a writer means you constantly enquire. All those who have enquired of me did me a great service as it sent me on an enquiry of my

own, which is present in every poem, every tale, every story handed down to my children. My own sense of Guyana, as a country, a concept, a place inhabited by indigenous peoples and folk whose ancestors crossed oceans in bondage or as free human beings, has been enlightened by experience, empathy, study, and migration. Although the immigrant need to belong in their country of settlement is primal, particularly if they've been promised a mother country, I've realised that feeling a sense of belonging is not always important – that we should be open to travel, to integrate, to learn and appreciate other cultures, other lifestyles. That may be a less articulate way of agreeing with Wilson Harris, whose vision for Guyana was esoteric and surreal, but I realise that the limboland in which I exist is cracked, which allows the light to get in.

Being granted the opportunity to learn more about the land of my birth through writers such as Grace Nichols, John Agard, Wilson Harris, Edgar Mittleholzer, Martin Carter, Pauline Melville and David Dabydeen, and then being able to launch my memoir *Kiskadee Girl* at the National Botanic Garden of Wales, in the presence of a sheep farmer from the Black Mountains and friends and neighbours from both England and Wales, was a celebration of inter-cultural engagement that began a new chapter in my life. My move to Wales, land of nationhood, stunning landscapes, hills of song breaking out from under their bigger neighbour, issued another question waiting to be deciphered – why here, why Wales? Returning then to Kent like a homing pigeon posed yet another.

Now it seems, everyone knows where Guyana is. The discovery of oil has placed her on the map indelibly; rumours suggest she will become the largest oil exporter in the area. It's worth remembering that neighbouring, oil-rich Venezuela once held that title, and her refugees grow by the day.

Maggie Harris

Maggie Harris is a poet, prose writer, and visual artist. Originally from Guyana, South America, she recently re-located to Kent after 10 years in Wales. She attended Kent University as a mature student, achieving a BA and MA, and started her career performing, running workshops and teaching creative writing. She has worked for Kent Arts & Libraries, represented Kent in Europe and was International Teaching Fellow at Southampton University.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

© Maggie Harris