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 fifth-generation 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 encore 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.

7. When They Left

Ingrid Griffith

Figure 7.1
The author, Ingrid Griffith (right) with her sister Dawn (left) and brother Oliver (center) in December 1968. Their maternal grandmother had taken them to Skevelair’s Photo Studio in Georgetown, Guyana to pose in the church outfits their parents, who had recently migrated to the United States, had sent for Christmas.

© Griffith Family Collection. Courtesy of Ingrid Griffith. CC BY 4.0.

© Ingrid Griffith, CC BY 4.0  https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0218.09
It was one of the worst days of my life. I was seven years old, my sister—Dawn—was nine, and my brother—Oliver—four. My parents said we were lucky because they had gotten visas to the United States. It was 1968. The Guyanese exodus was well on its way.

We were at grandmother Adda’s house in Georgetown on the veranda saying goodbye. That morning, my parents were leaving Guyana without us. They looked into our faces, planted kisses on our tears and promised they would be back for us soon. My stomach gurgled as my mother held me tight. The growling in my belly continued when my father did the same. It did not stop when he let me go. I wanted to pee but I was not going to even think about it.

The early morning was already sulfur bright and steaming hot, typical for equatorial Guyana. Dawn and Oliver were sobbing.

‘Don’t cry,’ said my mother, as she brushed their tears away. ‘This is a joyous moment.’

My father headed down the flight of stairs behind my mother carrying a little suitcase, the brown grip that had been stored under their bed. I stood on Adda’s upstairs veranda trying hard to muffle the sound of my cry. I wanted to keep my promise to be a big girl and not cry so that my parents would keep theirs—that soon we would join them. Besides, I felt my grandmother’s grip on my right shoulder.

I knew the day was coming for some time now. Since my parents had gotten visas for America, they kept telling us about the plan they were putting in place so things would run smoothly after they left. They arranged for the Indian man they heard of who drove kids to schools to take Dawn and me to our schools. They arranged for Jenny, our ex-landlord’s daughter, to arrive at Adda’s house early on school mornings to comb our hair. They had plans to keep us from missing them too much. They said that they would write to us constantly and send pictures. In America, they said, we would have a better life than we could ever have in Guyana.

Drops of pee soaked the crotch of my panty, the wetness now sticky along the insides of my legs.

I wanted to yell, ‘I don’t care about having a better life in America. I’m happy to just have us.’

Leaving Guyana for a better life had become a family tradition. In the early 1950s, my paternal great uncle left then British Guiana for England to study. He earned his college degree and returned to become one of Guyana’s leading educators and a prominent composer. Some years later, my father’s four older brothers left for England and the US and didn’t come back; they had given up on the repressive colonial system that was stifling young people like them. My mother’s three older brothers were lucky to secure jobs as deckhands on ships leaving British Guiana for foreign lands and eventually gave up on Guyana too, jumping ship in the UK and the US.
My eyes stayed focused on my parents as they walked the dirt passageway below. Others were fixed on them too. Someone leaving for America was more than a family affair; it was a neighborhood event.

‘The youngest Griffith and his wife leavin’ for the States. Ah hear any day now he and his wife going to America and ah hear dey leavin dere children wit his mudda.’

‘Mrs. Greenidge daughter and she son-in law papers come tru. She told me the news at church last Satday.’

When word got around that my parents had gotten visas, family they barely knew showed up with toothy smiles and eyes full of pride.

‘How dee, family? It’s me, yuh great Aunt Lily. Ah hear muh family get lucky!’

They believed good luck rubs off.

* 

Families like mine had once been giddy with glee about a new government led by Forbes Burnham, the leader of the People’s National Congress. Sentiment was changing though. There were not enough jobs for every one and you had to either know somebody or know somebody who knew somebody; or you would get nowhere.

That morning, Adda’s downstairs tenants and neighbors to the sides and back of her front house rose early to see my parents off. Children yawning wide and rubbing boo boo from their eyes made their way to front windows. Mothers and wives in thin nightgowns stood sideways at their half open front doors, waving. Fathers and husbands in half unbuttoned shirts headed outside to stretch their arms over the paling for a last handshake.

Most of those watching my parents had their own plans to leave Guyana. Some had a spouse who left to get settled first. Some had a son or a daughter overseas who, once they finished their studies and got a job, would send for the rest of the family. Some were biding time, waiting to get good news from the embassy like my parents, grateful that the family member in Canada or England or America who said they’d sponsor them had come through.

And there were those who were forever trying to get in touch with relatives overseas to petition them to put in the necessary paperwork and send for them even if the person was a distant relative.

As we stood on Adda’s veranda, a sudden breeze off the Atlantic Ocean a few miles away lightened the air.

Daddy walked towards the rickety footbridge to the waiting taxi that would take him and Mammy to Timehri Airport. He kept tapping on the top pocket of his suit jacket pocket, probably checking to make sure he had the things he needed—his passport, plane ticket, some of his monthly teacher’s salary he had converted into US dollars, the paper with his brother-in-law’s information. My mother’s eldest brother, Vernon,
would meet them at JFK airport. Until they got on their feet, my parents would stay with Uncle Vernon and his family in Wyandanch, Long Island.

The taxi’s engine hummed. The trip from Georgetown to Timehri Airport was a one-hour drive through winding, treacherous, unpaved roads and over unstable bridges.

Mammy looked more as if she belonged on a wedding cake than at the job she had at Swan’s Laundry. Her A-line dress was a frosty shade of pink, her black pillbox hat matched her handbag and opened-toed, sling-back shoes.

‘Earl and Gloria looking like the King and Queen this mawning,’ said a neighbor. ‘Yaw’ll take care of yuh selves. And mus don’t forget we back here.’

Regardless of how poor you were, what you wore on departure day had to be the best you could afford. You had to leave Guyana looking like you were already a success story.

Daddy nodded his head and continued tapping his hand on his breast pocket as he carried the single grip over the bridge towards the waiting taxicab. Sometimes my father wore a shirt with a tie to his teaching job at St. Sidwell’s; the gabardine suit he wore that morning must have been stifling. My mother tilted her head up at us; tears filled her eyes. ‘Mammy loves you,’ she said.

My parents said that their leaving was the beginning of more good things to come in America. Our parents had downsized to a two-room flat on Albert Street, Georgetown. I don’t remember the bigger flat we lived in before. Another family rented two similar rooms on the other side of a wall separating us. I remember spending most of my time when I was not at school between our two grandparents; we came to our flat as a family in the evenings. We didn’t have a kitchen or a bathroom. Granny lived in the next yard. We relied on her cooking and the makeshift outdoor shower under her house. Under two loose floorboards in our flat was a white enamel posy my parents would reach for when we had to use the potty.

In America, we would have a house with a kitchen, an indoor bathroom, maybe two. We’d have our own bedroom. We would have a television set, maybe more than one. We’d have a backyard with a swing set. Leaving us behind was only temporary. It was necessary for a better future. So, they assured us.

I went over the plan in my head.

We were to live with Adda, my paternal grandmother, until our parents returned for us. We were to visit Granny, our maternal grandmother, on weekends for church. The fact that Adda and Granny could remain as anchors was another reason why my parents felt lucky. Both grandmothers lived close to each other in Georgetown. We would go to the same school and church. Our parents surmised that the familiar surroundings would make us feel less like we were being ripped away from everything we were used to.
Daddy placed their grip in the car trunk. Mammy opened the car door. I pulled away from Adda, ran halfway down the flight of steps and leaned out over the wooden bannister.

‘Wait! Wait!’ I said.
‘Careful, Mako!’ said Mammy, calling me by my nickname. ‘Careful!’
‘Fix your nighty, pull the nightie straps back up,’ said Adda.
I bolted down the stairs. ‘I want to tell you something!’
‘Come back here, Ingrid!’ said Adda.
My mother turned to walk back over the bridge.
‘It’s okay, Gloria, she’s okay!’ said Adda.
The car door slammed; the engine revved. I dashed across the bridge.
‘Wait! Wait, I want to tell you something!’
I heard voices behind me but they were drowned by my shouted pleas.
‘Wait! Wait!’
I didn’t think to run as fast as I did down the street. I just did. The taxi was gaining speed. I started feeling dizzy. The road got blurry. I could no longer hold the knot in my stomach. The pee I had been holding in became an unstoppable force . . . The taxi became a dot in the distance.
My parents couldn’t afford to wait.

* 

‘Wake up Dawn, Ingrid? Wake up! Time to get ready for school.’ Adda kept tapping the metal frame of our bunk bed with the gold band on her ring finger.

‘Jenny is going to be here in fifteen minutes for hair combing. Time to bathe. Who first?’

I pretended to be asleep, wanting to dream the same dream I had been having since the three of us moved into Adda’s house three months earlier. In the dream, Daddy and Mammy returned to Guyana to get us and we had five minutes to pack our things to take to America. I decided to leave everything behind.

Dawn and I couldn’t stop missing our parents or counting the days since they left us behind. Oliver was missing Mammy and Daddy even more. He had not yet turned school age. After our parents left, Oliver forgot all about his potty training. He would not own that he was wetting and soiling his underpants. He developed terrible allergies and sores on his legs that wouldn’t heal. Adda sent him to live with Granny. We were now separated.

I wish I didn’t have to be a big girl. I wish I were younger and as needy as Oliver so I, too, could live with Granny. Adda was adamant that she was the one our parents had put in charge and her job was to keep us ‘whole’ until our visas came. I couldn’t understand what she meant by ‘whole.’ Did it have anything to do with the sadness I was feeling?
Adda’s house was much bigger than our flat on Albert Street but it was filled with grandchildren now that all of her five sons were overseas. My siblings and I had slept with our parents in the same room of our two-room flat on Albert Street. So, it felt normal that seven of us—Dawn and I, our three cousins, Lilah, and Adda—slept in one bedroom. Lilah wasn’t a blood relative but she became family when Adda took her in after her parents died.

That morning without opening my eyes I knew that Adda was dressed in one of her worn-out cotton shifts. I never saw the fresher dresses Adda said she was saving. Maybe, she didn’t feel the need to wear them since she never left the house. The dresses she did wear stretched tight over the dome of her stomach and the stoop of her back, so worn that the armpits were frayed and faded. It was a safe bet that Adda was wearing the shiny black wig one of my uncle’s sent from America. She never took it off, not even when she went to bed.

My sister and I had become curious about the goings-on in our new surroundings, things we had not noticed before. But looking to our grandmother for answers made us feel like pariahs and in less good standing than our cousins. I pressed my eyes closed. Awake, I was tempted to ask questions I wished I had asked my parents before they left us. Like: Where did Adda grow up? What were her parents like? Why didn’t she ever go outdoors? Why was she so suspicious?

I could hear my responsible older sister sigh as she climbed out of the bunk bed below. I should have felt lucky to have an indoor shower just a few steps from the bedroom where I slept now. And I did. But I couldn’t just jump out of bed and into the shower. There were rules. Dawn and I had to fetch our towels and underwear that were stored in the small front bedroom. My fresh panty and singlet had to be on, and my towel must cover everything between my armpits and kneecaps before I exited the shower.

I heard the water in the shower running, opened my eyes and decided to make the trip to the small front room. On the way, I noted other predictable things about the morning routine at Adda’s house. My green enamel cup was already placed on the dining room table. Flies hovered around grease spots on a brown paper bag that held plaited bread and tennis rolls; the slab of butter covered on its dish melting. One fly, then another, landed on the rim of my cup filled with milk. Adda knew I didn’t like milk. Not even chocolate milk.

I moved beyond the clutter in the living room towards one of the two rocking chairs near the front windows. I often sat on the right handle of the rocking chair looking up at the sky and daydreaming about my parents. Behind the rocking chair was the door to the small front bedroom that held our belongings and where Adda piled things—old newspapers, books, scraps, broken furniture, a bicycle.

So much had changed under Guyana’s new independent government. Like the perfume scented Lux soap that used to sit next to the sink in Adda’s dining room.
Since my parents left, there was no choice but to purchase the locally-manufactured, thick block of beige Zex soap. It had no scent. The Trout Hall brand orange juice in the small tin cans that our parents bought if we were coming down with a cold was also a thing of the past.

Forbes Burnham insisted that Guyana be self-reliant. But there were no jobs, little food, and a downward spiraling economy. By the early 1970s, Guyana was a dismal mess.

* 

After school on Fridays, as planned, we went to Granny’s house for the weekend. It was a tiny wood structure under a pitched zinc roof supported by six-foot high cinder block posts. Two parallel stairways on opposite sides of the house led to her front and back doors. Once, Granny had decided to take her eldest son’s offer to go to America; but just to visit. She had her two daughters in Guyana who needed help. She said she had her ‘lil house;’ a community she counted on. America, she declared, was for young people.

Granny was a Seventh-day Adventist. By sundown on Friday, everything had to be in order. The radio was turned off. Chores stopped. Idle gossip ceased. Only prayers, scripture readings, and songs were allowed. We heard Granny singing through the open windows even before we bounded up the flight of stairs.

‘Granny and Ollie missed y’all too, yuh know,’ she said at the door. She held us to her bosom, kissed us on the tops of our heads. ‘Go on through and settle down then come join Granny for worship.’

The smell of the meal she prepared for lunch the next day after church was reassuring. The pan with the seasoned ground beef and vegetables and the one with macaroni and cheese, my favorite, cooled on the stove near the backdoor.

The top half of Granny’s back door stayed flung open until worship ended. Coconut trees swayed, their branches humming in the breeze. A kiskadee perched on a tree branch singing.

I looked over the zinc fence at the bottom flat in the next yard where we used to live. Jenny and her family still lived upstairs, but our downstairs flat stood empty. The white-washed greenheart wood was stripped of its paint, the grimy windows closed, the glass panes broken into pointy shards.

I pictured the room where we slept. Our bunkbed and parents’ bed pressed together in the tight space. I remember how Dawn, Ollie, and I wouldn’t stop jumping up and down on our parents’ bed, not until one of us fell off and ended up crying. I remember the blue and white portable record player, the pickup Uncle Vernon sent from America. It stayed on the table that stood over the two loose floorboards we lifted to retrieve the posy. Mammy had a few small round records Uncle Vernon had also
sent. She liked playing one by Aretha Franklin. Next to the table was the couch. It was there Daddy read us poems before we went to bed. My favorite was:

‘Some like bath nights but I do not. For the cold’s so cold and the hot’s so hot...’

It was there he explained the letter writing plan that would keep us connected when they left for America.

But the letter writing plan was not working out on my end. Adda was censoring our letters. I couldn’t tell my parents how different things were without them and why I was always sad. I couldn’t tell them I hated school or that I no longer cared to eat. I wanted to tell them how much I needed to be with them. But by the time the letters were edited for proper grammar, punctuation, structure and content, all of me was taken out.

Dear Daddy and Mammy,

I miss you so much. I’m behaving at home and doing well at school.

Adda says hello. I can’t wait to see you.

love and kisses

Ingrid

There came a time when there was no guarantee we would visit Granny every weekend as my parents had instructed. Dawn and I had to be on our best behavior during the week or Adda would cancel the weekend visit. What Adda said must stand. There was to be no discussion, no questioning, no talking back. Weekend visits to Granny ended. Being on my best behavior was in constant conflict with what I wanted to do. Was it the sinner in all of us Pastor at church talked about that Adda saw in me? My natural instincts were to be doubted, what I felt to be stifled. Adda saw it as setting me on the path of righteousness. I didn’t know it then but Adda was a minister’s daughter.

Were my parents missing us as much as we’re missing them? Why haven’t they kept their promise? How long is ‘soon’ anyway?

I wanted to ask my parents these questions but Adda wouldn’t allow it.

At the primary school I attended, no one I knew had parents who were overseas. When I brought photos, my parents sent to school for my teacher and classmates to see, their eyes opened wide. I had to remind myself to pretend to feel lucky that I had parents in America.

*  

The six years without my parents drew on. I witnessed neighbors’ children, young men and women just out of high school, some recently married, some with new families, leaving Guyana and their children in the care of grandparents like my own parents had. I felt no bond with the kids who were left behind in Guyana like I
was, except for the unmentioned sadness. A deep bond, though, was created with my older sister—the on-going separation from our parents pushed Dawn and I closer. We became one and the same; agreed it was best to stay mute around Adda to stay out of trouble. We no longer had to speak to each other to know what we were thinking and feeling. Gestures and codes became our form of communication.

Nothing much changed on Adda’s end.

Oliver was school age and it was becoming clearer that he was not developing normally. In a blink, he would sneak out the school yard and find his way back to Granny’s or sometimes Adda’s house. Adda would look out the window to see him standing in the trench below. The drainage system long ago implemented was needed to collect rainfall that cokers dumped into the Atlantic Ocean. Otherwise, the citizens of our low-lying country would drown.

Oliver sat in the mucky waters in his school uniform all day and despite all the entreaties, coaxing, and threats from Adda made his way indoors only when darkness fell.

Oliver was drowning. Dawn tried her best to set the right example and follow the rules; it was the curse of the oldest sibling. I had not unraveled completely like Oliver, but I too was sinking.

In those days, a telephone call to the US was too expensive. Email and the internet didn’t exist. The only way to contact my parents was to put pen to paper.

_Dear Daddy and Mammy,_

_I feel unlucky._

_I hate school. I cheat on tests and copy the correct answers from Dawn’s old math and comprehension workbooks._

_Adda is old-fashioned and doesn’t allow us to go anywhere. I’m not her favorite grandchild. I know because she doesn’t treat me like I’m her favorite. I want to run away and never go back to Adda’s house. Why are the visas taking so long? I’m almost 12 and you’re still not back. I’m wondering if the best thing is to forget about ever seeing you again. Maybe that would help._

_Your daughter,_

_Ingrid_

Of course, this letter was never sent.