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Why I Write

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Why I Write

Abstract

Because I can. Obviously, not the whole story, but important nevertheless. Perhaps if I were a fabulous blues singer I wouldn't write. And it isn't enough simply to write. For me the very look of the piece must declare a refusal to accept the boundaries. Refusal. That's the key word. I write, at least at this stage of my life, I write because the images of myself, of the world of women, of what I am supposed to value, of my society, the accepted 'common-sense' of dominant segments of the Western project and of the place it has constructed for me, as well as the 'me' it has tried to construct are unacceptable. More important, these notions hinder, perhaps even prevent the development of 'whole' persons, and simple decency.

CLAIRE HARRIS



Claire Harris settled in Calgary after coming to Canada from Trinidad in 1966. She is the author of five collections of poetry, including *Translating Into Fiction* and *Travelling To Find A Remedy*, both from Goose Lane Editions. In 1985, she received a Commonwealth Prize for Poetry. Her most recent book of poetry *Drawing Down a Daughter* (Goose Lane) was a finalist in the 1993 Canadian Governor General's Award).

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Because I can. Obviously, not the whole story, but important nevertheless. Perhaps if I were a fabulous blues singer I wouldn't write. And it isn't enough simply to write. For me the very look of the piece must declare a refusal to accept the boundaries. Refusal. That's the key word. I write, at least at this stage of my life, I write because the images of myself, of the world of women, of what I am supposed to value, of my society, the accepted 'common-sense' of dominant segments of the Western project and of the place it has constructed for me, as well as the 'me' it has tried to construct are unacceptable. More important, these notions hinder, perhaps even prevent the development of 'whole' persons, and simple decency.

The persons I am thinking of here, since I am perceived as a creature of the Western world, are white. But Western culture has been congratulating itself recently on having won the war of 'civilisation'. So I must accept that along with its suits, its languages, its attitude of total war, it has spread its construct of me and its diseased notions of racial hierarchy as fundamental to the human project.

The human project. The discovery of the possibilities, the freedoms, the terrors, and limitations of being human. In this space/time. Not original. But the confessional alternative – why me/why here – strikes me as not only ignoring the possibility of chance, but also of being altogether too self-centred for a species for which social stimulation is a developmental requirement ... and much too self-important.

From the beginning my work has been about putting people, mostly women, in impossible situations and seeing what happens. Most of these people are of the Americas. They are also poor and/or oppressed. Their poverty and/or oppression the essential result of Western, patriarchal hegemony. So it was I discovered how a man could use a baby as a football; how a woman could castrate a man; how any human being could take up arms. I suppose I discovered how I might be able to do these things. And in doing so, discovered the dominant other.

The problem of being black in the West is that one cannot avoid internalizing this dominant other. Therefore, of the generations of Africans forcefully stranded here, especially those born before 1960, the marvel is their physical and emotional survival and the rich variety of their contribution, scientific, artistic, economic, to the enterprise of which they form

an integral, if largely unacknowledged part. I could not begin to write until I saw my particular job in all this as a kind of archaeology. I had to dig up myself.

Layer by layer the cultural sediment that makes me what I am. I have to know what is most narrowly genetic, familial, experimental, and what regardless of education, class, and place of birth, we Blacks hold in common. I have to know which strands of thought and practice are essential Africa; which strands are Europe; which are/were designed in the white hot cauldron of the Caribbean to ensure the survival of the human spirit. How did we come to the incredible, private, life-saving cynicism that enables us to watch the manoeuvres of the Euro-American Axis to ensure continued domination without turning to bombs? How is it so many of us wait with real calm for you? How easy, African in the West, to hold always the moral hill! What does that do to us? To you? This is the rocky ground of the writing I do.

Like almost every one writing today, I mean, of course, almost everyone black, I am obsessed with language, and the world it creates. So personal and political a tool. With the notion that language conceals as much as it reveals. With the difference between theory and the relatively actual. With the shifting ground between the two. With how one holds on. Life is so often 6.6 on the Richter scale ... if one pays attention. That's why I read detective fiction ... squalid, almost gothic, fairy tales for the twentieth century.