Liminal Spaces
Migration and Women of the Guyanese Diaspora

EDITED BY GRACE ANEIZA ALI

Liminal Spaces is an intimate exploration into the migration narratives of forty-five 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

Grace Aneiza Ali is a Curator and an Assistant Professor and Provost Fellow in the Department of Art & Public Policy, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. Her curatorial research practice centers on socially engaged art practices, global contemporary art, and art of the Caribbean Diaspora, with a focus on her homeland Guyana.

3.

Electric Dreams

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Natalie Hopkinson and Serena Hopkinson

Figure 3.1

Serena Hopkinson on a class trip to Trinidad in 1966 while she was a student at St. Joseph’s High School in Georgetown, Guyana.

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Mom, these days when I see all the xenophobia and nastiness in the United States, I am overwhelmed by an urge to pick up and move. Growing up, you and dad were constantly on the go. I think I counted eighteen addresses in two countries and three states before I finished undergrad. That you and dad could both come from the humblest of Guyanese families, land in North America with no visa, and then sail into an upper middle-class life is pretty amazing. Our family’s migrations speak to the choices we can all make as educated people with skills in demand, and as global citizens.

You and dad never settled. You never stopped moving, exploring, hoping, dreaming, and demanding something better for yourselves and for us. You never really got comfortable. You fell—a lot. But you never seemed to spend a lot of time on regrets. You were always on the lookout for a new, better thing.

Mom, I am so proud that you have gone back to undergrad at Florida Atlantic University to study sociology and Spanish. You are always talking about ways to improve your oral fluency. At sixty-eight! If you can be that courageous and mentally nimble as you approach sixty-nine, with all you have been through, it makes me feel that I, too, can face any challenge in front of me. When you walk across that stage to collect your undergraduate degree this year, no one will be cheering louder or longer than me.

Natalie

Bush People

Natalie, I have spent so much of my life building, and then starting over again. Moving is awful. It’s a pain. But it is so thrilling. Each time, I feel reborn. I started out in the country on the Pomeroon River, moved to the city of Georgetown where I married your dad, left Guyana, became a Canadian citizen. I had you four kids in Canada and moved to the US. I had careers in banking, accounting, computer tech, and real estate. I rebuilt our family after divorce. I had to rebuild my body from cancer—twice. But when I consider where I draw my strength, who I am deep inside, I know I can face any difficult situation in life because, as I proudly say, ‘I am from the Bush!’

My mother, Christina (Tina) Elizabeth Baird, was primarily Arawak and my dad, Millington Benn, was African. I am their second child of nine children. I was born in 1948, at home near the river with the help of a midwife. Until I left in 1960, we never had a motorboat, so we always paddled wherever we wanted to go. Each Monday, there was a passenger launch that picked up people on both banks of the Pomeroon to go
to Charity—a big market where everyone took their goods to sell. Charity was also the connecting point to a road that took people to other places in Guyana. It was a special hub filled with laughter and friends.

The Pomeroon River was ominous at night. It was usually dark by 6 p.m. and bright with sunlight by 6 a.m. We were very close to the equator. We had no clock. We estimated the time by the position of the sun during the day. We looked on the steps of the house to see where the shadows were. When it rained and there was no sun in the sky we had to guess. I can still smell the river at night. It is a moldy, haunting, muddy, deathly smell. Pitch black. There were small kerosene bottle lamps around and often a big fire to send swarms of mosquitoes away.

At times when I used to smell the river, I would wonder which person it might have claimed that day. Seventy-five feet deep, the Pomeroon River had no mercy. It didn’t matter how much of a great swimmer you were, when it was ready to take you, it did. One time, my brother Ovid had to rescue me when I panicked attempting to swim across it. As children, we paddled for two or three miles on the other side of the river to the Marlborough Roman Catholic School. How long the trip took depended on the tide—whether it was coming in or out, whether it was stormy or not, whether the waves were high or low. Some of our schoolmates did not make it. Their boats capsized and they drowned. That all nine of us survived our crossings of that river for so many years, still surprises me.

But the Pomeroon River also provided our transportation and sustained our lives. We drank the brown water. We bathed in it. We swam in it. We fished in it. It fed us: dried, curried, stewed, and fried fish for school almost every day. The mighty, mighty Pomeroon River was home until I was twelve.

Serena

Snow White

Mom, I remember my first time visiting the Pomeroon was the first time I saw you scared. In 1984 all of us—Michael, Denise, Nicole, and Dad—were all packed onto that tiny speedboat on the Essequibo River on our way to your childhood home. I was eight years old and all I had known was Edmonton, Canada. We got our hair braided in cornrows. Someone put a flower in my hair. I don’t remember wearing any life jackets.

All that we saw and experienced in Guyana was so different from our lives in Canada. We got to taste what were mostly rare treats in Edmonton. We ate lots of cassava bread, plantain chips, pepper pot, garlic pork, and curry chicken. In Georgetown, city buses were packed with people moving and speaking fast. Rasta hairstyles, thick and matted,
stretched down to people’s waists. I learned to chew on a sugarcane stalk and saw it cut fresh with a cutlass. We learned where our family’s accents came from. You and dad were so jubilant and at ease, enjoying a triumphant return ‘back home.’

We arrived so pasty pale because we got little sun in Canada. For us kids, it was a strange new experience. But as I started to grow older and more aware of race, Canada was also beginning to feel a bit strange, too. In Edmonton, we were born into constant snow. We lived in our boots and ski pants and some of our time on the playground during recess was for skating. The Edmonton I remember was filled with ballet classes, badminton practice, tennis, gymnastics, the Royal Glenora country club, and lots of travel. It was a cold city filled with warm, friendly people. I can’t say I feel the same connection to Edmonton as you do to the Pomeroon River. But, I, too, love the city of my birth and am grateful to be born there.

_Natalie_

_Daddy’s Girl_

Nat_alie, to me my dad will always represent ‘home.’ He was very serious, quiet, and hardworking. I adored him. He was what Guyanese call the ultimate ‘sweetman.’ He loved the ladies. But he was also a thirty-something-year-old married man when my mixed-race and Amerindian mother, at sixteen years old, became pregnant with my older sister Lynette. My mom grew up in an environment where it was normal to violate young indigenous girls. My dad had two children from his marriage and numerous others outside his marriage. At last count, the number was twenty-two children with multiple women. When he died in 1988 at age seventy-four, he had a four-year-old son with another indigenous woman. When we lived in the Pomeroon, my siblings never wanted to talk to him. They were intimidated. I was not.

In 1960, when I was almost twelve, the teachers of the Marlborough Roman Catholic School told my parents to send me to take an exam far away. Details were scarce. My dad arranged it. Afterward, we learned that students who passed it were allowed to go to secondary school in the capital, Georgetown. And so, my journey away from the Pomeroon River began. Dad decided he would do whatever was necessary to keep me in school. He became the most important person in my life. I bade farewell to my river home and went to St. Joseph’s High School in Georgetown, a Catholic girl’s convent school with 600 girls. It was a brand-new beautiful school located in a very prime and fancy stretch of real estate. Everyone wore blue and white uniforms. I was totally out of place. I was not accustomed to wearing shoes. My feet hurt and I was uncomfortable every single day. My fellow schoolmates were children of wealthy parents—business people, diplomats, and educated expats.
My end-of-school term trips home from Georgetown took me twelve hours: a bus to Stabroek Market, a ferry to Vreedenhoop, a train to Parika, a steamer to Adventure, a bus on an unpaved road for forty miles to Charity, and finally a passenger launch to Grant Strong Hope on the bank of the Pomeroon River. There were no roads.

Going to St. Joseph’s pushed me into another world. Dad was always proud to introduce me to people who didn’t know me as ‘my daughter who is away at school.’ I was a celebrity. It was dad who agreed to send me on a field trip to Trinidad with my rich schoolmates in 1965. At home mom, dad, and my eight siblings farmed coconuts, oranges, limes, cucumbers, rice, and corn on about five acres of land. To pay for the trip, my siblings had to harvest more produce to sell at the market. Back then, I felt entitled to the trip. Now, I cringe at my lack of self-awareness, and how I must have seemed to my siblings. They had to sacrifice to give me an opportunity they never got.

British Guiana had always been a country with conflicts over race. It mattered whether one was African, Indian, or Portuguese. Your race determined your status. I am one of those mixed-up ones—split between my mom’s mixed Amerindian heritage and my father’s African ancestry. In the Caribbean caste system, African ranks higher than indigenous Amerindian, who were often exploited. My mom, my siblings and I were never really accepted. We were referred to as ‘buck children.’

Serena

Figure 3.2
Serena Hopkinson (far left) in 1967 with her fellow students at St. Joseph’s High School, Georgetown, Guyana.

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Daddy’s Girl, Part II

Mom, we have this in common: we both spent the first decade of our lives in our birthplace before we made our first migration—when everything changed abruptly. For you, it was leaving ‘Bush life’ on the Pomeroon River for the big city Georgetown. For me, it was leaving Edmonton, Canada for a whole other country—Indiana, United States.

Growing up in Edmonton, most of my playmates were white Canadians, but a good number of the kids were also the children of immigrants from different countries—China, Pakistan, Thailand, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, and Italy. I remember one solitary Jamaican but no other Blacks in our school.

Canadian manners dictated that it was rude to mention race. I started having questions as I approached puberty. In Études Sociales class, we talked about the ‘White Man’ who conquered and oppressed the First Nation indigenous Canadians. I wondered, ‘Where did I fit?’ Didn’t our family come here to inhabit their land, too? We must be considered the ‘White Man!’ I was happy at this thought. At a sleepover, the girls went around a circle confessing their crushes. When eyes stopped at me, I shyly spit out the name of a white boy in our class. Everyone smiled politely, and then a silence hung two beats too long. Weeks later, I daydreamed. Who would I marry? For the first time, I felt my difference. It was a bit lonely.

It helped to be part of our large family. The four of us were like a gang. Michael and Nicole—so smart, athletic, artistically talented, and popular—blazed the path for me and Denise. But in 1986, in fourth grade, dad took the job in Indiana installing a new computer system for the Department of Motor Vehicles. Everything changed for our gang of six. I watched you cry as dad flew back and forth weekly from Edmonton and Indianapolis. Dad’s absences also hit me hard. I often could not hold back my tears in school. I, too, was a ‘Daddy’s girl.’ Of the four of us kids, I looked the most like him. I loved to snuggle underneath him. I was always sad when he commuted to his job in Indiana and cried at school sometimes. A school counselor put together a calendar to count the days when he would be coming back home. Like anyone else, he had his flaws. He could occasionally be cruel. Things only got worse when we moved to Indiana.

Natalie

‘Black Bitch’

In 1963, when I was fifteen years old, tensions over race and politics boiled over. In Georgetown where I went to school, there were fierce riots and violence
between Africans and Indians who were vying for political power as we approached independence from Great Britain. The whole of downtown Georgetown was burnt to smithereens. I had to miss school for months while things simmered down. Because I looked ambiguous—I was brown-skinned but wore my soft curls blown straight—I didn’t know whether I would be attacked in the streets by Indians or Africans.

I had a major crush on an Indian boy—Bishnue. He was forbidden by his parents from speaking to me. We found a way though. His family had chosen an Indian girl for him. She lived not far from me in a large fancy Georgetown home. One day, she called me a ‘Black bitch.’ I attacked her and threw her off her bicycle. She was hurt. Her dad was a sheriff. He went to my very prestigious school and demanded I be kicked out. I was so scared. I don’t really know how I was spared.

Serena

‘Martian’

Beech Grove, Indiana in the 1980s was a strange and intense place. Everyone spoke with a twang, a slow and lazy tongue. Everywhere we went in the neighborhood, hateful stares demanded answers I did not have. I sensed the Hopkinson family had caused the people of Beech Grove a great offense. No one told me what. We spoke English, so people expected us to know and understand things. We did not. Like: if you are the only Black family, there is probably a reason for that. Each time I opened my mouth, it was so obvious how different I was from white kids who were our neighbors in Beech Grove. I was a Martian to the Black kids bused in by desegregation court order from inner city Indianapolis. Instead of speaking in the wrong accent and being outed for not knowing the slang or music, I chose silence. Michael and I had a job delivering newspapers as we did in Canada. We had to go door-to-door to collect our payment. I could never predict what level of disgust flung open on the other side of the door. I remember when teenagers chased Michael as he walked home, screaming at him, ‘KKK is gonna get you, nigger!’

Compared to the bright whiteness and cheer of Canada, Indiana was heavy and dark. I tried to make myself small. I strained to avoid drawing attention to myself. I wanted to stay off the streets. But home ceased to be a refuge as we turned our frustration and anger inward in our too-tiny apartment. We wanted to rent or buy a bigger house in Beech Grove, but every single white seller or renter refused our family. You and dad fought constantly. My daily wish was to turn invisible and thus never anger anyone inside or outside our house. I dreamed of running and floating far away.

Natalie
Torn Asunder

Natalie, those were hard times in Beech Grove. I can relate to the alienation you felt. I don’t know how I held on to my sanity. My marriage did not survive. Living without friends and family in Indiana, I turned inward for peace. As my marriage crumbled, I continued running and playing tennis every day. In these activities, I challenged myself physically. I entered my first half-marathon, training weekly with my new white friends in this suburb. We had absolutely no Black neighbors. When our constant and increasingly vicious fights became too much to bear, I calmly called a sharp young attorney from the yellow pages. He advised me that in Indiana, no woman should take it for granted that she will get custody of the children.

I proceeded anyhow with the divorce, praying feverishly that I could convince the judge that I could care for four children even though I was not working at the time. What optimism! My huge character flaw—but it often worked. The judge gave me full custody. I am so sorry for the pain these years caused you.

Serena

Finding Home

Mom, I don’t like it when you blame yourself. Beech Grove was an outlier. In general, people have treated me well. You and dad divorced, and we moved to Indianapolis into an excellent and racially mixed school district. I can’t say that the white kids on the north side welcomed me with open arms, but they were not hostile. And to this day my oldest and dearest friends are Black friends I made in Indianapolis. School was always a refuge for me. It was a place that was orderly, not messy. So, I am grateful to you for making sure we lived in the very best school districts available, even if at times we did not live in the grandest house.

In the years you worked as the business manager at the historic Black Madame C.J. Walker Theatre in Indianapolis, I started to come out of the shell I had erected around myself. While dad was focused on Michael becoming the next tennis superstar, you signed us girls up for all of the theatre’s ‘Youth in Arts’ programs. We did dance, drama, creative writing, and visual art. And for the first time in my life, I was around a lot of other Black people. It felt like I was able to exhale after holding my breath for years without realizing it.

When I got the opportunity to go to Howard University in Washington, DC on a journalism scholarship, I was happy to continue my journey of exploring identity, understanding my place in the world, and finding out ‘what is home.’ I met my future husband Rudy McGann there. I stayed and built my family. I have now lived in
Washington, DC longer than I have lived anywhere else. It has been the closest thing to ‘home’ for me. In 2008, I voted for the first time, for Barack Obama. Those eight years in America and in Washington, DC have been a fairy tale. With that beautiful Obama family in The White House, I allowed myself to fully exhale: to believe that yes, this was my country; I belonged here; this was home. For now.

Natalie

Finding Love

Natalie, I am so proud of what you have done as an academic. It is maybe what I would have done if I were born at a different time, when the options and expectations for women were different.

In 1965, I managed to finish high school at the top of my class and St. Joseph’s offered to extend my scholarship to do advanced level subjects for the next two years. By 1967, I had graduated from St. Joseph’s High School and found my first job at a Georgetown accounting firm as an audit clerk. A year later, I moved on to Barclays Bank. At that time the banks only hired Portuguese or ‘high-colored’ people—meaning light-skinned. With my curly hair and my rich brown skin, I became the first Black teller there.

Around that time, I met your dad. Terrence Hopkinson graduated from the top high school for boys, Queen’s College. He was tall and good-looking with a mischievous dimple in his chin. It was 1969 and he was just back from traveling overseas, working for IBM in Trinidad and Barbados and in Texas and New York. He was the best player on the badminton courts. I was one of three girls who played, and I was an in-your-face kind of player. We played as doubles partners until we won the national mixed-doubles championship the next year and represented Guyana in tournaments abroad. We did not have a winning record, but we did win at our relationship. We got married in 1970.

Terrence wanted to go to Canada to continue school. He made a lot of connections working for IBM maintaining computers throughout the Caribbean and training in the US. But he knew he could not advance any further at IBM if he did not get his college degree. He did not like what he was hearing about the draft to fight in Vietnam in the US, so we chose to move to Canada.

I had no money. He had some. Neither of our families had money to help. I approached my bank manager and asked to borrow $3,600. I had no collateral, but I assured him that I’d pay it back. He wrote me the check on my word. We left Guyana in 1970 and paid back the loan four years later.

After our airfare and other expenses, Terry and I landed in Toronto with $103. Immigration asked us how long we wanted to stay. We said we would be going to the
Figure 3.3
Serena and Terrence Hopkinson on their wedding day in 1970 in Georgetown, Guyana.

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Figure 3.4
Serena and Terrence Hopkinson in their first year in Toronto, Canada, 1970.

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University of Toronto. They gave us ninety days to get our student visas. We went to the University, found out about the high fees and realized that going to university was not going to happen that year. Instead, we petitioned the Canadian government for ‘landed immigrant status’ to allow us to stay and work.

Between your dad and me, we had no doubt that all of it was going to turn out as we planned. He had the ideas and the suggestions, and I worked on making them happen. Immigration officers asked whether we had any family or friends out west. We said yes and we used our last dollars for airfare to Edmonton. We got our Canadian resident status within three months. I eventually got a job with the Alberta government. Your dad finished his bachelor’s degree in computer science at the University of Alberta, then went on to do his MBA while working at major companies and owning his own business. During those years we also sponsored my mother and three brothers to join us in Edmonton. I worked to support your dad’s studies, went to college in the summers, and raised you four children. We became popular for our parties and hangouts for our club friends, college friends, and Caribbean friends. We acted in plays as a family. It was a good life in Edmonton.

Serena

A Return to Guyana

Mom, you were with me in 2010, at Mrs. Hing’s funeral in New York at the moment my interest in Guyana was rekindled. I hadn’t been back since that childhood trip. I was so intrigued by the conversation we had with Uncle Ovid after the funeral at a restaurant in the Little Guyana part of Queens. Of course, we talked about Mrs. Hing, the beautiful Chinese-Guyanese matriarch whose home you boarded at during your studies at St. Josephs and who taught us all how to make fried rice and stir-fry. Uncle Ovid was missing Guyana bad. He reminisced about his old life and adventures he had hunting gold and diamonds as an underwater miner. I loved his stories of diving underwater for hours and camping in the forest with makeshift gold-mining villages deep in the interior hinterlands. It brought back memories of my first visit to the Pomeroon. Uncle Ovid was one of the last siblings to migrate to North America and he was already in his fifties. He was living in New York and working as a security guard. He complained that he was ‘gettin’ fat’ due to this new sedentary lifestyle, and not enjoying America at all. He told me he was biding his time until he could go ‘back home.’ This was very odd to me. To hear most Guyanese, the only direction there was supposed to be in Guyana was ‘out.’ You and dad sent for everyone who wanted to make the crossing. Dad never had any desire to return. He always used to say he had no friends in Guyana because everyone left. ‘Brain drain,’ he called it.
Uncle Ovid’s melancholy surprised and intrigued me. I was determined to go to Guyana and learn more about this place that so tugged at him. I wanted to see the beauty and adventure he could not wait to get back to when he retired.

I was very happy to be able to plan a month-long trip in 2011 with four generations of our family in Guyana. Gramma Tina (who came to Canada in 1979), you, Rudy, and the kids joined us. Our kids Maverick and Maven, eleven and eight years old at the time, were able to participate in a children’s heritage camp sponsored by the Guyana National Trust. We stayed in Uncle Richard Hing’s apartment, which had no TV or air conditioning. We visited the gold mines and stayed in a country home like the one you lived in on the Pomeroon River. I made some local research contacts for a project I was working on art and public policy.

In the last six years, I have since returned to Guyana on my own and reconnected on Facebook and in person with my first cousins who still live there. I got a publishing contract for a book about artists set in Guyana. In my readings, travels, and interviews, I’ve learned so much about our idiosyncratic ways. So much is explained by tracing Guyana’s jagged path of colonization and globalization, like why we have five continents represented in our food and culture. I learned so much about these historic, economic, and cultural clashes that shaped who we are. I’m happy to be able to pass these experiences on to my children and their children, and for posterity through my writing about Guyana. It is wonderful to hear about how you, too, have returned.

Natalie

Electric Dreams

On 12 May 2016 I arrived in Guyana for the 50th Anniversary of Independence celebrations. The pomp and ceremonies were fine, but I was very antsy about leaving to go ‘down to the Pomeroon’ as we say. My boyfriend (also named Rudy) took the trip with me. We took a crowded minibus downtown and then another one that took us to Parika where we hopped into a speedboat with forty other passengers. Today we have life jackets; it is now a law to provide them. Traveling close to the mouth of the Essequibo River, which at its widest is nineteen miles, the trip took us about forty-five minutes. The river was choppy. The waves slapped the bottom of the boat. I thought, *this frigging boat is going to disintegrate at any time*. I breathed deeply and calmed down, remembering these waters were familiar to me since birth.

We sped by the islands of Leguan and Wakenaam. For a brief moment we could see no shoreline. We were at the mouth of the Essequibo River as it flowed into the Atlantic Ocean. We arrived at Supenaam, and my brother sent transportation for me. By car we traveled forty miles to Charity on a single road. Both sides were filled with
rice fields, coconut fields, and stores. There were very large beautiful homes situated on many acres of land. It was dreamy. It would be so lovely to live in this area again.

At the end of this road was Charity. The market was busier than I recalled. We got into my cousin Roy’s speedboat, fueled up, and drove towards Marlborough Roman Catholic School, my old primary school. I got out of the speedboat and walked toward one of the buildings. There was no guard there. I approached the headmistress. When she told me there was no power in the school that was serving over a hundred beautiful children, most of them indigenous, I was appalled. There was no electrical power when I left nearly sixty years ago. And there was no electrical power now. No electricity means no plumbing, no stoves, no computers, no phones, no printers, no copiers, no Internet. There are still no paved roads. The closest hospital is about six miles away and you can only get there by speedboat or canoe.

When I returned to the city, I realized that in part the reason Marlborough was forgotten was because they are out of sight, out of mind. I visited my nephew Carlos, a civil engineering student at the University of Guyana, and we talked about solar energy. Together, we met with the Departments of Education and Public Works. They accepted my offer to underwrite the cost of wiring the Marlborough school buildings. Carlos became my project manager. We hired an electrician to wire the main building. The Department of Education delivered donated solar panels and two computers. The work continues to move forward via email, Facebook, Western Union, and telephone. The next step is to train the staff and students on how to use their new technology.

I hope they keep celebrating the ‘Bush’ culture that makes us special, too.

Between my busy tennis schedule, finishing coursework for my bachelor’s degree in sociology and Spanish, and bringing electricity to my elementary school in Guyana, I have been thinking about what is next. I have dreams of spending a year in Barcelona to improve my Spanish fluency. I hope you and the family will come and visit me there, too.

Serena