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 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 III

TRANSITIONS

What we were in that other life, is shattered open. But the worlds we now inhabit still speak of the need for invention, of ancestors, of faith. In a time of literally explosive possibilities, we must figure out how to live our lives.

Meena Alexander, *The Shock of Arrival*[^1]

In *Transitions*, Grace Nichols (United Kingdom), Suchitra Mattai (United States), Christie Neptune (United States), and Sandra Brewster (Canada) reflect on how Guyanese women unfold a life in a past land to construct a new life in a new land. In these essays, poet Nichols and visual artists Mattai, Neptune, and Brewster detail the transition from citizen to immigrant. As the essays’ titles suggest, each of their narratives has the acts of making and fashioning at their core—revision, weaving, embroidering, transferring, tracing. The women written about in *Transitions* struggle hard to get to their new lands, to be there, to belong, and to stay. We hear of Guyanese women who took on jobs and identities that required them to put themselves aside to be in service to others—other people’s families, other people’s homes, other people’s empires. And, other people’s dreams. In these essays, we witness how, through migration, Guyanese women are made, unmade, and remade again.

The space between departure and arrival is a terribly fragile one. As Grace Nichols pinpoints her first flight—her precise moment of leaving Guyana—she unravels how that singular moment of departure changed the course of her life forever. Her essay, ‘So I Pick Up Me New-World-Self,’ punctuated with poems ignited by her early years after her arrival in England, details the days when she embarked on the work of inventing the woman and writer she hoped to become. Within both her poems and her reflections, is a similar refrain for women who migrate: our acts of leaving are rarely, if ever, about desire. Instead, they are acts of necessity. Nichols likens her departure to a kind of rupturing, a severing. And then she is confronted with the shock of arrival and the stain of unbelonging thrust on her. As a Guyanese-born woman who has now lived in the United Kingdom longer than she has lived in her homeland, Nichols charts how we leave our old-world self to fashion, in her words, our ‘new-world self.’

Throughout her oeuvre, artist Suchitra Mattai artistically reimagines and disrupts idealized landscapes. Her migratory path through three countries, Guyana, Canada,
and the United States, informs her artistic practice, characterized by what she deems ‘disconnected “landscapes” that are unreal but offer a lingering familiarity.’ In the selection of work featured in her art essay, ‘Revisionist,’ Mattai uses landscapes as both a symbolic device and a canvas to illustrate the liminal space of disorientation when one transitions through multiple cultural spheres. Mattai invokes a migration story started long before she left Guyana—that of her Indian ancestors brought by the British from India to the Caribbean, beginning in the 1830s and throughout the early 1900s, to work as indentured servants on British Guiana’s sugar cane plantations. Mattai’s landscapes, used to explore her relationship to the idea of homelands in transition, teem with texture, materiality, and laborious detail. To make this work, Mattai utilizes a bounty of objects and processes that are hand-done. They are a nod to the Guyanese women in her family who are experts in crocheting, weaving, embroidering, needlepointing, and sewing. With each puncture of embroidery, each woven thread, Mattai centers Indian women and the essential role they have played in three centuries of migration movements in and out of Guyana.

In her art essay, ‘Memories from Yonder,’ American-born artist Christie Neptune mines childhood memories of her mother, a Guyanese immigrant in New York, and her love of crocheting—a craft popular among Guyanese women (as we also see in Mattai’s essay) and passed down through generations. For Neptune, the art of crocheting becomes a metaphor for the necessary acts of unfurling a life in a past land to construct a new life in a new land. Neptune unpacks her artistic process in making her multi-media installation. She portrays Ebora Calder, a fellow Guyanese immigrant and elder. Like the artist’s mother, Ebora migrated to New York in the late 1950s and represents a generation of Guyanese women who in the past sixty years have been part of the mass migration from Guyana to New York City. In the installation, Neptune features a diptych of Ebora that has been distorted and obscured as well as a pixelated short video. In both photograph and video, Calder can be seen quietly engrossed in the slow, methodical, rhythmic act of crocheting a red bundle of yarn. ‘The gesture serves as a symbolic weaving of the two cultural spheres,’ writes Neptune, ‘to reconcile the surmounting pressures of maintaining tradition whilst immersed in an Americanized culture.’

In ‘A Trace | Evidence of Time Past,’ Canadian-born artist Sandra Brewster elevates the voices of the matriarchs in her family. Brewster’s family history of migration from Guyana beginning in the 1960s—a decade in which the country saw a tremendous exodus to Canada—parallels the emergence of Toronto as a prominent node in the Caribbean diaspora and one of the largest and oldest Guyanese populations outside of Guyana. As a daughter of immigrant parents, Brewster grew up hearing her family’s stories of life in Georgetown—stories that simultaneously gave her a connection to Guyana as well as left her with questions. In her art essay, she generously mines those questions and offers us the stories, memories, and language of her grandmother,
mother, sister, aunts, and cousins whose words simultaneously trace a rupture and chart a chronology: What did it take to leave a beloved Guyana and build a life in an uncertain Canada? As Brewster documents that process, what is revealed is that it takes generations, it takes a whole family, it takes the driving force of women to get to a place of not merely surviving and adapting, but thriving.

The essays in *Transitions* implore us to ponder: How do we hold steadfast to our dreams, when in order to survive we must diminish parts of the self? As Nichols, Mattai, Brewster, and Neptune continue to center Guyanese women in their poetic and visual art practices, they reaffirm their laudable commitment to using their artistic practice as spaces for women of the Guyanese diaspora to speak, to be heard, and to be seen.

**Notes**
