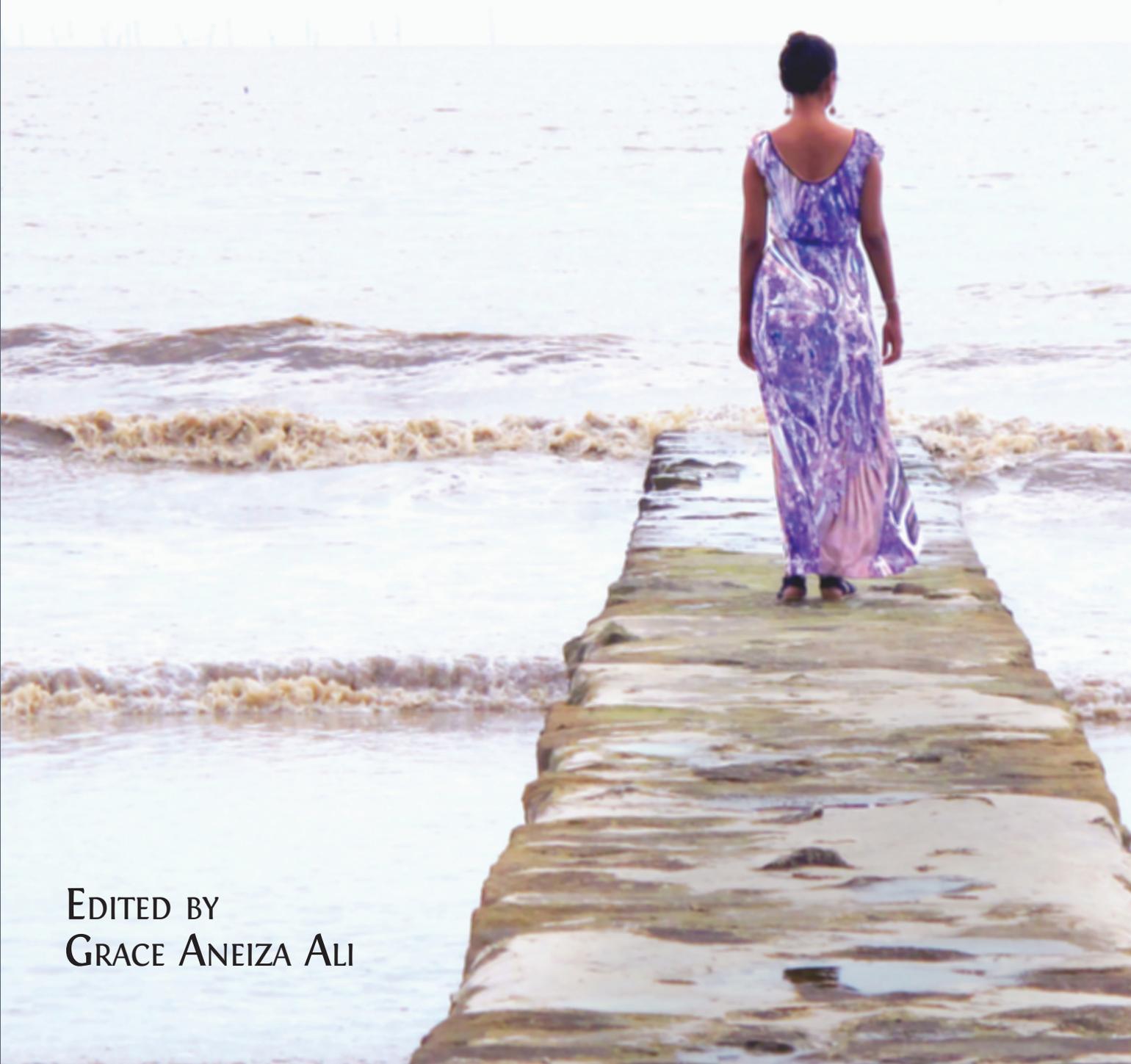


# Liminal Spaces

Migration and Women  
of the Guyanese Diaspora



EDITED BY  
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PART IV  
RETURNS, REUNIONS, AND RITUALS

The joy of coming back to a country I called home was always punctuated by explaining why I deserved to call it home in the first place.

Rida Bilgrami, 'Why Do Borders and Passports Dictate  
What Country I Get to Call Home'<sup>1</sup>

**F**or those of us—in the millions<sup>2</sup>—who have left one country for another, how do we return? And after we do, how do we stay connected? What tangible things do we cling to? In Part IV, *Returns, Reunions, and Rituals*, Michelle Joan Wilkinson (United States), Maria del Pilar Kaladeen (United Kingdom), and Maya Mackrandilal (United States) do not rest solely on gazing back at a homeland from an outsider distance. Instead, each of their essays explore their returns to Guyana and the ways in which they choose to remain tethered to the houses, lands, and sacred heirlooms embedded within their family legacies. Connecting these three women—all of whom were born in the diaspora—is a deep desire to know the land of their parent's birth. In their returns, they have ended decades-long estrangements from Guyana, reunited with relatives they've known from a distance through telephone calls and letters, and created new rituals to honor the loved ones they never knew.

'What gets left when we migrate?' is the question American-born curator **Michelle Joan Wilkinson** poses as she opens her curatorial essay, 'Concrete and Filigree.' Within that initial question, we are left to ponder its subtext: What are the objects we choose to carry when we leave a place? How do we decide, when we leave a homeland, which of our possessions become worthy to migrate with us? Writing from a curatorial perspective, Wilkinson explores two deeply personal objects that engage this duality of what we leave and what we carry. Concrete and filigree function as inheritances that connect Wilkinson to her grandfather and grandmother, and, by extension, to Guyana. A concrete house built by her grandfather literally roots Wilkinson in Guyana's soil; and a treasure trove of gold filigree jewelry passed down to generations of Wilkinson women is a reminder of her family's traditions. While noting the tremendous responsibility of caring for the things we either inherit or carry with us from our homelands, Wilkinson's essay reminds us that in small and grand ways, we are all the caretakers of our family's stories.

**Maria del Pilar Kaladeen** opens her memoir-essay, 'A Daughter's Journey from Indenture to Windrush,' with the passport portrait page of her father Paul Kaladeen. The black and white portrait is stamped in 1961, the year Paul left British Guiana for the United Kingdom. He would return some forty-five years later with his daughter. The passport photo is a document of agency, of one's freedom, or lack thereof, to move about the world. The portrait of Kaladeen's father, taken in a moment of great transition for a young man, is full of possibility and promise. Yet, for many decades after his migration, there was silence about his homeland. Without a sense of her family's roots to ground her identity in, Kaladeen writes of the racism she endured growing up in the United Kingdom as a daughter of immigrants and the pressures, including from her parents, to shirk her cultural identity and be monolithically 'British.' It was Kaladeen's desire to know the land of her father's birth that served as the catalyst to end his four-decade estrangement from Guyana. Their intertwined story illustrates the fractures and fissures migration creates in relationships and simultaneously, the sheer willpower required to rebuild a bridge between two lands and between a father and daughter.

To create the body of work 'Keeping Wake' featured in her art essay, American-born artist **Maya Mackrandilal** journeyed to Guyana in 2011. She returned to the rice fields where her Guyanese-born mother grew up, until she too left as a young woman. We find Mackrandilal in the midst of loss and death as rituals and preparations are made for her grandmother's funeral. Water is a key symbol throughout 'Keeping Wake.' Mackrandilal paints vivid scenes that mirror the crossing of the *kal pani*—Hindi for 'dark waters'—conjuring the traumatic voyage of Indian indentured laborers from India to British Guiana. We are reminded that the history of the Indian crossing into Guyana is a dark one. Indeed, contributors Suchitra Mattai and Maria del Pilar Kaladeen also poignantly link their migration stories to their Indian family legacies. Between 1838 and 1917, over 500 ship voyages deposited more than a quarter-million men and women from India to British Guiana's Atlantic coast. They would spend over eight decades toiling on sugar plantations and rice fields. Mackrandilal connects generations of those who ventured into the *kal pani* two centuries ago with those who embark on symbolic crossings of their own twenty-first-century dark waters. The rupture created by the initial crossing of the *kal pani* remains pervasive. It now haunts a second wave of migration, this time from Guyana to the United States. As she contemplates the past, questioning why the majority of the indentured laborers never returned to India, Mackrandilal draws comparisons to the distance she and her mother now experience with Guyana and reflects on their absence in their homeland. She ponders an important question for us all in the poignant narration of her 2014 video work, *Kal/Pani*, 'Acres of rice farm in a country we rarely visit [...] what are we, the generation that exists in the wake of estrangement, to make of the pieces?'<sup>3</sup>

Collectively, the essays in *Returns, Reunions, and Rituals* explore how daughters of immigrants like Wilkinson, Kaladeen, and Mackrandilal have rekindled, restored, and repaired frayed bonds. For those in the diaspora still estranged from Guyana, they illuminate how to rediscover a place once lost.

## Notes

1. Epigraph from Rida Bilgrami, 'Why Do Borders and Passports Dictate What Country I Get to Call Home,' *Catapult*, 19 September 2019, <https://catapult.co/stories/becoming-british-uk-citizen-passports-borders-immigration-rida-bilgrami>. Used by courtesy of Rida Bilgrami.
2. According to the United Nations' most recent study on global migration, 258 million people are now living in a country other than the one they were born in, marking an astonishing increase from 173 million people in 2000. Elisa Mosler Vidal and Jasper Dag Tjaden, *Global Migration Indicators 2018* (Berlin: Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC) and United Nations International Organization for Migration, 2018), [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/global\\_migration\\_indicators\\_2018.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/global_migration_indicators_2018.pdf)
3. Maya Mackrandilal, *Kal/Pani*, 2014, SD video with sound, 8:53 mins, <https://mayamackrandilal.com/section/417745-Kal-Pani.html>. See also curatorial statement (pp. 62–65) in the exhibition catalogue for 'Un |Fixed Homeland' curated by Grace Aneiza Ali, at Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art, (Newark, NJ), 17 July–23 September 2016, <https://view.joomag.com/un-fixed-homeland-aljira-center-for-contemporary-art-2016-catalog-un-fixed-homeland/0430951001481910086?short>

