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 financially 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'. Multi-modal 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.

PART II

THE ONES WHO LEAVE . . .
THE ONES WHO ARE LEFT

We were a straggly bunch of immigrants
in a lily white landscape.
We made our home among strangers,
knowing no one but ourselves.

Meiling Jin, ‘Strangers in A Hostile Landscape’

There are two spectrums of the migration arc: the ones who leave and the ones who are left. The act of migration is an act of reciprocity—to leave a place we reconcile that we must leave others behind. Yet, the narratives of the ones who are left are constantly eclipsed. Part II, The Ones Who Leave . . . the Ones Who Are Left, counters the discourse and creative representations on migration that are overwhelmingly focused on the ones who leave. Contributors Dominique Hunter (Guyana), Khadija Benn (Guyana), Ingrid Griffith (United States), and I, Grace Aneiza Ali (United States), center the stories of those who remain.

In ‘The Geography of Separation,’ I, Grace Aneiza Ali write about women and girls who have known both spectrums of the migration arc: to leave and to be left. The essay is a travelogue, composed of four vignettes, each focusing on a woman or girl I’ve encountered in a precise moment in time and in a particular place—Guyana, India, and Ethiopia. Each abstract is framed as an ‘Arrival’ or ‘Departure’ to situate my accountability to these places and to the ways I’ve entered into or departed the lives of the people who live there. Twenty-five years after my first departure from Guyana and many miles circling the globe since, all roads still seem to lead back to Guyana. Whether I am in Hyderabad or Harrar or Harlem, I find myself weaving the stories of these places and the people I’ve encountered with those of Guyana. For now, this is how I psychically return. And yet I know it is not enough. In her collection of memoir-essays, Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work, the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat examines what it means to write stories about a land she no longer lives in. ‘Some of us think we are accidents of literacy,’ she says. Each time I board a plane for another far-off land, I grapple with the guilt that it is not bound for Guyana. I am haunted by the what-ifs. What if I had stayed? What kind of stories should I be telling of Guyana? What do I owe this country? Am I guilty, too, of forgetting?

© Grace Aneiza Ali, CC BY 4.0 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0218.05
Guyanese-born artist **Dominique Hunter**, based in the nation’s capital city of Georgetown, moves in and out of several geographic spaces within the Caribbean and North America for various artist residencies and opportunities. They are what she calls ‘mini migrations.’ Yet, she is vocal about rooting her artistic practice in Guyana, even while it is subjected to the ebb and flow of departure. In her art essay, ‘Transplantation,’ Hunter tells us that from a very young age, the Guyanese citizen is indoctrinated with the charge to leave their country. ‘There is an expectation once you have reached a certain age: pack what you can and leave. I am well past that age, yet I remain, stubbornly rooted in the land my parents spent their lives cultivating,’ she writes. What a spectacular thing for any citizen of any place to grapple with—to be, from birth, dispossessed of one’s own land. As both artist and citizen in Guyana, we are shown how she shoulders the personal, political, and economic consequences of Guyanese leaving their native land in droves. In her essay, Hunter uses a dictionary definition of ‘transplantation’ as a metaphorical device to engage ideas of migration and rootedness. She shepherds us through what she deems, ‘A guide to surviving transplantation and other traumas.’ In both her words and collages, Hunter layers organic imagery reminiscent of Guyana’s lush vegetation found in its interior Amazon as well as on its riverbeds and the famous Sea Wall on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. Embedded in her visual imagery is a silhouetted self-referential figure. Its haunting presence among the flora and fauna thrives amidst Guyana’s extreme elements of temperature, wind, water, and sand. In this symbolic artistic gesture, Hunter insists that the act of staying, of being rooted, of choosing not to be transplanted, is its own kind of agency.

Like Hunter, **Khadija Benn** is among the few women photographers living in Guyana and choosing to forge an artistic practice. As a geospatial analyst, Benn often journeys across Guyana to remote places where most Guyanese rarely have access. These small villages are central to Benn’s stunning black and white portraits of the elder Amerindian women who call these communities home. However, as she emphatically notes in her portraiture essay, ‘Those Who Remain,’ these are not invisible women. Benn’s adjoining excerpts from her interviews with the Amerindian elders illustrate how essential they are to Guyana’s history and its migration stories. These women, whose dates of birth begin as early as the 1930s, have witnessed Guyana evolve from a colonized British territory, to an independent state, to a nation struggling to carve out its identity on the world stage, to a country now burdened by its citizens departing. They have also been the ones most impacted by serious economic downturns over the past decade where the decline of mining industries, coupled with very little access to education beyond primary school, have left these communities with few or no choices to thrive. These elder Amerindian women are mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers whose descendants have migrated to border countries like Venezuela and Brazil in South America, to North America, and to nearby Caribbean islands. Yet, these women have made the choice to stay. While their children go back and
forth between Guyana and their newfound lands, many of these elders have never left
Guyana, some have never left the villages they were born in, and some have no desire
to leave.

At the age of seven, Ingrid Griffith’s parents left Guyana for the United States,
leaving their children in the care of their grandmothers. Griffith’s experience is
common for many Guyanese as well as Caribbean families where parents must make
the difficult choice to migrate and leave their children with extended family members
or caregivers. It is indeed a noble agenda, as Griffith writes about her parents’ goals
to work hard in a foreign land so that they can acquire the funds, passports, and visas
to have their children join them later in the United States—a process that took years.
Told uniquely through Griffith’s perspective as a young girl, ‘When They Left’ offers a
glimpse of how a child struggles to reconcile her parents’ love with their simultaneous
departure. In her moving memoir essay, Griffith explores the rupture migration enacts
on families when children are split apart from their parents and how that separation
reverberates years after the first moment of departure. It is the narrative we rarely
see—what the act of leaving means for a child and how it becomes an open wound of
abandonment.

Collectively, the essays in The Ones Who Leave . . . the Ones Who Are Left underscore
that with both ancestors and descendants long gone, the women and girls who remain
in Guyana bear witness to the personal damage and the larger political consequences
when a citizenry leaves its country. As migration swirls around them, Hunter, Griffith,
Benn, and I, acknowledge leaving and being left as the great tension that twists all of
our lives.

Notes

1. Epigraph from ‘Strangers in A Hostile Landscape,’ in Gifts from My Grandmother (London: Sheba

2. Edwidge Danticat, Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work (New York: Vintage Books,