

Editorial

This sixth volume of *The Arts Journal* offers a blend of Guyanese voices at home and abroad through a range of critical articles and creative writing that speak not only to our condition of survival and existence but, more pertinently, to the pervasive condition of migration and exile. Guyanese scholars, poets and writers, many of whom have taken up residence overseas, reinterpret reality from a perspective of time and distance and, in so doing, define reality from *outside* the homeland, a realism that is applicable to those *inside* the homeland who are also in a state of internal exile.

What is coming through at this time in their writings is perhaps a notion that the borders of the native land have become blurred, that “homeland” is a shifting space, no longer a space of certainty, no longer the centre of experience. This vulnerable state is emphasised by the fact that, in addition to our people spread out in the Caribbean archipelago, Europe and North America, in Guyana physical “bridges” are being constructed and contemplated to link us with our non English-speaking South American neighbours rendering the national borders more porous in both real and psychic terms. This fluid, ambivalent space will inevitably be mirrored in our art, literature and culture.

Given the above situation, the notion that Guyanese literature may have as much in common with the Latin American canon and its shared landscape as with that of the English-speaking West Indies to which we are historically linked by virtue of our shared experience of colonialism, has gained currency. Perhaps it was such an affinity that led a small but significant number of Guyanese to attend a lecture at the Mexican Embassy in Georgetown, Guyana, on 1st June 2010 in observance of Mexico’s 200th anniversary of Independence. “Words and Images from Mexico: Four Poems Four Works of Art” by Professor Eliff Lara Astorga of the Philological Research Centre, National Autonomous University of Mexico, in this issue, is an expanded version of that lecture. Professor Lara analyses the ways in

which four poets and four visual artists of Mexico engage each other and deepen the meanings in their works within the context of the Mexican Revolution.

This reaching across genres and mediums of expression to capture reality is not unique to the Spanish tradition. In this issue we feature Guyana's seminal novelist, Wilson Harris [now Sir Wilson Harris], whose work reflects this very engagement with art and who also treads the ground of magic realism to bring us to a more radical understanding of reality.

Harris's interview with Michael Gilkes, and Gilkes's review of Harris's final novel, *The Ghost of Memory*, throw light on, and demystify the writer's technique which Harris himself explains thus: "You see, readers are accustomed to novels that set everything out in a manner which seems to be realistic The writer tries to give himself to the writing as delicately and as powerfully as he can. If the writing is not understood, the problem may have to do with the fact that readers tend to be conditioned by reading conventional novels and cannot see that other forms of novels are not only possible but, I would say, inevitable."

"Tale of Another Crossing" by Roxana Kawall is an adventurous piece of prose writing that employs dramatic shifts backward and forward in time. It is a valuable account of the visit to Guyana (June 2009) of Brigid Wells, the eighty-one-year-old great great aunt of Theophilus Richmond, ship's doctor of the second ship, *Hesperus*, that landed in British Guiana on that historic day, 5th May 1838, bringing the first wave of indentured labourers from India to the Gladstone plantations. For those who have read *The First Crossing: being the Diary of Theophilus Richmond, ship's surgeon aboard the Hesperus 1837-38* (Derek Walcott Press, 2007) with a critical Introduction by its editors (David Dabydeen, Jonathan Morley, Brinsley Samaroo, Amar Wahab and Brigid Wells) Kawall's article adds a lively dimension to a rather dry diary. If one hopes, like Kawall, that Richmond's remains do not lie within the ill-kempt Bourda cemetery, then we pray they are not within the Le Repentir either where mountains of garbage are piled on the access road to the jungle-like cemetery almost in defiance of

the sanctity of the dead – and perhaps this is just another manifestation of the shifting certainties inherent in being Guyanese.

The voiceless, anonymous cargo of the “first crossing” that is documented in Richmond’s diary comes to life in *No Pain Like This Body* (1972) by Harold Sonny Ladoo. Even though Ladoo’s birthplace, Trinidad and Tobago, has thrown up writers of distinction including Indian-Trinidadian writers (among them, V.S. Naipaul, Ismith Khan, Shiva Naipaul, Neil Bissoondath) who have accurately fictionalized the world of immigrant Indians, none has paid attention to the small enclave of Janglee coolies virtually existing on the fringe of society as Ladoo has done in his first published novel.

Professor Victor Ramraj, in “The Distinctive Indo-Caribbean Art and Voice of Harold Sonny Ladoo”, attempts to illuminate the world of Ladoo’s coolies and in doing so exposes a style of writing employed by Ladoo – a crude and vulgar style steeped in violence and sexuality that possibly draws from the naturalism of earlier writers such as Emile Zola.

It would seem that this vulgarity and lewdness also permeate certain Guyanese novels for Keith Jardim’s “Welcome to the Plantation” examines three novels by David Dabydeen and also makes the argument that the experience of indentureship seems to evoke violent linguistic expressions in some instances. Jardim’s analysis points to a stark truth that “. . . the life on the plantation harbours the kind of soul/character destroying grief that creates a masochistic-sadistic cycle that he [a character in the novel] can’t resist after he has been immersed in it for a certain time” and, more relevantly, he finds that “. . . most West Indian politics remains nothing more than a corrupt/corrupting plantation exercise . . .”. These critical observations prompt us to reflect on the brutal truths of a V.S. Naipaul novel even though Dabydeen has often declared that he owes much to Wilson Harris.

In the article entitled “The Artist Donald Locke: Notes on a Career and its Development”, the art historian and art critic Carl Hazlewood asserts that the artistic impulse in Donald Locke and Stanley Greaves can be traced back to the Working People’s Art Class with its energetic leader E.R. Burrowes.

In this article, Hazlewood examines the growth and development of the artist and his retention of his identity as a Guyanese person even as he left Guyana, first to study in Britain and then to work and study in the United States of America. Even though Locke's work has universal resonance, fitting in with a sophisticated contemporary ethos, Hazlewood argues that his work is deeply rooted in the Guyanese heartscape and folk traditions. [While this issue was in press, Donald Locke passed away on 6 December 2010].

In the creative writing section the female voice dominates with relatively new poetry from Stephanie Bowry and Cicely Rodway as well as the more established voices of Grace Nichols and Mahadai Das, and a hitherto unpublished suite from Stanley Greaves.

Two additional poems by Bowry and Nichols emphasise the theme of "home and away from home" which emerged in this collection of articles.

Michael's Gilkes's autobiographical narrative is quite nostalgic and the US-born Marina Budhos (of Guyanese father) expands the conversation on exile and displacement through the eyes of the second generation in the Diaspora, in the first chapter of a published novel *Tell Us We're Home*.

This issue is capped by a varied catch of book reviews that will be useful to students and researchers:

Ameena Gafoor reviews Marian Pirbhai's *Mythologies of Migration, Vocabularies of Indenture: Novels of the South Asian Diaspora in Africa, the Caribbean and Asia-Pacific* (University of Toronto Press, 2009).

Mariam Pirbhai reviews Cyril Dabydeen's *Imaginary Origins: Selected Poems 1970-2002* (Peepal Tree Press, 2004).

Ameena Gafoor reviews Edward Baugh's *Frank Collymore: A Biography* (Ian Randle, 2009).

Michael Gilkes reviews Wilson's Harris's *The Ghost of Memory* (Faber and Faber, 2006).

Frank Birbalsingh reviews N.D. Williams's *Julie Mango* (Peepal Tree Press, 2004).

Frank Birbalsingh reviews Patricia Dathan's *Bauxite, Sugar and Mud: Memories of Living in Colonial Guyana 1928-1944* (Shoreline, 2006).

L'Antoinette Osunide Stines reviews Rex Nettleford's *Dance Jamaica: Renewal and Continuity. The National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica 1962-2008* (Ian Randle, 2009).

Judith Misrahi-Barak reviews Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (Harper Collins, 2007).

Ameena Gafoor
Editor