Liminal Spaces
Migration and Women of the Guyanese Diaspora

EDITED BY
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Liminal Spaces is an in-depth exploration into the migration narratives of female 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.

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Grace Aneiza Ali
1. Surrogate Skin: Portrait of Mother (Land)

Keisha Scarville

Figure 1.1
Keisha Scarville, 'After (Mom and Me)'
2015, watercolor in archival inkjet print.

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My mother stands in the front yard of my grandfather’s house in Buxton. The soft morning rain soaks through her nightgown. The weight of the water compels the thin pink fabric to cling to the fullness of her skin. It’s been ten years since my mother's feet have touched the fleshy soil of this land.

If only time could unfold the labyrinth of the history of this land—before the rumors and crime, before my mother was a little girl coming home for her noon day lunch, before my grandfather looked at my grandmother, claiming her sixteen-year-old body as his woman. If only my mother could touch rock and sand to see into the past to when this place was once an abandoned plantation called New Orange Nassau. If only she could see how it forged a new center of existence, purchased in 1840 by 128 emancipated Africans who renamed it in honor of the British Parliamentarian who advocated for the gradual liberation of African slaves—Thomas Buxton.¹

Now my mother has returned, positioning herself near the slowly dying tamarind tree that my grandfather used to climb, about a quarter mile away from the endless sea wall, and just a few yards from the upstairs bedroom where my grandfather quietly closed his eyes to this world for good. The air is different and familiar, filled with the smell of freshly cleansed leaves, sweet saltwater, and the faint sound of crowing. My mother closes her eyes and raises her face to the pouring sky. My aunt yells out to her, but she does not respond. She lifts her hands, rubs the rain deeper into her skin and smooths the silken water like lotion over her body. The words that come out of my mother’s mouth are indecipherable. I sit tightly packed on the worn wooden steps and bear witness to this ad hoc baptism. Slowly my mother walks back to the elevated house. Each footstep leaves a moist trace of her hardened soles. As she gets closer, I focus on the drips of water collecting like beads on her feet. I am transfixed. This is the last time my mother and I would be together in Guyana. In a few hours, the sun will push its way through the clouds, transforming all of this into a dry landscape of memory.

My mother left Guyana in 1967. She was the oldest of five and the first in her family to travel to the United States. Her motivations for leaving Guyana were an unequivocal certainty. ‘I had to leave,’ she would say when reflecting on that moment in her life. ‘I couldn’t stay.’ My mother was one of many Guyanese citizens who left during the late sixties, driven by a promise of opportunity and a new narrative to be unearthed within foreign landscapes. My father and several friends preceded her arrival. Though my mother chose to emigrate to the US, she maintained a connection to the land of her birth, firmly planting one foot under a tamarind tree in Buxton and the other, rooted on the rooftop of an apartment building in Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York. When I was a child, Guyana was a place that existed partly in my imagination and partly in my memory—stitched together like patchwork by what my parents carried with them and reassembled here in America, and my own experiences during short visits to see my family who remained. However, as the years went by, those visits
became less frequent and Guyana lived mostly within my mind as a growing myth of what I regarded as a form of home and motherland.

On 13 August 2015, my mother passed away, taking with her a treasure chest of stories and deep knowing. Like how to properly clap a roti skin, or how to speak the vegetal language of soil and plant life, or how to clean and prepare your house so that good luck will come in the new year. In the months leading up to her passing, we often talked about the idea of home. I wondered whether she would ever return to Guyana. Or, like so many immigrants who moved to the States, let time and distance alter her relationship to the land. Did she now consider America her permanent home? In recounting her experiences when she arrived in the US, she often discussed the first sensation of real cold, the strange taste of American chicken, and overcoming the embedded alienation of this place.

I became curious as to how my mother’s presence within this American landscape influenced her sense of belonging. How had the process of becoming an American citizen affected her? What was the impact of her shifting relationship to Guyana? Even now, I find myself left with more questions than answers.

The death of my mother left me with a sense of displacement and an internal fracturing. Her friends, most of whom also made the journey from Guyana to plant seeds in the US, would comfort me by saying, ‘Alma is going home.’ The word home became both a troubled and expansive concept—more amorphous than concrete. I started to realize that an element I regarded as home—my mother’s body—was now missing. In her place were all that she accumulated as an American.

I was inundated with remnants of her existence, specifically her clothing. My mother’s closets overflowed with bright colors, strong prints, and long flowing fabrics. When I was a little girl, I would often play dress up in my mother’s clothes and imagine the day I would fill her dresses and assert my body as a woman. Her clothes would hang off my small skinny frame, loosely encasing all my prepubescent delights and aspirations. I reveled in this form of role-playing. I found both amusement and comfort in my mother’s clothes, where her scent seemed to linger and cling to each fiber.

As an homage to my mother, I decided to photograph myself in her clothes. I wanted to find a way to ease the anxiety of separation by conjuring her presence within the photographic realm. I allowed the assemblage of clothes to drip off my body as though it were a residual, surrogate skin.
Transient borders and undulating lands speak of histories that have long past. I stood on the shores of a beach in New York and looked out to see myself walking along the Sea Wall in Guyana.
Figure 1.3
Keisha Scarville, ‘Untitled #1’

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Figure 1.4
Keisha Scarville, ‘Untitled #3’

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Beneath the weight of her clothes, I exist as beneath a veil. I breathe my mother into me and feel her presence in my body.
Figure 1.5
Keisha Scarville, ‘Veil #1’

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Absence is a space filled with desire. I became interested in the experience of absence and the camera’s role in visualizing that which cannot be seen but felt.
Figure 1.6
Keisha Scarville, ‘Veil #2’

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The presence of the landscape became an important factor in the images I created. I chose locations that held emotional and geographical significance to be read as echoes of my mother’s body. In early 2016, I returned to Guyana—this time alone. I chose to investigate the terrain from a different point of view—a first-generation American-daughter searching for home. I wanted to peel back the ancestral layers and examine my own sense of belonging. I brought a suitcase of my mother’s clothes and returned to Buxton. I photographed myself in and around my grandfather’s house and along the Sea Wall. It was a process of repositioning and reconstitution for both my mother and myself.
Figure 1.7
Keisha Scarville, ‘Untitled #5’

© Keisha Scarville. Courtesy of the artist. CC BY-NC-ND.

Figure 1.8
Keisha Scarville, ‘Untitled #4’

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I often think about why my mother chose to bathe herself in the rain that day. I wondered what it meant for her to return and how her identity became subjected to shifting landscapes. I tried to find the place where my mother stood that day, but the ground was not the same. I cannot cleanse myself of the loss I experienced. I can only find a new name for a new place and for a new body.
Notes
