Liminal Spaces
Migration and Women of the Guyanese Diaspora

Edited by Grace Aneiza Ali

Liminal Spaces is an innovative exploration into the migration narratives of fifteen women of Guyanese heritage. It spans diverse inter-generational perspectives – from those who leave Guyana, and those who are left – and seven seminal decades of Guyana's history – from the 1950s to the present day – bringing the voices of women to the fore. The volume is conceived of as a visual exhibition on the page; a four-part journey navigating the contributors' essays and artworks, allowing the reader to trace the migration path of Guyanese women from their moment of departure, to their arrival on diasporic soils, to their reunion with Guyana.

Eloquent and visually stunning, Liminal Spaces unpacks the global realities of migration, challenging and disrupting dominant narratives associated with Guyana, its colonial past, and its post-colonial present as a 'disappearing nation'. Multimodal in approach, the volume combines memoir, creative non-fiction, poetry, photography, art and curatorial essays to collectively examine the mutable notion of 'homeland', and grapple with ideas of place and accountability.

This volume is a welcome contribution to the scholarly field of international migration, transnationalism, and diaspora, both in its creative methodological approach, and in its subject area – as one of the only studies published on Guyanese diaspora. It is essential reading to those studying women and migration, and scholars and students of diaspora studies.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

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PART I
MOTHERING LANDS

The mother’s body is the country of our earliest memory, the soil from which we are formed. Our lives are an arc of flight: away, toward, away.

Shara McCallum, ‘From the Book of Mothers’

Mothering Lands engages the tensions between our place of birth (motherland) and the space of othering (otherland). For artists Keisha Scarville (United States), Erika DeFreitas (Canada), and journalist Natalie Hopkinson (Canada/United States), all first-generation daughters, their relationships with their Guyanese-born mothers serve as a metaphor for their relationship with Guyana—a space frequently wrestled with as a mythical motherland. They illustrate how their mothers, grandmothers, great grandmothers, and oldest mothers are their deepest and most tangible connection to their ancestral land. As they reflect on their immigrant mothers’ journeys across Guyana, the US, and Canada, their gaze as daughters is full of compassion and tenderness. They each mine their family archives—photo albums, letters, clothing, oral stories, sacred rituals, and recipes—to shepherd us through multiple migrations and returns.

Artist Keisha Scarville spent her childhood raised in Brooklyn where her parents, along with so many other Guyanese immigrants, migrated and settled after leaving Guyana in the 1960s. In her photography essay, ‘Surrogate Skin: Portrait of Mother (Land),’ Scarville reflects on her portraiture series, ‘Mama’s Clothes,’ an homage to her late mother. In the portraits, Scarville embodies her mother’s dresses to evoke her connection to Guyana. In both her prose and portraits, Scarville grounds herself in her mother’s place of birth of Buxton (Guyana) and her neighborhood of Flatbush (US). The lush, organic landscapes in these images, shifting between Guyana and the US, hold emotional and geographical significance: they capture the artist and her mother’s dance between transient spaces. Grappling with ‘a sense of displacement and an internal fracturing’ after her mother’s passing, Scarville looked to her ‘mama’s clothes’ of bright colors, strong prints, and long flowing fabrics for meaning. She drapes and layers her body in her mother’s clothing as well as fashions masks and veils to cover her face, which is always obscured. In merging her body with her mother’s
clothes, Scarville marries both time and space—two generations, two homelands, and the complexities in between.

In an artistic practice steeped in process, gesture, performance, and documentation, Canadian-born artist Erika DeFreitas generously mines her family archive of photographs and letters throughout her oeuvre. In her art essay, ‘Until I Hear from You,’ she turns to old letters and photos sent from Guyana to construct memories with a grandmother she’s never met and to piece together a motherland she’s never known. Her grandmother, a skilled baker in British Guiana in the 1950s, passed down the practice to DeFreitas’ mother who then migrated to Canada in 1970. In sharing her family album, DeFreitas illustrates how the act of passing on sacred crafts through two geographies and three generations of DeFreitas women has shaped her connection to Guyana. In her essay, she expands on how she uses cake icing—perfected so beautifully by her grandmother that she taught classes in cake décor to the women in her neighborhood—as an important symbol in her work as well as in her poetic language. The icing is both material and process—meant to decorate and to preserve. DeFreitas leaves us to ponder the question: Even when we commit to preserving a motherland’s memories, rites, and traditions, how do we navigate the inevitable loss that pervades?

In a series of letters that read as intimate journal entries, letters that could easily belong to familiar collections like ‘Letters to My Younger Self,’ letters that unveil deep untold secrets and desires, mother and daughter Serena Hopkinson and Natalie Hopkinson reveal the great love and admiration that abides at the core of their relationship. It is a mother-daughter bond that has seen several migrations across three countries: Guyana, Canada, the US, and many returns and reunions in between. Guyanese-born Serena Hopkinson migrated to Toronto in 1970 as a young bride who would soon embark on building a family of her own while navigating the terrain of being an immigrant in Canada and later the United States. The Hopkinson family life was one in constant transition, defined as being ‘on the move.’ The letters the Hopkinson women write to each other in ‘Electric Dreams’ are symbolic postmarks of the places they have borne witness to, survived, and thrived: Pomeroon River, Guyana; Edmonton, Canada; and Florida and Washington, DC, United States. Like so many immigrant families who have left Guyana, a series of arrivals and departures in search of ‘a better life,’ took its toll on Serena’s marriage and on Natalie, her Canadian-born daughter’s identity and selfhood. What this duo brings to light is that despite the emotional toll migration takes on families, their relationship has been a constant driving force. It continues, to this day, to sustain, inspire, and buoy them as they chart new paths and adventures in their roles as women, daughters, wives, mothers, grandmothers, teachers and life-long learners.

While they share the great losses within their maternal histories, revealing how migration, death, and loss are inextricably linked, Scarville, DeFreitas, and Natalie and
Serena Hopkinson unpack how Guyana continues to be a land that mothers. Their essays in *Mothering Lands* are poignant examples of how as daughters of Guyana we can reach to and rely on our mothers as constant collaborators and co-authors in both our lives and in our art.

**Notes**
