

1992

Inside Passage

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Recommended Citation

Harris, Claire, Inside Passage, *Kunapipi*, 14(2), 1992.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol14/iss2/4>

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Abstract

Only once in my whole life I travel a far distance by sea. Is when I make the voyage out from Trinidad to university in Ireland; from a way of seeing everything 'double': so one part you see the African-Trinidad way; the very same time you see story-book British. You cultured. A good word when you think what is milk culture. Thing so automatic, seem so necessary to respect you ain't even know you doing it, eh. Still it got this sour aftertaste. I move from that to seeing myself as 'other'. I telling you straight; was a singular experience. Take ten days or so from Trinidad to England. It begin a trip what carry me five hundred years. So when I hear the theme of this conference 'voyages', what come to mind is plunging seas, a grey ship, coming home. Talking my talk here today, it going be only about them seas. I dividing this into two: 1) How all them voyage I take, that emigration, how I suspect it shape what I writing; 2) That word, - woman, how it come too too clear aint no accident it mean what it mean. That also kneading the work.

CLAIRE HARRIS

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Ever since I know myself, everybody take it for granted I going be a writer. So how come it take me 16 years to get start? I come from that class a West Indian what never really take this race thing serious. On the whole they behave like is somebody belch at table; they too polite to notice. I remember when I about eleven I tell them home about some Expat teaching at the convent. My father first he laugh, then he say the world full of fools why should she be different. Then he get serious and he say nobody what anybody really good leave England to come to a dot in the Caribbean. Is what I needed then and I grateful to him. But looking back from now, I see this ambivalence. Every body else live at the centre of they world but not us. Still my parents was fierce in they pride, so it take a while for me to accept that along with all the classist stuff I absorb, it have so much what bound to be racist.... I get to Ireland and pretty soon I want a language; I want Gods; I stop writing.

Now this culture thing: Is a real callaloo of myth, religion, language, ethics, economic pattern, science and art all bubbling together, you know. And we right down there in the pot bubbling along with it. We an everything else relate, an is all-a-we, an it aint have no way to escape. Body and mind you is what you culture is. It become a kind of seasoning the whole world taste of it; and the world aint have any other way to taste. Every-

body else use water from they own well to make base. In these island, what ever we class or race, we using water for-so from a European well. Is so we ending up hand in hand with a culture what try to reduce we to nothing. Is so sometime, somewhere, we bound to find weself obozkee. Allyuh see this all all the time at these conference when all them idea-logical, them critical terms is always an everytime something other people come up with. Now is how any a we could think that European rules of organising ain't consciously or unconsciously going wipe we out, especially where topic and style ups an reflect what actually going down? On the other side we trap in a economic reality. Some of we, what want to eat, aint got no choice, cept irony.

But it have a worse thing: I cant imagine a writer what aint love language, but this language I love, aint sweet on me. No matter how you look at it the more real we be, we Africans in the Americas, the more we out there on the edge. It clear is time for we to start thinking for we self about we self in the world, laying down we own string and following it to the end. For those of we what cant eat in the Islands, and is more and more of we, is the most important thing. Because I telling you straight, out there where it aint have anything to hide behind, we got nothing to tell the children. They aint dumb; they see the ole talk aint working anywhere. Is time we reinterpret the signs. Otherwise is another generation we risking. And dont bother mamaguying yourself; it aint have nothing to do with class.

Any how, yes, my mother used was to say never play game by anybody else rule. Meaning if I aint play slave no body could play master. I begin to see I get a real opportunity here with this language thing/this interpretation thing ... it take awhile before I could use it.

Now it aint possible to write serious without choosing. People what born with a deep down proud, they can't Naipaul. In fact any kind of victim shuffle, it out. That only leave you with one choice and that is the choice to know for youself. Knowing for youself mean you have to know not only *who* you really is but *where* you really is. Now after Europe I aint know nothing that count except that one thing... (I better say right here eh, nobody beat me up; nobody spit on me; this landlady do me a real favour, tell me I in her house under false pretence: Claire Harris couldn't possibly be your real name.) After Jamaica I know a little more. Mostly what I aint going to do. In Trinidad, I realize nobody ready for me. (In 1965 I say I making a rule in my English class... unless youself white I aint marking no story with white hero. Them days, you read children story in those elite school and all the people have blue eye. Well is uproar in the staff room. They say I racist; I crushing chile.) Eventually I pick myself up an I leave. I did get a job in New Zealand but life take a turn in me skin and I end up in Canada.

Now is one thing to live in a country as student, is another thing to enter they market place. Is a worse thing when people see you propose to eat

you food/drink you music/and dress you dress. I learn living there. 1) A West Indian person living away got to decide for she one self what in the callaloo matter to she. 2) It aint have no way of being other than as member of you own group. And whether you like it or no you place in opposition. Now it have oppositional site an oppositional site. If you talk you private life, if you want to scream racism, that's fine. They custom to that. If you want to write about Trinidad that is fine too. Be real real careful if you start looking deep at the society; be even more careful if you start laughing. Though in true laugh is only a way of dealing with this looking business. This looking close is the hardest part; mostly what you find it terrifying. Anyway I start to read serious because I had was to find for myself the source of all them crazy ideas about Africans these societies have. And the even crazier ideas about themselves. I start traveling with me eyes open. I remember this idea lamblassing me that what I write have to be different. Still it have this whole cloud of dead white man complete with Austen, and Eliot hanging over one shoulder. They grow me up in a house full of books and female ancestor stories. Grandmother, Aunts, Great Aunts everybody proud for so and full of words. So this even more demanding cloud of dead black women on the other shoulder waiting to see what I go make with what they win for me. I was paralyze. Finally, I take a year off for Africa. Was 1974.

I only had was to land, three weeks later the dam burst. I start writing. So when I meet up with John Pepper Clark it had this sheaf of trembling poems clutch in my hand. He mentor me for long enough. Looking back, I did really need Africa. Them people aint have a clue what it mean to lose you self. And I find out I have a world view; and I find out just how much water it had in my wine. I'se a West Indian; I descend from people what had to create themself in the West, eh. For me it come clear. There aint no way to graft a Yoruba self onto the West Indian self; You got to surrender to Africa completely. By then I did have enough surrender; enough of other people culture. I finally free to begin finding the New World African. Of course I return to Canada full of Africa. And proud as hell. I soon see is contain I cant contain all that in 20 or 40 lines. Is so I begin journeying with the long poem. Is just fact that thousand mile of prairie, sky gone to forever out side my window make the outer landscape mirror the inner one.

I start myself up as a public poet. I want to say this is what it mean to be alive today. This is what it mean to be human. Everybody like they shock about what going on now they decolonise the rest of Europe. Aint no surprise to me. Is not the same thing happen in India, in Africa? Is not that civilisation what haul we here to lock we down in they stink all the way from Africa? Aint they wipe out whole peoples in the Caribbean, in Africa? God know where else! (And is guns I talking not disease.) Aint civilisation wipe out half the European Jews? Aint it the other half of

those self-same European Jews what wiping out Palestinians? Aint half the world confuse technology with something special they call 'civilisation'.

My subject, it seem to me, this minute (notice all them weasel words I throwing at you) my subject is what different between that superior moral image, all that moral philosophy all them colonising societies fool themselves with. (And is all I really mean: the usual suspects, plus most of them in the Americas, Far/Near/Middle East, Ethiopia and all the rest of them in Africa, the Zulu and so) and how violent, how in truth it uncaring; how it anti-life. How it most primitive in it basic tribal insistence. And when I say primitive here I mean peoples what still think *any* woman/and the man over the hill aint fully human. Boil down what happening all over the 'developed' world that is what it truly is. That primitive. In such a space I ain't got nothing to lose. Cept myself. So I set up to counter all them image of Africans, all them image of women, all image of 'civilisation as we know it' what they re-colonizing the globe with, for image what a little closer to what I myself see really happening.

Now this feminism thing; is a matter of ownership. All over the world societies feel they owning they women. They think it natural as breathing. What difference, it only in degree. In the Americas is one in four have the subtlety of the fist.

It have judge what say a man could rape you, and you bound to carry he thing. It have judge what say domestic violence different; like domestic science I suppose is part of homemaking; It have judge what lock up woman to protect she foetus, but any man could damage he sperm: drink, drugs, chemicals, you got to carry it. It have politician talking 'family values', what they mean keep woman in the market place, preferably part time, that way you just dont bother with fair payment. That way as a langniappe you get control. It have politician what afraid to outlaw automatic weapon; so the next maniac could shoot 7 women engineers instead of fourteen. An I aint even going get started on Anita Hill; or on them so what raping they girl child.

Voyaging through these things what is one thing, what like the sea and cant divide, what is me/African/female/of the Americas, lead to charge my poetry overtly political. Is like saying I make poetry out of words. It have anybody who work aint political? Some of we overtly support the status-quo, and some of we don't. A more real point is me own participation in Canada, it hegemonic role. (After all what I doing is teaching people, who thinking I cant really influence, how to use the verbal tool like a boss. And I teach them because is live well I like to live well.) Some of this insinuate itself into the work.

If I could, is rupture I would want to rupture this world and make it back safe for all-a-we. But as I dont believe in omelette, so I trying to rupture the *idea* of limits, of expectation in form. I does always talk story; even so I write a layered kinda poetry. I like to fool around with words, I like even the way they line up, the way they look on the page. I like to

see the way they different ways of meaning on the line support what I wanting to say deep inside, an still leave space for the reader to create she own thing. Is so I move in to the poem as a ship I buy for meself. I plant my flag where I feel like. And I take it over.

Vincent O. Cooper

1733: ST. JOHN, DANISH WEST INDIES

A conch shell declares
 Their destiny
 Drummers echo crisp commands;
 Two bussals and creoles blend
 Thirty tongues
 In martial orchestry,
 Defying Babel's curse.

No confusion of African tongues here;
 No blueprint of Popul Vuh.

Legba's supreme sorcery
 Cheats Werewolf of his prey.

Ancestral
 Drumbeat of Atsime
 Dub-bl-talk of Assortor
 Rap and rim of Hounto:
 Open our ears;
 May we hearken to Bilal's call to worship;
 May we hear Askia's call to build ...

December, 1990